

The spoken word shall prevail

Communication between farmers and the public

I grew up on a farm on the edge of Basle, the second largest city in Switzerland, where my family had run a large farm for generations, with arable farming, milking cows, fattening pigs and special products. An awful lot has changed over the past 40 years. But one thing that has not changed is the need for communication with the city. It has always been a central feature of our farm. For this reason, for me farming is synonymous with communication. Since I was a child these two disciplines have been closely interwoven. But one thing has indeed changed in this respect: many years ago there was hardly any public relations know-how, whereas today the range of tools is enormous.

1. Considerable changes in public relations in Swiss agriculture over the past few years

- **A common national image campaign**

For the past 7 years Swiss farmers have been running a common national image campaign under the slogan "Lucky we have Swiss farmers!". This campaign was initiated in 1998 by the Swiss Farmers' Union, the farmers' umbrella organisation, at the request of its members and is aimed at coordinating and strengthening farmers' public relations activities. The image campaign includes

- a statement and a logo,
- advertisements,
- posters,
- give-aways,
- stands at trade fairs,
- a national "brunch on the farm" on 1st August, the Swiss National Day,
- school projects and other activities and measures

- **A large number of labels and brands**

Labels and brands play an increasingly important role in agricultural public relations. On the global market you have to make sure you stand out. For this reason, many farmers have decided to produce for labels and brands. They no longer offer indistinguishable products but through their produce they communicate ethical principles (ecology, animal husbandry), or traditions, history and scenic values that make them distinctive in the consumer's perception. But this has led to a variety of labels and brands that is confusing for the consumer. Under the slogan "Our secret – the best in the area" in the canton of Berne alone, where we are now, there are seven different regional communal brand-names under which local products are sold.

- **A wealth of individual initiatives by farmers**

Individual farmers are coming up with many new ideas in public relations and product marketing. Many are reacting to deregulation and new agricultural policy with innovative ideas, creativity and diversification. Yesterday we saw some examples. Farmers are using new initiatives and special offers to try to get closer to the consumer and the urban population so that they can acquire new, direct sales channels as well as the goodwill of the urban populations. They are using farm shops, bed-and-breakfast facilities, refreshment facilities, new attractive species of livestock, farm signs, open-days, websites and roadside advertising as public relations tools. This has created a new image of farmers, a new type of farmer – and what's more, a diversity of new types of farmers.

2. Agriculture needs more advanced public relations

There are various reasons for this:

- **New agricultural policies**

As I have already said, since 1990 farmers have had to face a deregulated market and at the same time more stringent ecological demands. They have reacted with good innovative ideas and a strong entrepreneurial approach. But the image of old-fashioned farmers spoiled by subsidies still persists. The Univox surveys carried out periodically by the Zurich Federal Institute of Technology show that 97% of the people questioned consider that food production in Switzerland is important, 62% that it is very important. In contrast a growing number of consumers are convinced that agriculture in Switzerland is too expensive: 52% are of the opinion that current agricultural policies cost too much. In 2002 Swiss agriculture and food production was subsidised to the tune of Fr. 4 billion, which corresponds to 8% of the federal budget. Although consumers approve of the direction agriculture is taking with regard to animal protection, ecology and innovation, the growing level of criticism shows that the farmers' efforts are considered too costly by the media, private industry and consumers,. Transparent communication and dialogue is needed. Communication between farmers and the general public has become a question of survival for Swiss agriculture.

- **Fewer and fewer farmers**

Only 150 years ago 68% of the population of Switzerland were involved in working the land. Today the figure is a mere 4%. For many years farmers could assume that a large part of the population was familiar with or even had a direct link with agriculture. This ensured a certain level of understanding and solidarity. Social development has since destroyed a large part of this network of direct communication: three-quarters of the population of this country now live in towns and cities. This means that farmers must make a special effort to consolidate the links between urban and rural areas.

- **More product processing**

The distance that has developed between producers and consumers is growing not only at a contact level, however. It can also be seen in the products themselves. The degree of processing of farm products is constantly rising in all industrialised countries. For each franc that a Swiss consumer spends on food the farmer receives only 16 cents; the food-processing companies, the packaging firms, the retailers and the transport companies receive 84 cents. This illustrates the gap between the producer and the consumer. Consumers – adults and children¹ – have less and less idea of the fascinating relationship between seed and harvest, season and origin and dependence on renewable natural resources. In this respect too knowledge, understanding and solidarity need to be ensured and promoted through specific public relations campaigns.

3. What needs to be communicated?

Whether agriculture makes a conscious effort to communicate with the public or leaves it to chance, there is always a degree of communication: “Everything communicates”. But what exactly do the farmers want to communicate?

- **An image: the farmer as a modern entrepreneur**

There is a great diversity of farms in Switzerland, and individual interests are often contradictory. But all farms need entrepreneurial courage, market-economy competence and a feeling for nature to be successful. And this is what we want to communicate to the general public. The results of studies have shown that the public appreciates managers who communicate actively. Information and arguments have to be appreciated at a personal level. In relation to farmers, this means that the public wants to see not only farmers who simply offer high-quality products and work hard behind the scenes but farmers who make an effort to communicate with them and thus personally represent and communicate their own values.

- **Knowledge of how agriculture works**

Agriculture is distinctive from other branches of the economy in that it depends on natural, renewable resources and is tailored to their specific characteristics: sustainable development, the rhythm of the natural cycle, the seasons and fluctuations in production that depend on climatic conditions. For many branches of the economy and for consumers too this is not immediately obvious at all. The industrial model dominates the general public’s understanding of production. Everything can be manufactured in the desired quantities on demand. The controlling factors are the market and the stock exchange. But this model only functions where raw materials are available on demand and in the desired quantities, which applies to oil, for example.

¹ If you have ever seen children being taught about the production cycle of potatoes or wheat from a seed to harvesting, processing and consumption and seen their astonishment at the discovery that chips do not grow in the ground or on trees you will understand that there is something more important than price and quality here: communication, to explain the relationship and create a link.

If the same economic parameters are demanded from agriculture as are applicable in manufacturing, nature cannot meet this demand, which is diametrically opposed to the requirements of consumers in relation to the environment and a guaranteed supply of food. It is an important and basic aim of agriculture to explain this fact through public relations².

- **Knowledge about the significance of agriculture (multifunctionality)**

Swiss farming families want to be the guarantors of a Switzerland where life is good and food is supplied using ecologically responsible methods.

- They are reliable producers of a broad range of high-quality, fresh, healthy, dependable and tasty foods produced using methods that respect nature and the needs of their livestock.
- They ensure that undeveloped land is used competently, cared for and well maintained and as a consequence farms are typical features of the Swiss landscape. From the point of view of their structure (family businesses) Swiss farms operate in an optimal and finely tuned symbiosis with the land and what it offers.
- They bring life and sustainability to remote mountain areas.
- They play an important and active part in maintaining the identity, the particular character and the attractiveness of Switzerland and its culture and are a typical expression of both traditional and modern character of the country.

In this way Swiss farmers meet the major basic requirements of the population: relaxation in an attractive and accessible landscape, a healthy lifestyle through a broad range of high-quality fresh food, pleasure and interest in specialities, social stability in rural areas, a range of leisure activities, a link with nature.

- **The quality of Swiss farm produce**

Owing to the geographical and climatic conditions that prevail here, Switzerland is not suited to producing large quantities of food for the world market. In this country it makes sense to focus on quality, specialities and niche products. What Swiss farmers produce is high-quality basic foods that can be enjoyed primarily within the country and to a lesser extent on the international market. The label "Swiss Guarantee" was recently created to distinguish this quality.

² "There is no reason why agriculture should not be subject to the same fate as industry, namely that it should have to adapt to new conditions", said the former General Director of the GATT/WTO, Arthur Dunkel, in an interview 15 years ago. And it applies just as much today as it did then. Two weeks ago the WTO published a "Declaration for food self-sufficiency" that it received from various farmers' organisations, including from Norway and Switzerland. This declaration, which demands the right of each country to operate its own agricultural sector and provide its own food, was handed in to the WTO at the end of a 2000 km march from Norway to Geneva. Does agriculture function in the same way as industry? Is it important where and how food is produced? Why do American consumers have such different opinions about genetic engineering and hormones from many Europeans? Questions and more questions that require answers, on the one hand in the global and on the other in a national, regional and local context. "All business is local" applies in particular in a sector which is dependent on the soil, the weather and the environment – namely agriculture.

4. How should Swiss farmers communicate with the public?

The most important basis for all communication and all commerce is confidence in what the farmers do themselves. Farming families need to have both feet firmly on the ground and produce high-quality products. With such a basis they can actively communicate with the public. In our communication-centred society farmers need to make the public aware of their services and products through the media. The messages and campaigns run by retailers, food-processing companies, branches and farmers must be coordinated and have one common aim: to promote the appreciation and sale of Swiss food. The basic public relations work of the Swiss Farmers' Union and its partners under the slogan "Lucky we have Swiss farmers!" is a common denominator for many national and regional advertising and information campaigns to promote Swiss agriculture. The branches and food-processing companies can build on this slogan and sell their products in greater quantities.

As I see it, communication between Swiss farmers and the general public can be improved in the following ways:

1: A minimum common denominator as a basis

There are fewer and fewer farmers, who are running ever more specialised farms. All these groups have their own message to impart: mountain farmers, vintners, small farmers, poultry-farmers, market gardeners, hemp-producers and dairy farmers. But to ensure a common image there must be a common denominator, a consensus on common values, as the Swiss Farmers' Union is striving to achieve, as a basis for joint public relations activities.

2: More professional communication

Farmers are professional managers of what are expensive production tools in Switzerland – the land, labour and capital. Specialists and politicians in this country and abroad would all agree with that. If they can succeed in managing their public relations with equal professionalism they will have a competitive advantage that will bring them respect and approval.

3: A concerted image

The agricultural sector must make every effort to ensure a concerted image and not to publicise itself through numerous and often diverging voices. If there are no binding elements between the various public relations campaigns concerning agriculture (including advertising) the sector will be lost in a flood of information. Each person in Switzerland is confronted by an average of 4,500 advertising messages each day.

4: Reinforce the extra sympathy for Swiss products

There is excellent potential for a successful joint public relations campaign. Only Swiss farmers can produce food and look after the countryside in Switzerland. In addition, they have that extra sympathy and consumers generally prefer Swiss products over foreign imports. This bias must be reinforced.

5: Communication tailored to target groups

There are many target groups for public relations in the agricultural sector. Whether it be consumers, the media, private industry or politicians, the message must be more precisely tailored to the needs of the target group, because the customer is always right!

6: Actively publicise basic services

Consumers have delegated responsibility for producing their daily bread to farmers and retailers. Farmers have extended this key position in the provision of “calories for the body” to include “calories for the soul” in that they maintain the countryside where the general public can spend its leisure time and help rural culture to survive. If farmers can succeed in making the public aware of this role they will become the essential sources of these basic services from which modern society is happy to benefit.

7: Direct contact as a guarantee of awareness among society

Society’s awareness of the agricultural sector is influenced by many different factors, only certain of which can be controlled. Direct and open contact between farmers and target groups leads to two-way communication and, in such a situation, is the best guarantee of understanding and good relations.

5. What is at stake?

Everyone needs understanding and good relations with those around him – farmers and consumers and society as a whole – in particular in the interests of future generations:

- **For farmers: the survival of many farms**

Many parts of Europe, including Switzerland, and other continents are centred around a thriving, functioning agricultural sector. If farmers cannot convince consumers of the importance of their social role and value through their products and services as well as by communicating with the public, private industry and politicians, life will become very difficult for farming families. If the farming community disappears Switzerland will also lose part of its culture and its roots and thus waste a valuable advantage for the tourism sector.

- **For consumers:**

In Switzerland and in other countries, consumers have a global shopping basket from which they can choose their food. Around 60% of the food that is consumed in Switzerland is produced by Swiss farmers. And some 30% of the total surface area of the country is cared for by Swiss farming families. The farmer’s work, and consequently the choice of food and the character of the countryside, can be influenced directly by the electorate through legislation as well as by consumers through their shopping habits.

- **For future generations:**

Through their work farmers also make an important contribution to the future of society. The provision of healthy food produced under transparent conditions and the maintenance of the Swiss countryside are important elements of what makes up Switzerland and Swiss culture. They are part of the Swiss identity that we shall pass on to future generations.

If every country has the right to maintain its countryside, a right to produce its own food, every country will need its own agricultural sector. Through their efforts, farming families satisfy not only the population's need for food but also their need for spiritual happiness – and only native farmers who have close links to the population and feel its pulse can achieve this.

For these reasons the agricultural sector desperately needs good and clear communication with the general public and other interest groups in Switzerland and in other countries.

This inspires me to build bridges through public relations and to ensure an understanding between society and farmers, and beyond.

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