

FORAGE

Farmers, ranchers must share their ag stories

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Agriculture is an industry that has been misunderstood by those outside of it. It has at times been criticized, mocked and left a mystery to the

people who rely on it the most. A great deal of that has to do with the individuals involved in agriculture. In general, ranchers and farmers are low key and more interested in doing their job and doing it well than beating their own chest. That humility may be a great character trait, but it doesn't help to promote awareness and understanding of why agriculture is so great and essential.

Today less than 1 percent of our population works in agriculture and less than 2 percent of the population lives on farms. Interest in how food is raised is increasing daily, even though less than 10 percent of a U.S. family's income is spent on food. There are many opportunities to tell your agriculture story. Many in the industry have already sensed the need to reconnect with consumers and are actively telling their story and emphasizing the importance of environmental stewardship, food safety and good animal care practices.

Being an advocate for agriculture



is nothing new, but agriculturalists need to focus more on telling their stories of what agriculture means to them and why they choose that lifestyle, as well as the depth and breadth of their conviction.

Anyone in agriculture telling the story of their operation has impact. They should tell it often and with conviction and commitment. It can be as simple as talking to a consumer in a grocery store, writing a letter to the editor of their local paper or to a legislator, or even going into a classroom.

Agriculturalists should also become

involved in trade and professional associations related to their operations. This is a very effective avenue to communicate agriculture's story. Association memberships can be pricey, but when considering the benefits, trade and professional associations are a great investment for agricultural producers and their industry.

Trade and professional organizations offer dozens of benefits, but the following are three major ones:

- **Education:** Associations offer a variety of educational opportunities from webinars to national and ►

international conferences. Often, the educational resources alone are worth membership.

- **Advocacy:** Advocacy is perhaps one of the most overlooked benefits of a trade association. Members belong to and support an organization dedicated to protecting and advancing industry needs. Having a dedicated team to lobby and advocate on behalf of the membership is powerful. Segments of the agricultural industry not engaged and at the table are on the plate.

- **Networking:** This might seem obvious, but associations offer wonderful opportunities to connect with others in our industry. Members can learn from other members and can even create alliances or partnerships.

What's great is that trade and professional associations typically exist on national, state and local levels. Of course, it's important to find the right one. Consider asking colleagues and competitors what associations they're involved in. Look at your local newspaper and event calendars to

see which associations are the most active in your area. If you find one that looks like a good fit, contact a few existing members and ask them about their experiences. When conducting this due diligence on potential associations, you will find the right one, benefit from the membership and become engaged in the conversation. As the divide between urban and rural continues to widen, it is increasingly critical that agricultural producers become more vocal about the importance of agriculture. ■