



## Sharing the Dairy Farming Story – One Person at a Time

**F**inally—a beautiful spring day! Actually, we just enjoyed a promising spring weekend as I write this column in early April. Today is not the kind of day when I like to be tied to my computer, but deadlines are deadlines and I'm facing one for writing this month's column. Given the fact that I would prefer to be outside doing something else right now, I decided to discuss being personally involved in issues dairy farmers need to address when we would rather be milking cows and growing feed for our cows. Doing something that challenges us and is outside our "comfort zone" vs. doing something we love isn't always easy.

Last month, I wrote about animal treatment, specifically the National Dairy Animal Well-Being Initiative and how we all should be involved in writing those rules about animal treatment. I also mentioned that we need to become better communicators with our customers. This month, I would like to expand on the communications part. I think we can make a difference by explaining to people more about our industry whenever one of us has a chance. For example, you might surprise a friend or neighbor with this data about the productive efficiency of the U.S. dairy industry: In 1944 we had nearly 26 million dairy cows producing a total of 117 billion pounds of milk, and in 2007 we had 9.25 million dairy cows producing 185.6 billion pounds of milk. What a story of efficiency!

Agriculture is receiving far more press today than at any time I can remember. The higher cost for food has captured peoples' attention. It provides a good opportunity

to become involved in educational conversation when the subject comes up in our circle of acquaintances. Many people associated with agriculture have related to me experiences they've had with friends and acquaintances on this subject in the last year and how they've taken the opportunity to have an extended conversation about agriculture and how farms operate.

Most consumers are probably aware that the prices we receive for the commodities we produce are at record high levels. They've read the headlines and heard the newscasts, but they haven't read or heard that we are paying record prices for inputs like fuel, fertilizer and feed. They probably don't know there are more people in China's middle class than the total population of the U.S., which has created larger export markets and therefore higher prices at home. India produces more milk than any other country in the world today, but its rapidly growing middle class is consuming so much more that India is no longer a dairy exporter. These are interesting facts that help open conversations about our businesses.

Perhaps you and I can start correcting misconceptions by engaging locally with our friends and neighbors, not only in conversation but also through events such as farm tours. Put yourself in the other person's shoes for a moment. Someone who is not connected to nature and farming may tend to equate a farm animal to a pet. Someone who has a pet dog or cat and who hears the cold weather advisories warning that pets should be kept inside on a bitter day may think calf hutches are inhumane living conditions for

baby calves in the heart of winter, not to mention at other times of the year. We know better. We can see how comfortable and healthy those calves are in the dead of winter; it just seems logical to us. We know when calves are well fed, protected from wind, rain and snow and properly bedded they not only survive but thrive. A farm tour might provide a perfect opportunity to explain why we use hutches and how healthy the calves are that live in them.

Calf hutches provide just one example of the many misconceptions that exist about dairying and animal treatment today. It illustrates why we need to be personally involved in setting the record straight. We all have more opportunities than we realize to do this. Our social circles extend beyond just dairy farmers. In our neighborhoods alone, we have both farm and non-farm neighbors who probably don't know as much about animal agriculture as we think. Our children and grandchildren attend schools with other children who need to learn how their food is produced and how to make good choices about what they eat.

June is dairy month and will be here before we know it. What a perfect time to invite your neighbors over for a picnic on the farm! It might be a great way to "show and tell" the milk production story. Remember that you're not just impacting the person you interact with, because chances are that person will tell another person. Even if it goes no further than that, you've enlightened two more people and that can make a difference.

*Ken*