



## Changing Perceptions

The word “change” has been on my mind lately. I don’t know if it is because “change” became an overused buzzword in the recent election year or because so many dairy producers feel lucky if they at least have some change in their pockets today. The word was nagging at my subconscious, so I looked up its meaning in *Webster’s New World Dictionary* and found it takes 3.5 column inches for its definition. I think I now realize why it became popular political rhetoric in 2008.

Thinking about change leads to serious consideration of the evolution of the dairy farming industry since dairy cow numbers peaked at just over 25 million in the early 1940s in the United States. Those 25 million cows were milked on 4.6 million farms that were primarily pasture-based systems. Today the U.S. dairy herd number is 9.3 million, and the cows are milked on 60,000 farms that are primarily freestall-based systems. The 1940 cow produced just over 4,500 pounds of milk per year for a U.S. total of 120 billion pounds. Today’s cow produces over 20,000 pounds per year for a total of 190 billion pounds. One farmer in 1940 fed three people; today’s farmer feeds 144 people. That is a dramatic change in productive efficiency in 60+ years.

With the change in efficiency came dramatic changes in society. In the decade of the 1940s when the first baby boomers were born, most consumers knew a relative who was a farmer; today very few consumers even know a farmer. Along with the lack of connection between farmer and consumer has come

a lack of knowledge about food production. So what’s my point? Nothing I’ve written is “breaking news.” It is instead history, but looking back at history helps me understand consumers today and our interaction with them.

Most of us in agriculture have a problem comprehending what motivates people to vote for an animal rights initiative in California or any other state, or at least I do. However, when you study the effective manner in which the proponents of the issue framed their points, you start to understand how voters without firsthand knowledge of agriculture production practices could be misled.

I think where this leads is that we have to evaluate the way we look at both ourselves and the consuming public. We are so accustomed to treating our cattle humanely that it is just second nature to us, but consumers won’t necessarily know that unless we tell and show them. This is another job that we don’t need in our busy schedules, but unfortunately, nobody does it better than you and me.

Here’s an example. Almost two years ago I was visiting with an MSU professor (not from the animal science department) who thought removing calves from their mothers soon after birth had a negative impact on developing immune response in the calves. With an impaired immune system, the logic continued, the calves will need more drugs, and more drug usage increases drug resistance in treatment of human diseases. I thought it was ironic, considering the actual reason we remove calves so soon after birth is to protect

the calf from pathogens in the environment. Ensuring that a calf ingests clean, disease-free colostrum soon after birth is a method to boost the calf’s immune response. The professor understood the logic after my brief explanation, but that conversation helped me understand how the practice of removing calves from their dams soon after birth could be misconstrued by many people.

Calf hutches present another example. While many methods can be used to successfully and humanely raise baby calves, none are any better for the calves than calf hutches. Yet some in the non-producer world think calf hutches are inhumane. Little do they realize that hutches weren’t developed with the comfort of the human calf feeder in mind but rather for the health and well being of the calves.

I’ve mentioned two dairy farm practices that occur in the first 30 to 60 days of a dairy animal’s life where misunderstanding could damage our image, yet they are humane practices. Many acceptable practices that take place between birth and the time a cow leaves the herd might seem unacceptable to the untrained eye.

Professionals in the dairy industry are aware of the need to better inform the public of acceptable dairy farm practices, but they can only do so much. We are the frontline professionals who need to hone our promotion skills and actively educate the consuming public about how food production happens. Consider hosting a tour of your dairy facility in June—it’s Dairy Month!

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