

Selling our story

A recent speaking tour through Tasmania, King Island and Victoria got me thinking about the importance of protecting and promoting the image of farming - especially for staffing and attracting investors.

It was challenging to observe operations under pressure such as those coping with drought conditions that present real challenges. Our Australian cousins need all the support they can get if they are to muster the resilience and creativity needed to navigate through its implications.

They are a hardy bunch for whom belief that normality is only a few days rain away is critical to getting through. There is opportunity hidden amongst adversity - so long as optimism can triumph over negative press.

Equally intriguing is the approach of niche farmers in more isolated locations such as King Island. Located 40 minutes flight west of Tasmania it comprises a cluster of dairy farms, its own dairy factory and a population of just over 2000. There are plenty of challenges for them as to how they can best present themselves as a career and investment choice.

Each situation has a story to tell that is characterised by location, lifestyle, risk management, investment pathways and potential to fast tracks to success. However listen to the media and some industry talk and one picks up an unfortunate message of gloom and doom.

Managing this positively relies on coordination of industry publicity and individual farming talk. Whether it is to staff, new investors or the wider community there needs to be a credible presentation of what each area has to offer.

The gap between perception and reality about farming appears to be growing as the number of businesses decreases while each business grows in size. The traditional urban rural connection between country and city cousins is diluted by an increasingly corporate farming sector.

Gone are the days of farm holidays or A&P shows that kept the wider community in touch. Framing's image is far more driven by sound bytes and news items whose brevity is focused some where between a busy audience and short attention spans. Messages need to be punchy and concise.

Hidden in all of this are success stories about specialised products, sophisticated farming systems and environmental opportunity that blend the best of science with the "can-do" culture of country folk. Success stories of champions who thrive in adversity can capture urban imaginations both sides of the Tasman. In my view this cannot be talked up enough outside the Industry.

A coordinated approach around this will rightly brand agriculture as loaded with opportunity. If as much effort went into selling the story of modern farming as the promotion of the products it produces there would undoubtedly be gains in industry support and participation.

Such strategies would help keep the challenges of farming in perspective. Climate and labour market change are classic examples of how an industry can talk itself or be talked out of a future. There is no doubt some are facing tough times but it is equally certain solutions will be found.

Rural communities need to take the high ground. I saw enough opportunity in Australia to convince me there is still a very bright future. I work every day with heroes who combine commitment with a long term view that international demographic and economic upswings signal buoyant times ahead for our low cost farming systems.

Let's breed from the golden goose rather than stand by and watch it starve! Coordination to drive the industry story will be a great start!

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