

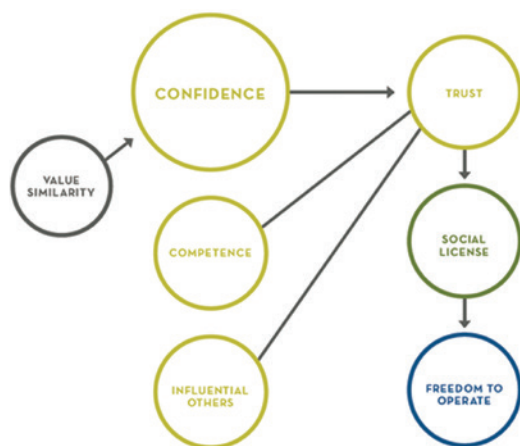
# Earning community trust in agriculture

Deanna Lush, Managing Director, AgCommunicators, Sheep and grain farmer, South Australia  
2016 Churchill Fellow and 2018 Winner - Australian Farm Institute John Ralph Essay Competition

When we consider who or what we trust and why, we most likely immediately think of the things we ourselves do not trust. Let's take a current example... downloading the COVIDSafe app... there has been much discussion around whether to trust it and its developers, and in particular what might happen to the information once collected.

Regardless of your personal view, what if you had the opportunity to meet with the developers, to sit down with them and ask questions, to understand the security precautions put in place? Would you feel better if they answered your questions and were completely transparent with you? If there was an alternative between having your questions ignored or being listened to, most people would feel much better for being heard. But when it comes to people not trusting us as farmers, the idea seems foreign – why would people not trust us as farmers? We are doing our absolute best to carry out important work – feeding and clothing the world – sometimes with Mother Nature not working in our favour. Why would people not trust us when we are doing the right thing?

**Figure 1.** The research-based 'Trust Model' developed by the US Center for Food Integrity and Iowa State University.



People who use products – be they apps or food – have questions, it is just a part of life. Questions or scepticism are not necessarily bad. We need to embrace them, not take it personally and seek to understand where the question is coming from. Most questions are driven by an underlying value; our job is to find out what that value is and address it.

The US Center for Food Integrity (CFI) is a global leader in building trust in agriculture and I have had the privilege of being mentored by its CEO and founder Charlie Arnot for the past two years. The CFI's peer-reviewed model, originally published in 2009 (Figure 1), has found that an individual's level of trust is determined by three things:

- Influential others, meaning the opinions of those in two circles – family, friends and social circles as well as credentialed others like doctors, dietitians or veterinarians
- Competence, which relates to science and technical capacity
- Confidence, or the perception of shared values

After surveying 6000 US consumers over three years, the CFI found shared values are three-to-five times more important to building trust than sharing facts and science or demonstrating technical skills or expertise.

Traditionally, Australian agriculture's approach to building trust has been embedded in science and data; that is, *'give people more science and data and they will come to our side of the argument'*. But if they do not, we give them more research, more science and the cycle repeats. The equation of 'science and data' as the priority has been backwards for years because what consumers really want to know is *'can I still count on you to do what is right'*.

CFI research has found that to build trust, the industry needs to lead with shared values. Many consumer questions are based on whether practices are ethically grounded and so based on values such as compassion, responsibility, respect, fairness and truth (Arnot, 2018).

Traditional approaches to building trust have given people information about science and economics to increase their knowledge but have done little to influence how they feel and what they believe. The CFI believes that is where a better connection needs to be made. The debate is not focused on knowledge but rather “whether we should be doing what we’re doing”, which is a conversation about values and ethics.

The US experience is that the ‘shared values’ approach helps farmers respond in a strategic way, rather than visceral. The key lies in giving farmers the tools for that values-based communication and then supporting them in that journey, building their skills and confidence. The CFI observes that the community likes farmers, but they are not sure they like farming or industry. Farmers who become engaged in leading with shared values feel empowered because they are able to be a part of the dialogue.

In 2019, I travelled to the US to bring the CFI’s shared values communication training back to Australia and pre-COVID, commenced rolling out workshops across Australia. The shared values approach teaches people in agriculture to focus on the silent majority, more often called the ‘moveable middle’ – the 65% of people who have genuine questions about food and agriculture, rather than targeting the activist fringe which does not share our values. This training provides a template approach when we are faced with questions about how we produce food which encourages embracing the questions and sharing a perspective using a values-based approach. The values we may share with our non-agriculture audiences are many and varied; some examples may include how we produce a nutritious food source, environmental sustainability, food safety, family heritage and community support.

### **It’s about transparency**

Transparency is no longer optional, it’s now a basic consumer expectation and essential in building trust with those who are sceptical of the motives and practices of the food sector. The current era of radical transparency means everyone with a mobile phone can publish video on social media. Transparency is the best way for farmers, food companies, restaurants and retailers to demonstrate they share consumer values on important issues like food safety, the impact of diet on health, animal care and protecting the environment. Trust generated by transparency will provide the social licence needed to succeed in times of both calm and crisis. According to the US CFI (2017), a commitment to greater transparency includes considering:

- **Motivations:** acting ethically
- **Disclosure:** openly sharing good information & bad
- **Stakeholder participation:** engaging & being responsive
- **Relevance:** providing information that stakeholders care about
- **Clarity:** providing information that is easy to understand
- **Credibility:** a record of operating with integrity
- **Accuracy:** be truthful, reliable and complete.

Farmers and industry must be prepared for one of two things to happen with increased transparency (Arnot 2018). The non-agricultural community will either have a greater appreciation that practices are consistent with their values and expectations, which reinforces trust, or they will discover practices that are inconsistent with their values and demand change. In either case, transparency drives alignment of community expectations and farming practice.

### **Building trust vs defending an interest**

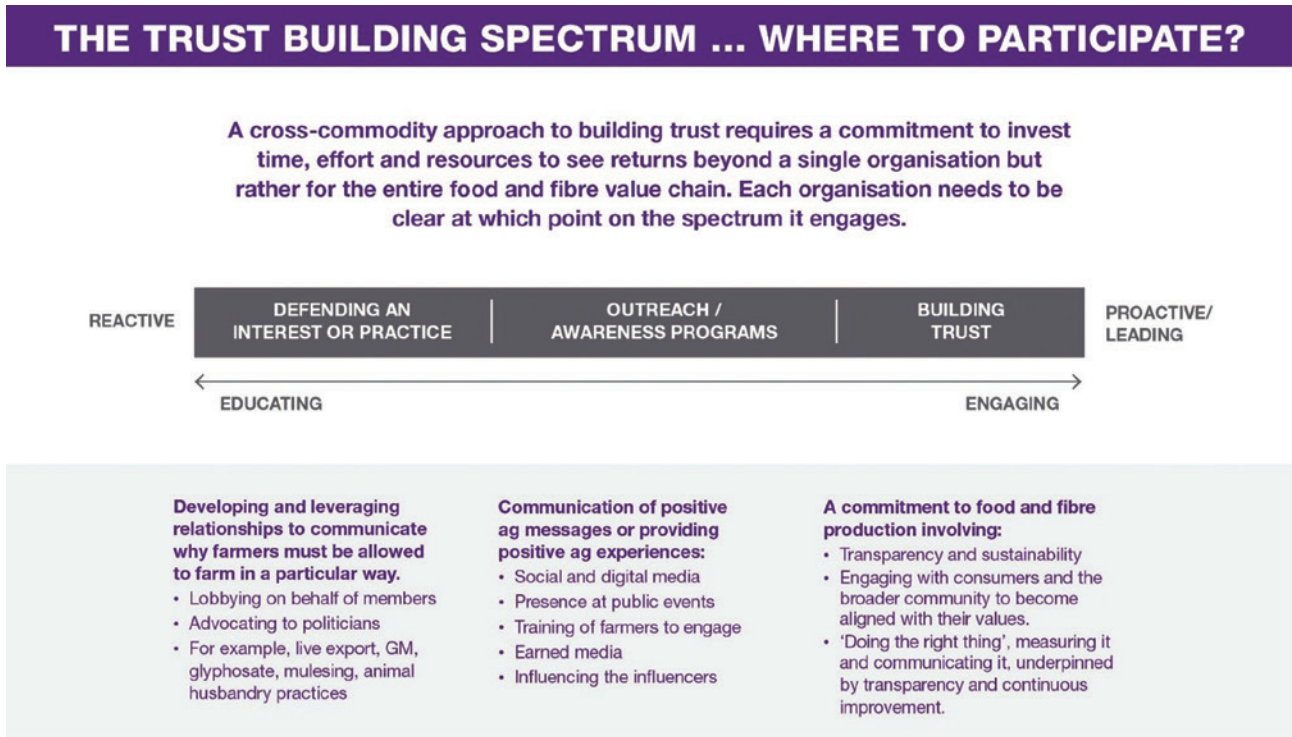
Following publication of my Churchill Fellowship report in 2018, and considering the issues since, it is clear that the Australian agricultural industry needs to consider where it engages in building trust. There are three distinct activities – defending an interest or a practice, general outreach / awareness and proactive trust-building strategies – the first two of which I have found are often confused for building trust (Figure 2).

Defending an interest or practice is very different to building trust. Defending an interest is lobbying on behalf of members and advocating to politicians. Members of lobbying organisations have an expectation that those organisations will protect their interests against those who would seek to erode them. Recent examples of these issues include live export, genetically modified biotechnology, agricultural chemical use and a raft of animal husbandry practices.

Outreach and awareness programs represent the middle ground, communicating positive messages or providing positive experiences. This is being achieved through tactical areas such as social and digital media, presence at public events, training of farmers to engage, use of earned media and influencing those who are driving conversations about food, identified through consumer sentiment research.

These first two areas are where much of the work in Australia is being undertaken. Australia has an extensive lobbying system which advocates to government and other decision-makers when right-to-farm issues are raised.

**Figure 2.** A model which outlines the difference between defending an interest or practice and a long-term commitment to build trust.



In addition, Australia has a network of well-funded rural research and development corporations, many of which have outreach programs which promote the sustainable and ethical production of their commodity. These campaigns are separate to the marketing functions of these organisations, which seek to increase consumption of their commodity.

In terms of the third area, building trust is proactive and engaging, it requires a genuine desire to engage with consumers and become aligned with their values. Importantly, it is about doing the right thing, measuring it and communicating it, underpinned by transparency and continuous improvement.

In Australia, many industries are developing Sustainability Frameworks – and this is the territory many of these occupy as they reach out to consumer and community groups to become engaged with them in an ongoing dialogue. Regardless of the role an organisation might take, it is important to note there is no 'either/or' when it comes to defending an interest, outreach or building trust. All are needed and are valuable.

There is so much work to do in building trust that it is a case of 'every shoulder to the wheel'. The agriculture industry can spend a lot of time rebutting claims of the anti-ag lobby, or it can work together to develop a collaborative strategy that is not 'us' versus 'them' and seeks to target the 'moveable middle', or the 65% of people who just have genuine questions. We do need to realise however that each approach is different and generates a different result.

**Shared values training**

Primary production as a whole must upskill producers in engagement and leading with shared values to build trust rather than providing more science and data which, while important, will not win the hearts and minds of the general public.

**For more information on this training, contact Deanna Lush 0419 783 436 | [deanna@agcommunicators.com.au](mailto:deanna@agcommunicators.com.au)**

*\* This column features excerpts from Deanna's winning AFI John Ralph Essay, read the full version at [http://www.farminstitute.org.au/news-and-events/FPJ\\_Summer2018\\_JRC\\_Winner2.pdf](http://www.farminstitute.org.au/news-and-events/FPJ_Summer2018_JRC_Winner2.pdf)*