

OPINION/EDITORIAL

Butt out



Gord Gilmour
Editor

Recently Manitoba's Bothwell Cheese announced it had received Project GMO certification for one of its product lines.

Boiled down, it means the cheese in question is made from milk that comes from cows fed non-GMO feed.

The move came, the company explained at the time, as a result of consumers asking for such a product. Their producer partners at the Dairy Farmers of Manitoba were ready and willing to provide the raw milk produced according to those specifications. It is a win-win for farmers and the company.

After all, that pull from the market is real. Just look at the results of a survey commissioned a couple of years back by a Canadian agriculture industry group and performed by pollster Angus Reid: 43 per cent of Canadians were more likely to buy a product that is "GMO free."

Yet despite the fact that a consumer goods company is meeting a consumer demand, it took little time for the agriculture industry to show its less attractive face on social media. Repeatedly, the company's Twitter presence was shamed for failing to take the opportunity to 'educate consumers about GMOs.' Most of this negative reaction came from both farmers and industry representatives, such as employees of life science companies.

While it's true that everyone has a right to their own opinion on a topic like this one, I'm not sure picking a fight publicly with a company like this is going to be a winning strategy over time.

So far the results have been mixed. Earls restaurants, for example, backed down on their antibiotic- and hormone-free, welfare-friendly beef initiative after a public backlash. However, it doesn't seem like the initial product claim was the pivot point of that decision, so much as the poor optics of replacing Canadian beef with U.S. beef.

Over an even longer time frame, A&W restaurants have steadfastly stuck to their own antibiotic- and hormone-free claims, much to the chagrin of many in the beef sector.

The first mistake many are making is expecting rationality in marketing. This has never been the case and I don't think that's going to change any time soon.

People buy cars and trucks, for example, based on what colour they are, or the model name. The world is full of accountants driving SUVs because they listened to an ad that told them to heed the call of the wild. It seems like there's an entire sector of that industry entirely devoted to producing midlife-crisis cars for the late-middle-age set with more money than sense.

I myself have driven more than one vehicle that was more sizzle than steak and treated the service bay like a second home. None of us are immune to this.

One trait that's nearly universally shared, however, is that none of us like to be told we're wrong, or that we're making stupid choices. Nor do we like to be told what we will or won't be allowed to do, unless there's a darned good reason for it, one that's better than "it's a dumb idea."

The very heart of an open-market economy is willing buyers meeting willing sellers. The only two parties who should have an opinion on a transaction that's legal and above board are the two who are exchanging money for goods or services. The rest of us are all kibitzing and our input is about as welcome as that of the person who's hanging over someone's shoulder, telling them the next card to play.

I happen to agree that there's really no need for a GMO-free cheese. There's absolutely no scientific evidence that the conventional products pose any sort of risk. Any attempt to meet this need is a lot of effort in the name of little, except for that consumer demand. But who are we to tell a company or individual they should or shouldn't pursue a perceived market niche? Or consumers that they can't or shouldn't have a market choice?

It wasn't that long ago the communist world pursued exactly such a model, with disastrous results. It turns out not everyone likes the blue pyjamas of Maoist China, nor the barely functional Lada sedans of socialist Russia. Like pretty much the entire rest of the world, these consumers like designer clothes, Levis jeans, Coca-Cola, and BMWs and Mercedes-Benz.

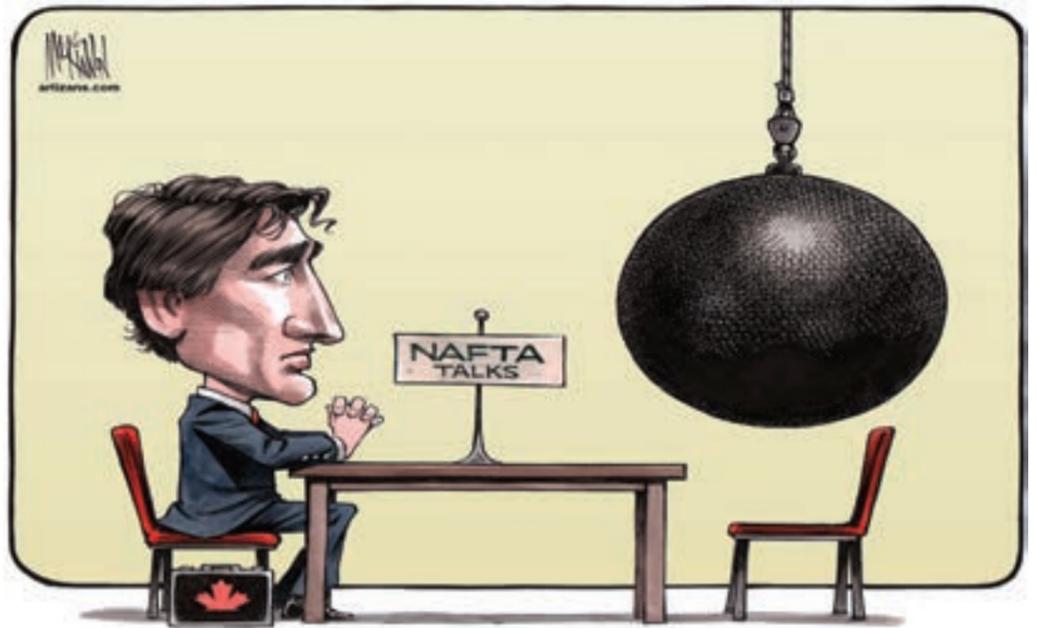
So why does the agriculture sector want to tell people what they want or need, or dictate how consumers should be "educated" on the value of preferred methods of production?

Why should a modern consumer only take what the industry makes? Why don't they have the right to ask for something different?

You may look at what they're asking for and disagree with their choices, and that's OK. But it's a mistake to presume they shouldn't be allowed that choice and to attempt to shame any company that's trying to meet that market demand.

It would be far better to try to figure out a way to either capture some of that market yourself, or create a new one.

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From a Saskatchewan farm to international customers

BY LANE STOCKBRUGGER

LDS Farms

I spent the first half of December on the road, on a whirlwind tour of four key markets for Canadian wheat and durum exports: Algeria, Morocco, England, and Italy. In total, we logged over 20,000 kilometres between these four markets in 15 days. It's a long way from the 4,000-acre grain and oilseed farm I run with my brother Lance, in east-central Saskatchewan. You see, Canada exports 20 million tonnes of cereal crops each year. And it's our job to maintain and protect these markets, through presentations, conversations, and dialogue, which is exactly what I did on the 2016 Canadian Wheat New Crop Missions.

Our two-week mission was organized and coordinated through three organizations: Cereals Canada, Canadian International Grains Institute (Cigi) and the Canadian Grain Commission (CGC). There were four new crop missions in total, spanning 17 countries in the fall of 2016 that travelled through Asia, Latin America, Europe, North Africa and West Africa.

The approach provides customers with updates from experts along the Canadian value chain, including a farmer, a representative of grain exporters, and technical specialists from the CGC and Cigi.

As a farmer, I was honoured to represent western Canadian producers, and our role is ever important on these missions, to tell our story. It was the opportunity to speak about our independent approach to running our businesses and how we make decisions on our farms that are in the interest of the family business, for today and looking toward the future. I spoke of our focus on technological advancements to help farmers in Canada be as productive as possible while

ensuring that we are growing crops in a sustainable manner that will protect our land, air, and water for the next generation.

The value of having a team of Canadians representing the value chain became more obvious as our mission through North Africa and Europe continued. Customers had heard that Canada had a tough growing season, plagued with too much moisture and a long drawn-out harvest. This led to very real questions and concerns about the quality that Canada would have to offer for export to Canadian wheat- and durum-dependent markets. It was our chance to correct any misinformation they had, and to share the whole story about the quality that would be available for their import needs. Questions about glyphosate and how we use it on the farm were valuable to hear and even more importantly to have the ability to respond first hand and explain how we use herbicides, pesticides, and fungicides to produce the quality product customers have come to expect from Canada. These discussions during the missions help build new business relationships and strengthen existing ones, which frankly is ever important to this Canadian farmer if we intend to maintain and grow our position in these markets.

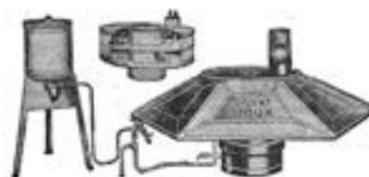
After spending these valuable two weeks in conversation with the decision-makers of these important end-use markets, I have a better appreciation of our role and the importance of that role. Conversing with companies and seeing their businesses in action using Canadian wheat to produce products for local markets and international distribution is humbling.

What we do as farmers makes a difference, but we can't rest on our laurels in this competitive landscape.

Lane Stockbrugger farms near Leroy, Saskatchewan.

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If you wanted to keep your chicks warm in the winter of 1950, you could purchase this Silent Sioux oil-burning brooder advertised in our Jan. 19 issue.

We reported that "Complaints were pouring in last week as residents of rural Manitoba felt the first impact of the general 25 per cent reduction in Canadian National Railways train service." The article said that some communities had service cut in half, mail delivery was slowed and merchants were complaining that they could not obtain fresh fruits and vegetables.

The editorial that week praised the efforts of scientists in developing herbicides. "Through their efforts many farmers have already benefited from the use of 2,4-D in increased grain yield per acre and improvement in the grade of grain sold."

Union Stock Yards in St. Boniface reported weekly receipts of 786 cattle, 73 calves, 465 hogs and three sheep. The Canadian Livestock Co-operative market report said that "If farmer-feeders use reasonable discretion in marketing and keep their cattle on feed until they are able to get into a Blue grade of beef, we think they are reasonably sure to obtain a good return on their feeding operations. Should large numbers of feeders become panicky and rush their stock to market before it is ready, there could be trouble." Choice steers up to 1,000 pounds were quoted at \$22.50, Good at \$20, Medium at \$17.50 and Common at \$15.50.