

Consumer Perceptions of Agricultural Words, Phrases and Images

Executive Report



The Center for Public Issues Education
IN AGRICULTURE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

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Introduction

Words and phrases like “farmer,” “food safety,” and “best management practices,” are all terms commonly used to describe Florida’s agriculture industry, but how are these terms understood by members of the general public? A recent study completed by the Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources (PIE Center) in partnership with the Agriculture Institute of Florida reveals surprising information regarding how Florida residents perceive messages designed to communicate about agriculture.

More than 20 commonly used agricultural words and phrases and eight photographic images representing typical communication messages were tested in this study. Overall, participants expressed both positive and negative reactions to many of the terms and phrases tested, along with some confusion and skepticism.

This report discusses the study’s methodology, research findings, strategic recommendations and recommendations for future research. “This research should serve as the springboard for more in-depth research on how to craft Florida agriculture messages that will help us connect with an urbanized, tech-savvy public who really don’t understand who we are or what we do,” said Betsy McGill, immediate past president of the Florida Agriculture Institute.

“We have a great story to tell, and research like this will help us tell it better,” said McGill.

Methodology

To conduct this study, two sets of two (4 total) focus groups were held in Orlando and Sarasota Florida. A total of 36 representative adults participated in the focus groups. The participants in these focus groups consisted of 18 males and 18 females. They ranged in age from 18-80. The participants’ household incomes ranged from over \$20,000 to over \$80,000. One-third of the participants had a bachelor’s degree.

Participants were shown a series of words and terms, images and messages commonly used to educate and inform about agriculture. To analyze the data, results were recorded and transcribed, and content analyzed using the constant comparative technique to look for emergent themes. Themes were analyzed across all four groups and findings based on agreements across all four and three of the four groups.

Focus Group Results

Agricultural Words

Farmer

- Positive Word
 - QUOTE: “Positive feelings, it’s hard for farmers right now considering the economy. Just imagine have a farm, that’s where you live at.”
- In three of the four groups, farmers were seen as the owner of a farm.

- QUOTE: “To me it means the main person, the man or woman who owns the land or farm.”

Farm Worker

- All four groups indicated that a farm worker could be a migrant worker.
 - QUOTE: “There’s an ethnic overtone to the words farm worker.”
- Farm worker was mentioned in all groups as being a negative word when attached to migrant workers.
 - QUOTE: “When you sort of attach illegal migratory word to farm worker then you get negativity, but not when you see the word.”
- A farm worker was seen in three of the four groups as someone who simply works on a farm.
 - QUOTE: “A farm worker that implies that he’s not the owner, he’s a worker.”
- Corporate vs. Family Farm discussion was brought up in three of the four focus groups while discussing the words “farmer” and “farm worker.”
 - QUOTE: “I think a lot is done in the name of the farm and family farmer in congress when there are fewer and fewer family farms and more are being taken over by large corporations. Legislation is helping large corporations.”

Agriculture and Agri-business

- All four groups discussed both “agriculture” and “agri-business” as being positive.
- “Agri-business” was identified by three groups as being positive.
 - QUOTE: I’m neutral, but more positive than negative, to me the business is just the business and agriculture is the production. You have to have a business to have a product.”
- Three of the four groups indicated that “agri-business” was just the financial side of agriculture.
 - QUOTE: “I would say agribusiness would be the financial aspects dealing with agriculture, like scientific principles we use to grow livestock and plants for human consumption.”
- Specific companies were identified as “agri-business” by three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “Agri-business, I think of Monsanto, Cargill, DuPont. I don’t think of a farmer, I think of controlling conglomerates that are controlling our agriculture.”
- Three of the four groups indicated that “agri-business” was corporate or factory type farming.
 - QUOTE: “For agri-business, that implies to me an individual who has tremendous acreage and huge business and employs hundreds of people, sometimes gets paid by federal government for not growing crops...etc that’s the business, the big end business.”

Animal Welfare and Animal Rights

- Indecisiveness was exhibited among all groups in regards to the meaning of animal rights and animal welfare and whether or not the terms were positive or negative.
- Three of the four groups identified organizations they felt were associated with animal rights.
 - QUOTE: “The first word for rights is SPCA.”
 - QUOTE: “Animal rights are more of the PETA folks.”
- Abuse was discussed as a facet of animal rights in three of the four focus groups.
 - QUOTE: “I think that the reason they have come to these terms is because there was abuse.”
 - QUOTE: “We need animal rights because so many people abuse animals.”
- All four groups brought in personal stories of animal rights and animal welfare into the discussion.
 - QUOTE: “My mom used to take us to the circus. Only now do I see that they were mistreated just to entertain us. The elephants used to have things in their fee to keep them up just to entertain us. Now I realize what those animals were going through.”
 - QUOTE: “I worked in film and anytime we had an animal on set we had people from the humane society on set to make sure the animal wasn’t abused on set. It didn’t matter if it was a rabbit, they care in this instance, but we don’t care about how chickens are treated. It’s law that somebody has to be on the movie set. If it’s cute, if it’s entertaining we keep you, if not we eat you.”

Family Owned, Locally Grown, Food Safety

- Three of the four groups made references to “locally grown” as positive/good.
 - QUOTE: “I like locally grown, it means a lot to me to buy locally.”
- The term “locally grown” was viewed in a positive light because food wasn’t being produced somewhere else by three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “It’s locally grown, so it hasn’t been shipped and doesn’t have preservatives.”
- Three of the four groups indicated that “family owned” was a favorable word.
 - QUOTE: “I like family owned a lot.”
- Distrust was exhibited by three of four groups when discussing “food safety”.
 - QUOTE: “Food safety is a misleading term because of large corporations who have powerful lobbies. Even if the meat you’re purchasing has grade A on it, it’s meaningless.”
 - QUOTE: “Food safety is crap.”
- When discussing “food safety” rules/requirements were included in the discussion of three groups.

- QUOTE: “Food safety is how the food is handled from start to finish. I’m certified in food safety, you know the rules and temperatures to keep food safe.”

Green Industry, Sustainable Agriculture, Organic

- “Green Industry” was identified as a marketing word with questionable meaning in three groups.
 - QUOTE: “This is a frequently used phrase and supposedly has a positive connotation, but it may not necessarily be. If you look deep into things, green can mean they might say their industry is green because they recycle paper, but that may be the only green thing they are doing.”
- Three of the four groups exhibited confusion or unfamiliarity associated with “sustainable agriculture.”
 - QUOTE: “I’m not sure what ‘sustainable agriculture’ is. I’ve heard it but what is it?”
- A negative association was drawn between sustainable agriculture and corporate farms in three groups.
 - QUOTE: “Sustainable agriculture, big corporations own these big farms and they are using chemicals, yeah it’s sustainable, but what are you doing to yourself.”
 - QUOTE: “I heard a food scientist who said something in to the effect of sustainability, it is the big thing. The way Ag has been going, larger farms greater quantities, the only way to do it is to force it, excessive pesticides. Anything that is designed to kill an organism will eventually kill you, you are just bigger.
- Sustainable agriculture was associated with agricultural practices in three of four groups.
 - QUOTE: “Agriculture by definition is self sustaining. You plant you harvest, you can’t be more sustainable than that.”
- Skepticism surrounding the word “organic” was observed in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “I think they need to come up with a definition for the word organic. I think they have stretched it a little bit.”
 - QUOTE: “When I see organic, it’s being used everywhere, in a week or so there will be organic coca cola. Who is monitoring these crops to make sure they are really organic? That’s what comes to my mind.”

Agricultural Phrases

Best Management Practices, Preservation of Natural Resources, Wide Open Green Pastures, Sustainable Growth

- Failure or distrust of best management practices was discussed in all four focus groups
 - QUOTE: “I’m really biased about best management practices. I guess I’ve been around best management practices for so long that I’ve come to totally distrust them. If it comes from that high up in the tower, it probably doesn’t work.”
 - QUOTE: “Best management practices doesn’t always mean what it says.”

- Three of the four groups favored preservation of natural resources.
 - QUOTE: “I would buy into preservation of natural resources.”
 - QUOTE: “If I had to pick one of the four I would pick preservation of natural resources.”
- Wide open green pastures allowed participants to develop a mental image in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “It is the only one that gives me a picture.”
 - QUOTE: “Wide open green pastures, I picture windmills.” Or “California cows producing cheese. You will see a lot of green pastures.”
- No common findings were found in relation to “sustainable growth.”

Safe, fresh, and nutritious product, Committed to producing the best quality product, and Quality food begins with quality care.

- Skepticism was exhibited in three of the four groups in regards to “Safe, fresh, and nutritious product.”
 - QUOTE: “I think we have become too sophisticated as consumers to buy into safe, fresh, and nutritious. We want to know how fresh. The high fructose corn syrup is trying to say it’s part of a nutritious diet. It is so vague, it’s meaningless.
- “Committed to producing the best quality product” was only discussed by two groups.
- No common findings were found among the groups for “Quality food begins with quality care.”
- All of the groups discussed this group of messages as being advertising or marketing schemes.
 - QUOTE: “They are telling you that, it doesn’t mean it is true. On a label, they could just put it there; they could just put it there to make you buy it.”
 - QUOTE: “It’s the context. I’m taking all of these as something you see advertised in the grocery store. We’ve been lied to so much, it is hard to believe any of them.

Farmers were the first environmentalists, Stewards of the land, and Scientifically proven, socially responsible, and economically sound.

- Three of the four groups did not agree that farmers were the first environmentalists.
 - QUOTE: “The first ones here were Native Americans and they weren’t farmers. They were Native Americans. If it wasn’t for them you all wouldn’t be here.”
 - QUOTE: “The first line is a lie. Farmers were not the first environmentalists. Farmers cut down trees to make farms. That’s carbon producing, I understand the hunter and gathers were the first environmentalists.”
- Only one of the groups recognized that “Farmers were the first environmentalists” is a bumper sticker.
- Three of the four groups discussed feeling favorable toward “stewards of the land.”

- QUOTE: “I do like stewards of the land. Even if they only have livestock they still have to take care of the land.”
- QUOTE: “It carries responsibility. ‘Stewards’ mean you accept responsibility to take care of it.”
- “Scientifically prove, socially responsible, and economically sound” was viewed as too complex by three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “Way too wordy, it’s huge.”
 - QUOTE: “I think the last one is meaningless. It all sounds wonderful, but what does it mean?”

Agricultural Images

Cattle Images



- The grazing picture was associated with proper health and living conditions by three of four groups.
 - QUOTE: “The first one seems healthy, very fresh, very green.”
 - QUOTE: “Healthy on the left.”
 - QUOTE: “The animals on the left are thriving. You don’t see that on the other picture.”
- Positive associations were made to the grazing picture in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “The first one is automatically, wow isn’t that neat!”
 - QUOTE: “Look happy in the green field and they have a nice blue sky.”
 - QUOTE: “On the left it’s a nice pasture.” Or “The animals have rich pasture to provide food for themselves.”
- Three of four groups referenced states where they thought you would see the grazing picture.
 - QUOTE: “California, the commercial they do with the cows.”
 - QUOTE: “Could be in Montana.”
 - QUOTE: “Left is upstate Iowa.”

- Skepticism was discussed briefly in three of the four groups in regards to the grazing picture.
 - QUOTE: “I don’t believe them, I don’t think that is how most cows we eat are raised. I picture little cages and fenced areas and they grow up, eat, and die.”
 - QUOTE: “Too peaceful, too perfect.”
 - QUOTE: “Not in general, Ag is not like this.”
- Three of the four groups questioned what the cows laying down were doing.
 - QUOTE: “The second one what are they doing, what’s going on there?”
 - QUOTE: “sad on right, ” “unable to stand,” “They seem sick and unhealthy.”
- Discussion in three of the four groups indicated that the cows lying down were not receiving proper care.
 - QUOTE: “This one looks like torture to me.”
 - QUOTE: “They just seem sick and unhealthy and they want food and water.”
- Geographical references were made in three of four groups in regards to the picture of the cows lying down.
 - QUOTE: “The one here is more like Florida because we have a lot of bad hot weather here. Reminds me of southern Oklahoma.”

Greenhouse



- All four groups referenced mass production.
 - QUOTE: “Consolidated farming, mass produced products or whatever. Instead of family owned farm, more corporate idea.”
- Positive associations were made when assumptions about the unknown were made in three of four groups.
 - QUOTE: “It looks clean.”
 - QUOTE: “It could be organic and healthy and wonderfully tasting stuff.”
- Three of four groups expressed a lack of appeal associated with this picture.
 - QUOTE: “It’s not very natural, that’s the only thing I don’t like about it. I’d rather see natural.”

- All four groups felt that the image was believable.
 - QUOTE: “It’s accurate for that type of agriculture.”
 - QUOTE: “It looks believable. I wouldn’t buy it.”

Milking Parlor



- Efficiency was discussed in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “You don’t see any mess like you would with a non-mechanical milker.”
 - QUOTE: “It doesn’t make milk less fresh, just makes it quicker.”
 - QUOTE: “If you are going to get milk to the shelf you can’t employ 30,000 milkers, can turn on a tap and turn on the milk.”
- Three of the groups indicated that the facilities appeared to be clean.
 - QUOTE: “It’s very clean.”
 - QUOTE: “Clean, sanitary, inspected.”
- The image created negative cognitions in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “One word comes to mind to me, the bones are showing, cruel.”
 - QUOTE: “I’d rather not see it. I’d rather have a different image.”
 - QUOTE: “I’ve seen this operation in progress and it’s cold. It’s a cold feeling.”
- Three of the four groups referenced mass production.
 - QUOTE: “Industrialized the farming, mass producing. The people not concerned about welfare of animals or freedom of animals. They just shove them in this building.”
 - QUOTE: “I see mass production. These cows are waiting at the door to get in there. Sometimes it’s painful to have that thing full of milk. Once they put milkers on, sometimes they pinch and the cows kick it off. Picture took me to agribusiness.”
- Animal rights /animal welfare was mentioned in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “We don’t care about the welfare of the animal.”

- QUOTE: “Hypothetically, if I was an animal rights person I wouldn’t like it.”
- QUOTE: “It’s inhumane.”

Pesticide Application



- Negative words used in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “Bad, what are they putting on the food?”
- Chemical based references were made in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “Chemicals being sprayed.”
 - QUOTE: “Pesticides”
 - QUOTE: “Like its pesticides and its going to kill us.”

Farm Family



- Positive family associations were made in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “This is positive because they are smiling and they have a family dog.”
 - QUOTE: “Family owned farm.”
 - QUOTE: “That’s your typical American family.”

Irrigation



- The aesthetic beauty of the picture was recognized in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “That’s pretty.”
 - QUOTE: “It’s a beautiful picture in many ways.”
- Positive associations were made in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “looks like a happy nice farm.”
 - QUOTE: “More positive image of large scale growth.”
- In three of the four groups water conservation was discussed.
 - QUOTE: “Water is an extraordinary important resource. Agriculture seems to get huge exemptions and gets huge water permits. Agriculture uses more water than humans. That’s draining down the well. This isn’t sustainable. When I see these things in operation it pisses me off. That’s a public resource and it belongs to all of us. I see this in real life and it makes me mad.”

Hydroponic Production



- Appetite was addressed in three of the four groups.

- QUOTE: “Yummy” or “The ones at Disney... nothing is as good as a homegrown tomato from Indiana or Ohio.”
- QUOTE: “First thing is that hydroponic tomatoes taste horrible.”
- Modern characteristics were identified in three of the four groups.
 - QUOTE: “To me it looks appetizing, efficient, it looks clean.”
 - QUOTE: “I know to put tomatoes on all hamburgers in America; you have to have a super efficient way to grow them.”
- Believability was questioned in all four groups.
 - QUOTE: “My first reaction is I don’t believe that picture. I’ve never seen anything like it before.”
 - QUOTE: “My initial reaction was this is some weird photoshop picture.” Or “I look at it and think it is a fake photo. I tried hydroponic and was unsuccessful and didn’t get one tomato. I think that can’t be.”

Additional Findings

- Three of the four groups included references to Amish in their discussion.
 - QUOTE: “I like scientifically proven. I think of the Amish. It’s good food.” (scientifically proven, socially responsible, and economically sound discussion)
 - QUOTE: “There was a story the other day because of an amish because he sells raw dairy.” (Food Safety discussion).
- All four focus groups made reference to media/pop culture.
 - QUOTE: “Farm worker the connotation I get is through the media. A lot of time farm workers are migrant workers and sometimes there is a negative connotation with that.”
 - QUOTE: “I’ve been strongly influenced- I read omnivores’ dilemma. Agribusiness is real negative for myself. So I would be biased.”
 - QUOTE: “That Sarah Mc Claugn commercial kills me.” (Animal rights, animal welfare discussion).
 - QUOTE: “Humane society, their commercial.” (Animal rights, animal welfare discussion).
 - QUOTE: “60 minutes did a story about how the chickens and they are so many and they are unsafe to be caged in and they need to be spread out.” (Food Safety Discussion).
 - QUOTE: “Heard about sustainable agriculture on NPR- not just sustainably of farming area but of surrounding environment like Lake apoka. All the run off killed the lake. Then the farming isn’t sustainable but also the area around it is not sustainable. That was their take on it- It made sense.” (sustainable agriculture discussion).

- QUOTE: “I did hear on the radio that organic is better as far as health is concerned .” (Organic discussion)
- The Dust Bowl was referenced by three of the four groups
 - QUOTE: “The one thing that strikes me as over the top is farmers were first environmentalist- if you look at what happened in the dust bowl. We are the ...not all of our farming practices historically were environmentally friendly.” (Farmers were the first environmentalists discussion).
 - QUOTE: “I think about if people don’t practice these things- you see in history we fail to follow good management practices and preservation of natural resources like the dust bowl. If we don’t follow these things- then you won’t have sustainable growth-it will be in the negative zone.”

Strategic Recommendations

With respect to perceptions of agricultural terms; overall results were as follows:

Words/Phrases Categories with General Agreement by all Groups

Positive Words/Phrases	Farmer Locally-Grown Family-Owned Preservation of Natural Resources Wide Open Green Pastures Stewards of the Land
Corporate Words/Phrases	Green Industry Agribusiness Animal Rights
Words that Caused Skepticism /Distrust	Organic Farm Worker (when attached to migrant workers) Food Safety Best Management Practices Safe, Fresh, Nutritious Product Farmers were the First Environmentalists

Enhancing Communication Efforts

- Consumers in this research liked seeing families in photographs.
- Communicators should use discernment when considering labeling or referring to a product or practice as “organic.” The consumers in this study were skeptical of this word.
- When showing images of animals, it is best for the image to have easily identifiable animal action.
 - When groups couldn’t tell what the animals were doing, they assumed the animals were not receiving proper care.
- Avoid showing images of animal agriculture production in a vacuum or snapshot (i.e. cows being milked).

- Consumers wanted to know how long the cows had to stay in the milking parlor, why their bones are showing, etc. By just seeing one milking picture, some consumers assumed they stayed in the milking parlor all day.
- Personalizing Messages
 - Agricultural communicators should consider shifting their portrayal of agricultural practices from corporate terms to more personal terms such as local, family, and farmer.
 - The term “best management practices” needs to be personalized. Consumers in this research stated that best management practices came from higher levels in an organization and didn’t feel like BMPs were implemented on a grassroots level. Work should be done to highlight actual producers who have found success in utilizing BMPs.
 - Messages regarding food safety should be personalized. Consumers in this research exhibited distrust regarding food safety. They discussed large corporations with large lobbies are in charge of these standards. Messages should contain images and phrases from people who look like the intended audience.
- Agricultural communicators should work to get accurate stories and images into popular media and pop culture. These consumers were getting saturated with subtle and overt agricultural messages each day from popular media like:
 - Local news
 - Books- Omnivore’s Dilemma, Free to Graze
 - SPCA Commercials
 - National news
 - California Dairy Commercials
 - Radio
- Agricultural communicators should consider engaging publics through agritourism efforts and/or media tours. Agritourism is a way for consumers to feel more connected with producers.
 - QUOTE: “All their [hydroponic] tomato plants, they just put them all in. It’s something new, just to drive out and see what they’re doing.”

Educational Opportunities

- There is an opportunity to educate consumers about the definition of “sustainable growth.” The groups were unable to come to any consensus about what this phrase meant.
- “Locally grown” was viewed in a positive light by a majority of the consumers.
 - There is an opportunity to define the term “local” as consumers did not have a solid definition for this term.
 - Agriculture commodity groups and member associations could work to define “locally grown” as made/produced in Florida.
- There are opportunities to educate consumers regarding the differences between animal rights and animal welfare.
 - Specifically, to educate consumers about current animal welfare standards.

- Many of the consumers' references to the treatment of animals revolved around images and media seen in pop culture. Therefore, consideration should be given to introducing pro-animal agriculture images into popular media.

Further Research Needed

- Concept of transparency needs to be researched further.
 - QUOTE: "This is the way it is, but I don't want to see it."
 - How much and what types of production do they want to see?
- Enhancing the believability of agriculture messages and images should be further researched.
 - What elements will encourage consumers to believe positive agriculture messages and avoid thinking they are all marketing ploys?