

Telling the Dairy Sustainability Story: The Value of Dairy Open Houses as Learning Events to Improve Consumer Understanding of Modern Animal Agriculture

A.S. Leaflet R2516

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Summary and Implications

Two dairy open houses as part of June Dairy Month events were conducted to provide the public the opportunity to experience and learn first-hand about the efforts made daily on modern dairies to achieve cow care, cow comfort and health, hygienic milking procedures, local cropping systems that provide quality feed for the dairy herd, manure management and land stewardship, respect for family and non-family workers, and overall quality and safety of milk and dairy products. These events were a product of industry partnerships. The two events reached 1700+ participants. Surveys performed at both events showed that many participants had trust in dairy farmers and the dairy industry prior to the event, but post tour surveys showed enhancement in their knowledge of modern dairy practices that assure animal health and comfort, product quality and safety, and environmental stewardship and preservation.

Introduction

A large percentage of the US population lives in an urban or suburban environment, and are slightly disconnected from agriculture and food production. At the same time, there is increasing interest and concern in the general population about food safety, quality, and sustainability. While many exercise trust in the dairy and other food systems, a segment of anxious but uninformed consumers appear to readily accept viewpoints of anti-livestock/anti-agriculture that are negative about animal care, environmental stewardship, and safety/quality of dairy products.

Dairy producers are increasingly aware of the importance of countering misinformation about their industry and their modern animal husbandry practices. Their check-off dollars fund product and information efforts such as the US Dairy Industry Sustainability Initiative. One of the aims of this Initiative is to inform the public and foster consumer confidence in dairy products. The Dairy Sustainability Initiative as shaped by national dairy check-off organizations aims to deliver 2 important messages:

1. “Sustainable practices involve the production of crops fed to dairy cows, on-farm milk production, and transportation and processing of milk and dairy products. In many ways, dairy farmers are the original

environmentalists. They live on the land, they drink the water, and they care for their animals and the soil.”

2. “The dairy industry is acting responsibly in working to identify economically viable ways to further reduce its carbon footprint.”

ISU Dairy Team Programmatic Response

ISU Extension Dairy Team workers partnered with Iowa’s dairy producer and industry associations, other farm and commodity organizations (ISU site) and the regional dairy check-off organization, Midwest Dairy Association, to plan and host Dairy Farm Open House events as part of “June Dairy Month” activities. Partners included: Iowa State Dairy Association; Western Iowa Dairy Alliance, Northeast Iowa Dairy Foundation, Coalition to Support Iowa Farmers, Midwest Dairy Association, Iowa Farm Bureau, Iowa Dairy Processors (Roberts Dairy, Swiss Valley Farms, Anderson Erickson, AMPI, and Wells Blue Bunny) and the IA Egg, Pork, Beef, Soybean, and Corn commodity groups (ISU).

The purpose of the summer 2009 Open Houses – one in central Iowa at the ISU Dairy Farm and one in NW Iowa at a large family-owned dairy farm was to provide experiential events in line with the theme and philosophy of the Dairy Industry Sustainability Initiative described above. The Open House coordinators planned events for the general public whereby they could see and learn first-hand about the efforts made daily on modern dairies to achieve cow care, cow comfort and health, hygienic milking procedures, local cropping systems that provide quality feed for the dairy herd, manure management and land stewardship, and respect for family and non-family workers.

At both open house sites, the planning partners incorporated a tour of the dairy with designated stations to showcase and educate on specific attributes of dairy farms (animal comfort and health, milking practices, product safety and quality, environmental stewardship). Members of the dairy community—dairy producers and agri-professionals- served as tour guides and narrators. In this way, guests learned facts about dairy herd management and production directly from the people who work on or serve the farm. Both events also incorporated opportunities to showcase and taste existing and new dairy products. The ISU Dairy Open House also had an agricultural learning center that encompassed interactive learning displays from all the commodity groups as well as an interactive agricultural display and maze on environmental stewardship. Both events incorporated surveys to assess

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participant knowledge and interests in the dairy industry and dairy practices.

Result and Discussion

A total of 1700+ participants were involved in these 2 events with many families and young children, and most participants from non-agricultural backgrounds. Guests at the Open Houses were invited to complete surveys to rate their experience of the dairy tour and knowledge and trust of dairy practices. At both events, the survey results were very favorable and indicated success in achieving the goal to improve consumers' knowledge and understanding about modern dairy farms. The survey tallies and comments posted below convey the guests' ratings and comments.

Jones Dairy Open House Survey Results June 30, 2009

1. Overall this dairy open house was?

170	9	1		2
Excellent 4	3	2	Poor 1	No Response

2. Segments of the event you enjoyed the most?

Meeting the Jones Family	47
Learning about care of the cows and calves	108
Learning about the crops and manure management	40
Learning about the things dairy producers do to provide safe, high quality milk and dairy products	65
Dairy Parlor	65
The Food	28

3. Prior to event, your opinion of modern dairy farms?

125	48	8	0
Positive 4	3	2	Negative 1

4. From what you've seen today, do you believe dairy farmers are good caretakers of dairy cattle?

174	8	0	0
Yes 4	3	2	No 1

5. Believe modern dairies are protective of environment?

166	14	1	0	1
Yes 4	3	2	No 1	No Response

6. After event, what is your opinion of modern dairy farms?

Impressive

169	12	1	0
Positive 4	3	2	Negative 1

7. Would you like to attend other events like?

161	14	1	3	3
Yes 4	3	2	No 1	No Response

2009 Dairy Celebration at ISU Dairy Farm – Ames Post-Event Survey Results

1. Overall, Dairy Celebration was? (Average = 3.9)

160	19		
Excellent 4	3	2	Poor 1

2. Segments of the event you enjoyed the most?

Dairy Tour	164
Ag Discovery Area	28
Live Radio	22
Dairy Parlor	59
DairyFood	51

3. Opinion of modern dairies prior to event? (Avg. = 3.63)

120	53	6	0
Positive 4	3	2	Negative 1

4. Do you support dairy growth in Iowa? (Avg. 3.92)

165	14	0	0
Yes 4	3	2	No 1

5. Modern dairies protective of environment? (Avg. = 3.82)

148	30	1	0
Yes 4	3	2	No 1

6. After event, opinion of modern dairy farms? (Avg. 3.91)

163	14	2	0
Positive 4	3	2	Negative 1

7. Would you like to attend other events like? (Avg. = 3.87)

164	8	6	1
Yes 4	3	2	No 1

Overall Findings:

- Attendees found the events to be worthwhile and would classify them as an A.
- Tours were the aspect of the events enjoyed most by participants.
- Many participants had high trust in dairy producers and farms prior to event.
- Participant's opinion of modern dairy farms following the event was positively and significantly increased.