

Farmers: Don't let Netflix or activist groups tell your story

Written by Adam Czech, [Minnesota Corn Growers Association](#)

If you spend any time browsing the documentary section on Netflix, it looks like ["Food Inc."](#) and ["King Corn"](#) got married and had hundreds of anti-farming documentary offspring.

Films like ["Food Fight,"](#) ["Farmageddon,"](#) ["Forks over Knives"](#) and ["Food Matters"](#) fill up screen after screen of Netflix's "Watch now" section. Millions of Netflix subscribers have instant access to these films. And for many, it's the only way they'll ever hear information about modern agriculture.

Unfortunately, the shots at modern farming aren't limited to documentary films. Well-funded activist organizations like the Environmental Working Group (EWG) regularly blast agriculture, likening farmers to ["drunks at a bar"](#) and using their metro media contacts to blame agriculture for destroying our [rivers and streams.](#)

Even multi-billion dollar corporations are piling on. Chipotle, which was once owned by McDonald's (a target of many food and farm-related documentaries), recently released an online marketing campaign disguised as a television series that [portrays modern agriculture as one big evil corporation](#) using GMOs to grow their bottom line and injecting the meat we eat with all kinds of who knows what.

Whether it's a film, activist organization or mega-corporation, one thing is clear: People enjoy a good story.

"In the end, people connect to stories more than they connect to facts," says Jen Haugen, a registered dietitian who grew up on a farm near Lakefield, Minnesota and currently lives in Austin.

And if farmers don't tell their own story, someone else will. Hence, films like "King Corn," activist organizations like EWG and anti-ag marketing campaigns from corporations like Chipotle.

Haugen frequently talks food and farming in the local media and at food and health-related events. She also has her own [website.](#) She's not a grenade-thrower, meaning she doesn't make outrageous claims simply to garner attention to sell a film or a burrito.

What she does provide is science-based information on buzzworthy food topics like GMOs and ideas for families to connect over farming and food. She also offers valuable insight into how individual farmers can better connect with consumers and tell their own story.

"One thing a farmer can do is to mine their lives of stories," she said. "It can be hard to think about all a farmer does in a day, but digging up a few key stories that showcase why you chose to be a

farmer, what is the most rewarding thing about farming, how you farm and why you continue to do it can go a long way to personalizing your story. I think it's also important for farmers to document these stories – write them down and refer back to them often as talking points.”

Farmers telling their own story isn't limited to the big screen or the pages of a newspaper. Everyday interactions present opportunities to tell farming's story.

“Telling your story can happen in many different ways,” says Wanda Patsche, a family farmer in South Central Minnesota who also [blogs at Minnesota Farm Living](#). “Talk with family members, neighbors, people you do business with, community service organizations such as Rotary or Kiwanis. Traveling also presents many opportunities — whether it's talking to the person next to you on an airplane, people in a hotel or campgrounds or restaurants. The person-to-person opportunities are endless.”

For many farmers, telling their own story is difficult. They're farmers, not public relations specialists. But a basic understanding of what makes an interesting story can go a long way in helping push back against misinformation currently out there about farming.

For example, I recently spent 30 minutes on the phone with a farmer talking about ideas for stories about conservation. Only after we were done chatting did I learn that this farmer also practiced [conservation drainage](#). To the farmer, conservation drainage was “just something he did.” The farmer didn't think it was worth telling the general public about.

With less than 2 percent of the population making their living on the farm today, America's disconnect from agriculture is bigger than ever. People want to know about where their food comes from and they want to know more about farming, but they have no idea where to turn.

They also want to know about things like conservation drainage. How is it making farming better? Why do farmers practice it? How does it help get food on their family's table while preserving our rivers and streams? If farmers don't answer these questions, consumers will turn to activist groups like EWG for answers, or head to Netflix to browse the latest films about “big ag.”

You can find Matt Braun on Twitter ([@FastGrassGuy](#)) and other social media outlets regularly sharing information about what's happening near where he grew up on a family farm near the Farmington/Hampton, Minnesota area and where he lives today near Dennison. He agrees that it's tough for a busy farmer to think about the public relations aspect of farming, but says it needs to happen.

“If the farmer is busy, that is alright, but he or she needs to do it whenever they can,” Braun said. “The grocery store, the movie theater, online...wherever. Starting a conversation goes a long way with the non-farming public.”

Yes, there is a lot of noise to cut through in order to get the true story out there about farming. It's easy for me to sit behind a keyboard and tell farmers that they need to tell their own story. Like most things in life, the issue is a bit more complicated than that. But we have to start somewhere.

If you still don't think consumers are yearning for more information from farmers, then [check out this video](#) of Jimmy Kimmel asking people who are gluten free if they know what gluten actually is (spoiler alert: they don't).

Imagine a world where the people being interviewed got their information about food and farming from actual farmers, not movies on Netflix, EWGs or burrito conglomerates?

"Consumers want to know more about where their food comes from," Patsche said.

"Unfortunately, some of the information about agriculture on the Internet is just plain wrong. And it's the misinformation about agriculture that we as farmers need to correct. If we don't correct the misinformation about what we do, who will?"

Visit Jen Haugen's website: <http://www.jenhaugen.com/>

Read Wanda Patsche's blog: <http://www.mnfarmliving.com/>

Follow Matt Braun on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/FastGrassGuy>