

Why Market?
Marketing talk by Lynn Betts
February, 2004

Why market? I think everyone knows why you market.

You market to reach a goal, to be successful.

Over the years, I've seen differences in success where people market and where they don't. For instance, back in the 70's and 80's, how do you explain the fact that one county would have thousands of acres of no-till farming while surrounding counties had only a few hundred?

Or, more recently, I've seen a county with tens of thousands of acres of conservation buffers, surrounded by counties with only a few thousand acres. Now, these counties are similar in landscape, soils, crops grown, and even the kinds of farmers and landowners. What's the difference? Of course, it's marketing. They may not call it that. They may say the district conservationist and others are "pushing" buffers. More on that specific instance later.

It boils down to the fact that we market because it works.

Every company is judged by three P's:

1. People
2. Product (or performance in case of service company/agency)

These first two categories are judged by customers who know the company, who get a product directly from the agency. But take the case of the NRCS. We are judged by our people and performance by the 2% of the population who know us. How are we judged by the other 98%?

3. Publicity

So, marketing does include publicity—news releases, brochures, videos and other ways to help people get to know us and our services. But marketing is much more than publicity. I believe it is a way of communicating with people, and maybe more importantly, a way of thinking.

Pete Heard reminds people every chance he gets that "everything we do on the land affects wildlife, either positively or negatively." Along those same lines, I believe every action we take or don't take with people is linked to how we feel about marketing. Every time you meet someone, talk with them, listen to them, you are making an impact, You are making an impression, either positive or negative. Whether we realize it or not, we are continually marketing our ideas, our project, our competence, and yes, ourselves. Incidentally, when Pete says everything we do has an effect on wildlife, he is marketing a concept, an idea. He wants to effect change in the way his audience thinks. He is a marketer.

Well, NRCS and NACD have a 7-step formal process of marketing. The approach was developed into a marketing kit that included a video and series of workbooks for employees and officials who want to solve a problem using the marketing process. I will show the first 7.5 minutes because it outlines what I think are the most important things to do to be successful with it.

What comes through in that video to me is the importance of talking with customers and forming alliances. People who say they can't write releases or brochures, so they can't market are missing the point of marketing. Marketing is all about thinking of the world through a partner's eyes, and from your customer's point of view. In other words, marketing is all about building relationships.

No doubt about it, we will have a better product, deliver a better service, if we talk to customers and partners. We will have a better service if we use their resources, their brainpower and their financial resources. That's without even considering how much more effective you can be when you have people who can influence your audience deliver your messages.

A little proof for me of the need to talk with customers and partners has come through publication work. I've done quite a few publications over the years, but two I was involved with come to mind. One was a pasture management brochure, where we sat down with five pasture managers for a day and talked about their needs, what information should be in a brochure and how it should be presented. The other was a farm bill brochure. In that case, we held a series of six focus groups across the country, again asking what information they needed and how it should be presented. In both cases, we were later told over and over that the brochures were on the mark. It was because we involved our customers rather than putting together what we thought they would want. Projects like that have etched in my mind how important it is to involve other people—we just can't do as good a job alone.

If you think about it, one of the most serious, expensive and classic marketing efforts takes place every four years in our country. The people who undertake that process first try to identify the problems their customers are facing, identify their needs, and also begin to build alliances. They develop a marketing strategy, specifically target those strategies to grouped sets of customers, and carry out the plan. Of course, they continually evaluate the marketing effort. At the end of the marketing campaign, the person who does the best job of marketing becomes President of the United States. You think about it, they do follow a process. Early on, when they define their customer, for instance, that customer is a party member likely to attend a caucus in Iowa.

Simultaneously, they are working with customers for the primary in New Hampshire. And the strategies are different for each of those audiences. Anyway, our leaders and our politicians are marketers—of their ideas, their capabilities—just like we all are.

To sum up, I'd just like to point out again it's how we think and whether we act on that thinking that's important. There's only so much time in a day, and to me, if we don't devote some of that time to strategizing about reaching our customers and working through partners, we're missing the boat.

To get back to that county that had tens of thousands of acres of buffers. What do you suppose was their key? Well, the district conservationist took advantage of groups in the county that would sell buffers for him. Rather than him going door to door, farm to farm, he worked with the local Pheasants Forever chapter, the local FFA chapter, and a watershed water quality improvement group. These groups had members who wanted to contact farmers. They believed in buffers, and the district conservationist multiplied his efforts by having them do the legwork and bring business in the door. And those groups will support NRCS in other ways as needed. It works!

It will work for you, for me, for anyone. We just need to jump in and step up our efforts to build new relationships or rekindle old ones. That's marketing.