

Agribusiness Essay

Lessons in Issues Management - Monarch butterflies and the Media.

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This writer has maintained for many years that the main 'issue' in the GM plant / food debate is not the actual science of the technology under discussion, it has been the management of information, public relations and the media.

In today's information driven age, news, or what is generated to resemble news, has become grist to a massive mill that is designed to churn out stories for the edification and entertainment of the reading, listening and viewing public.

We, the consumers of media output, are now so awash with information and the media is now so competitive that quality, balance and in many cases, good taste, have often become victims of the general clamouring for our attention and controversy and 'shock value' are two of the main tools used to grab that attention.

A validation of this hypothesis is found than in the Monarch butterfly – BT Corn saga that exploded across newspapers and the airwaves in mid 1999 – reporting that laboratory tests had 'proven' that pollen from BT corn was capable of killing Monarch butterflies.

An intentional inference was made - that the extinction of this much loved North American species was clearly being foretold by the scientists who had conducted the experiment and this extinction that was more or less guaranteed is 'something was not done' to prevent the terrible tragedy that was soon to be visited upon us.

To help to tell the full story behind the Monarch butterfly – BT corn story, the following web site has been put together by the Economic Research Service of the USDA and provides a very thorough and balanced coverage of the Monarch – BT issue <http://www.ars.usda.gov/sites/monarch/index.html> - the following quote is taken from that site.

A note in *Nature* in May 1999 about a small laboratory feeding trial appeared to show monarch butterfly caterpillars fed milkweed leaves coated with *Bt* corn pollen grew slower and suffered a higher death rate than caterpillars that consumed milkweed leaves free of corn pollen. Monarch caterpillars only eat a diet of milkweed leaves, and milkweed often grows near and in cornfields.

By design, researchers did not mimic natural conditions. These caterpillars were given no choice but to feed on leaves heavily covered with *Bt* corn pollen. The actual dose of *Bt* corn pollen used was not measured.

The lead researcher of the study cautioned that it would be inappropriate to draw any conclusions about the risks to monarchs in the field based solely on these initial results.

The key to the media storm that followed the publication of the *Nature* article was the intentional manipulation / selective reporting of the results of the study – only telling the part of the story that had 'shock value'. Unfortunately responsible coverage and full disclosure doesn't make a good story and thus emerges the great PR lesson from this issue for the agri-food chain.

Place yourself in the position of a journalist. Rarely does a 'balanced' story rate well or attract much attention. It is much more effective to either represent one side of the story, making mileage out of the subsequent controversy or to selectively engineer a story to represent an angle that will create the most 'interest'.

Like it or not, the role of the modern journalist is not to represent the 'facts', it is to create 'interest' and seek 'attention' from prospective readers, viewers and listeners.

In this particular case, the researchers created conditions in the lab that couldn't be recreated in the field, basically just to see what would happen. Neither the experiment nor the results had, by admission of the researchers, any relevance or application to the field.

With the *Nature* report, it was convenient (predictable?) for the media outlets that initially picked the story up to take the line of most 'interest' to readers / viewers / listeners and to ignore referring to the 2 vital aspects of the research, namely –

- That at no stage was the research designed or intended to mimic what could be reasonably expected to represent natural conditions (specifically with regard to pollen densities).
- That the researchers unequivocally cautioned against drawing any conclusions that could relate to real world risks to Monarchs from the research.

Had the reports initially included either or both of these qualifiers, the story would have been a fizzer – it wouldn't have created much interest.

Rarely do media outlets give the same weight to balancing a story such as this one once they have created the initial interest. Who cares if the experiments were not representative of 'real world' conditions or can't be replicated in the field – BT corn kill Monarch Butterflies is a damn good story!

An unfortunate side effect of this selective approach to reporting is that it has created in the minds of many the 'fact' that pollen from BT corn kills butterflies. A similar vein has run through much of the reporting of GM technology over the last 6 or more years. The term Frankenfoods was the brilliant creation of a mind not interested in examining the scientific, cultural or socio-economic appropriateness of a technology, but of a focus on ratings and circulation points.

However as professionals in the agri-food sector we have to accept the fact that those responsible for reporting issues can also be the victims of misinformation. It has been estimated that in Australia close to 80% of 'news' was not actually news (reporting of occurrences that 'happen') but is information generated from press releases, statements and the like issued by individuals or groups with an interest in a particular issue.

So when we are critical of the media for misinforming the public, we have to be conscious of the possibility that the media outlets may well have been misinformed themselves. In a competitive and time critical business like the print and electronic media, when a 'story' is presented that fulfils all the criteria required for it to be a success, it will more than likely be given a run – with or without verification or balancing.

This may well have been the case with the BT – Monarch story. A party with an interest in 'proving' that GM technology was bad for the environment, may well have been responsible for bringing the research to the attention of media and of putting the initial spin to the results of the experiments. That the additional information required to place the results in their proper context may not have been passed on is where the real manipulation of public opinion took place, and is where the reporters should have balanced their coverage..

What does this teach us from an issues management perspective?

Quite a lot actually. We have to understand that the media are not the enemies of science, totally irrational or a group of rat bags and they are certainly not 'the enemy'. They are a group of people with a specific purpose, one that is not secret or mystical. The aim of the print media is to sell newspapers and magazines and the aim of the electronic media is to attract viewers and listeners – all operating in a competitive market place and clamouring for attention in a world now awash with information.

To successfully manage an issue like the intentional selective reporting of the BT – Monarch research the first thing we have to do is accept that the media has the right to take and represent information in any way it sees fit – as long as it does so within appropriate legal boundaries. This is a fact of life in a free and open society.

In a free society selectively telling one side of a story can't be stopped. We have to accept that opponents of whatever activity one may be engaged in, have the opportunity or the right to represent facts in or out of their 'proper' context.

But we can be more prepared to undertake 'PR combat', by better understanding what drives issues, what motivates media outlets and journalists and by being more open with the media and the general public and having counter arguments that can place issues into their correct context ready at all times.

The major responsibility of media should be to ensure that both sides of a particular argument get equal prominence and that reporting is not swayed by sensationalism. In the case under discussion here, media outlets were guilty of swallowing a particular line (trials on BT corn kill Monarch butterflies!) and not giving similar prominence to the fact that the researchers created an artificial environment for their experimentation and cautioned that their results had no application to the field.

Balance is the key and a responsible media should verify and validate before publication / broadcast and give equal space and time to both sides of an issue, even if it means that they were unbalanced in their initial treatment of a story.

Oh look – it's a flying pig...!