

**BE GOOD AND TELL IT?  
RE-ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CONNECTION BETWEEN LIVESTOCK INDUSTRY AND  
SOCIETY.**

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**Abstract**

*The pork, poultry and dairy production chains have been of major significance for the rural areas of Western Europe. They provided food in abundance, employment and economic activities. In the last decade, however, there is an increasing awareness in society to farming. A gap has grown between animal production methods and the perceptions of society. The project BGood is looking for new ways to re-establish the connection between the livestock industry and society. These ways concentrate on communication strategies. Repairing a damaged relationship is, however, more than improving image. It is a combined action between image (to see) and identity (to be) (Birkigt & Stadler, 1986). Therefore, the communication strategies focus on changing society's view of animal production (image) and changing the attitude of the livestock industry towards society (identity). Twenty-five interviews have been conducted to explore how people working in other, non-agricultural, industries have acted in situations to bridge a gap (e.g. church and society, politics and civilians, chemical industry and their neighbours). Surprising ideas and comments have come up: "People want to identify themselves with a person (the farmer). They can't identify themselves with the high technology systems you're always presenting.", or "Start to think of yourself as a food producer, not as an animal care taker.", or "No visibleness means no engagement." The project is now at a stage where the plurality of ideas will be used as inspirational examples in a series of meetings with people from the agricultural industries. They will form working groups that take over the ideas and put them into practice. At the IFMA-congress the process during and results of the meetings will be presented. One of the conclusions of the project so far is that the cooperation between agriculture and non-agriculture was clarifying, gave us eye-openers and was very fruitful.*

*Keywords: animal production, society, communication strategies*

**Purpose**

The pork, poultry and dairy production chains have been of major significance for the rural areas in Western Europe. They provided food in abundance, employment and economic activities. During the last decade, however, there is an increasing responsiveness of society to farming. Rural areas get more densely populated and, lately, more and more by urban people. This phenomenon leads in practice to a conflict, which can be scaled down to the economic principle of property rights of resources. Rural amenities such as air, space and landscape are for everybody and with increasing population and intensive agricultural production in rural areas the competition for these resources is high and leads to more interference from society in agricultural production (Goldsmith, 2004). Next to this there is a growing awareness in society of how animals should be taken care of and, sometimes almost humanely, should be handled. These developments disclosed the fact that a gap has grown between animal production and perceptions of society.

The aim of the project BGood is to look for new ways to re-establish the connection between the livestock industry and society. These concentrate on communication strategies, while bridging the gap

starts with contact. Repairing a damaged relationship is, however, more than improving image. It is a combined action between image (to see) and identity (to be) (Birkigt and Stadler, 1986). Therefore, the communication strategies focus on changing the views of society of animal production (image) and changing the attitude of the livestock industry towards society (identity).

## **Methods and Principal Results**

### ***‘Outside-Inside’ Approach***

The project BGood is based on an approach which is called by the project as the *‘outside-inside’* approach. In short this approach comprises of that inspiration gained from people, activities and examples *outside* the agricultural sector in relation to the theme of bridging gaps, in order to develop innovative initiatives *inside* the agricultural sectors which give an interpretation of the goals of the project.

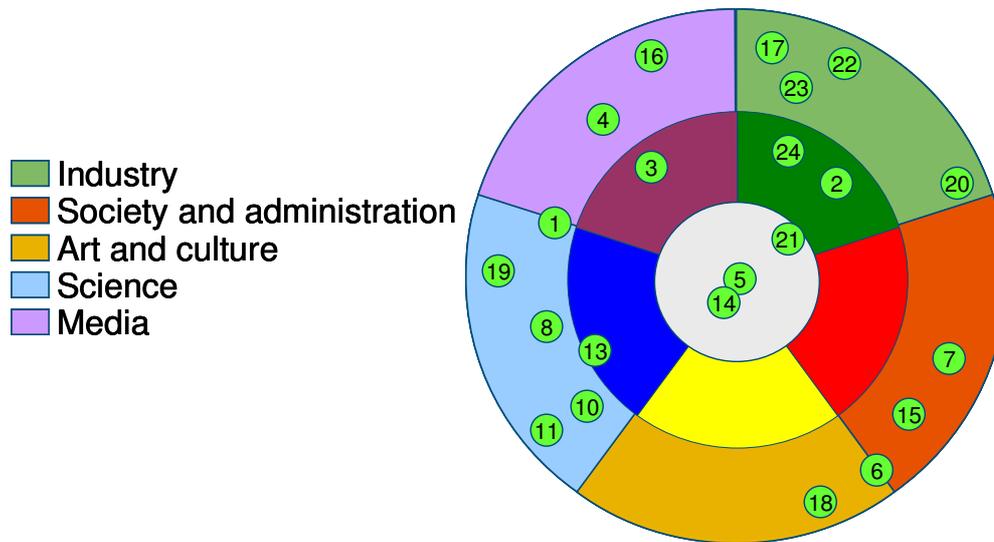
This *‘outside-inside’* approach was chosen for a specific reason. Over the last decade many initiatives have ‘seen the light’ and were implemented in the livestock production chains to fulfil to a greater extent the needs of society. Nevertheless it was concluded at the end of the Dutch national debate on pig and poultry production (19<sup>th</sup> January 2005), that these initiatives haven’t noticeably narrowed the gap between animal production and perceptions of society. Real breakthroughs and transitions in communication strategies do apparently not find their origin within agriculture itself. Therefore, it was necessary and thus decided to gain new insights on communication strategies outside the agricultural sectors.

### ***From Outside...***

Interviews were conducted in the period June 2006 to November 2006 to explore how people working in other, non-agricultural, fields have acted in situations to bridge a gap (e.g. church and society, politics and civilians, chemical industry and their neighbours). A format was set-up to talk to a large diversity of people across five different fields (non-agricultural industry, society and civil administration, art and culture, science, and media) and three different levels of the person’s involvement in the agribusiness (not, moderate, complete); see Figure 1.

In total 24 persons were interviewed. The distribution of interviewees was odd (Figure 1). We succeeded in contacting inspiring people within the art and culture field and the society and administration field, but didn’t manage to interest them in an interview to share their experiences with others.

**Figure 1: Overview of the 24 interviewees according to their working field and their involvement in agri-business (outer circle = no involvement, middle circle = moderate involved, inner circle = totally involved).**



At least 60 fascinating and valuable leads came up in the interviews. The materials - or building stones - originating from the interviews were, however, not useful in that format. Therefore, they have been grouped into clusters of building stones. Together, these building stones provide an important eye-opener for those in agricultural production chains, in relation to the way they typically communicate. The three most important eye-openers will be presented in the following bullet points:

- The first eye-opener points at identification. The focus of a communication strategy should be on a person (the farmer) and not on a system (the farm). People want to, and can only, identify themselves with a person and not with the high technology solutions presented by agricultural production chains. The latter creates distance and results in persistence of the gap between animal producers and society, no matter how society-oriented the production is. This argument is naturally followed by the building stone to communicate experience instead of facts, such as, the environment is protected by a certified 90% ammonia reducing air treatment system. Only one or two decades ago people wanted to be and were taught on the basis of such factual material and knowledge in, for example, fact sheets and documentary films. Nowadays the majority of society is more interested in feel-good and ‘reality actions’ and want to be entertained. This doesn’t implicitly mean that in between they can’t be taught, but increasing knowledge is not the main attraction to such programs or activities for them. Agriculture could make more use of entertainment as an instrument in its communication with society (with an emphasis on ‘with’ instead of ‘to’ society). To summarise, central principles in this eye-opener are: communicate with society making people central in entertainment-like activities, so civilians can identify themselves with the farmer and learn something about agricultural production along the way.
- The second eye-opener points at food. Following the first eye-opener, it is important in communication strategies to focus on elements where agricultural production can connect to society. Food is an every day connection between, and a meeting place for, these two sides of the chasm. Its value in communication is underestimated by producers. Relevant to this building stone is that farmers should start to think of themselves as food producers, not as animal carers takers. An obstacle to this eye-opener arises because the food production chain is made up of many links and is complicated and distant to consumers. Consumers should be more part of the food production chain and reclaim a part of food production. In this way they can identify more with the fact that food is produced and that farmers are part of this production process, instead of the idea that food is something synthetic coming from factories. Subsequently, the challenge is to break the taboo that meat originates from live animals and make it subject of discussion. This can be more easily done

with children than adults, while the former group is in general more un-biased, open-minded and susceptible for this discussion. To summarise, central principles in this eye-opener are: conduct a dialogue on food, in which consumers experience (partly) how food is produced and start to communicate with children to break taboos on the origin of food.

- The third eye-opener points at values. Farming is for many farmers a way of living. Many people not working in agriculture and to a large extent that have not grown up on a farm would, for this reason, might like to be a farmer for one day. Farmers could help them to discover the cultural value of ‘a bit farmer today’ and let them get a taste of farming culture, which might increase mutual understanding. This cultural value is one of the fundamentals of animal production. Additional current values and foundations need to be assigned to determine the justification of pig, poultry and dairy production sectors nowadays. The old adage ‘no more hunger’ is not a valid foundation anymore for these sectors in developed continents such as Europe. To summarise, central principles in this eye-opener are: rediscover the foundations of animal production and communicate these values with society, so they relate to farming.

### **... To Inside**

The eye-openers based on the plurality of building stones originating from the interviews with people working in other, non-agricultural, fields (non-ag people) was passed on to producers and other representatives of the animal production chains (ag people) in a series of two meetings up to now. In these meetings both ag and non-ag people took part, so non-ag people could share their insights directly with ag people (hear and learn from first hand), new contacts would be made and innovative collaborations could come about.

The first small-scale closed meeting in February 2007 was used to get acquainted and to set the agenda for the second large-scale meeting. In the first meeting about 20 people were invited and took part. They were the carriers of the second meeting in April 2007, to which over 100 people were personally invited. Aims of the second meeting were to generate new contacts and function as a breeding place for innovative communication strategies for the livestock production sectors. This meeting consisted of three blocks:

- Opening session with film fragments and spoken columns to open the minds of those present.
- A forum where building stones originating from the interviews could be discussed and, if appealing enough for participants, can be used.
- Discussion tables to debate further and in line with the points arising from the identified building stones. Every table had a theme in which one of the eye-openers was placed central.

The project is now at a stage to evaluate what can be harvested from the second meeting and to decide whether subsequent meetings are necessary and in which form. At the IFMA-congress the results of the second meeting will be presented.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

One of the conclusions of the project so far is that the cooperation between agriculture and non-agriculture was clarifying, gave eye-openers and was very fruitful for idea generation. It has to be seen whether they will be brought into agricultural practice and will be effective in bridging the gap between the livestock industry and society.

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