

For the Record

Straight talk about antibiotic use in food-animal production

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INSIGHTS ON THE ISSUE

Now that fear has turned a profit

*"When ideas fail,
words come in very handy."
— Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*

If your memory's long enough, you might remember the days when the protest movement against animal agriculture was almost fun. Some over-caffeinated vegetarian college kid dressed in orange shag carpet calling himself Chris P. Carrot, being killed with kindness and free ham sandwiches by Porkettes outside the Pork Congress hall. Sallow and humorless teenage girls, sad and limp under the rain as their cardboard "Meat is Murder" signs, herded apart by a matronly march organizer so they didn't bunch up and permit the one hurried TV camera-man to fit their entire protest march into the width of a single TV screen. It was street theatre of the absurd, reassuring that with enemies like this, animal agriculture had all the friends it needed.

Things changed.

Though they don't explicitly say so, several leading authorities in today's movement to bring good science back into public debate recently pointed out that a lot of that fun evaporated once the professionals took over. Their

August 2000 report looked behind the curtains of some masterfully manipulated media campaigns against Alar in apples, silicone breast implants, bovine somatotropin and others.

At the bottom of it all, the authors found [Fenton Communications](#), a Washington, DC-based public relations firm, as the "... spider [behind] a tangled web of non-profit advocacy groups." Fenton—of late known for its "What Would Jesus Drive?" and "Drive an SUV... Fund Terrorism" anti-SUV campaigns—

demonstrated through the Alar scare the power that well-funded environmental activism wedded to intricately executed public communication campaigns could infuse into weak—even nonexistent—science. The case study in abuse of public trust and profit by planting

and nurturing unfounded scares was aptly titled *The Fear Profiteers*.

As you might expect, according to *The Fear Profiteers'* authors, the profit involved in taking \$250 million off of apple growers' bottom lines and so decimating Alar's commercial prospects that Uniroyal ultimately abandoned it didn't necessarily [all accrue to the public good](#). "A modest investment by [Fenton's paying client, the Natural



Resources Defense Council] repaid itself manifold in tremendous and substantial revenue," an internal Fenton memo quoted by the *Wall Street Journal* revealed. The Alar campaign had wildly succeeded in what Fenton recognized as its ultimate goal—raising funds to support the NRDC.

Some of the same entities indicted by *The Fear Profiteers*, have now turned their attention to the movement to ban antibiotic use in farm animals. Recognizing that a consumer who openly yawns through a shrill protest on rural social justice, animal rights or capitalist enviro-plundering might perk up at threats that her children might risk disease owing to antibiotic failure, the Keep Antibiotics Working campaign has closely followed the model that Fenton built. Take a look inside this issue to see how the spin machine functions.

Also in this issue:

- A look inside the professional public information tactics being employed against your industry.

- Does it work? What the research says about whether consumers buy what the spin doctors say.

- Talk back! One of junk science's most vocal critics offers these steps to turn the monolog back into a debate.

For the record

Opponents of antibiotic use in animals are applying publicly palatable words and images to some unpalatable ideas underlying their wider agenda.



Read the entire report online at the Center for Global Food Issues: www.cgfi.org/materials/key_pubs/fear_profiteers.pdf

For the record

Today's campaign against antibiotic use in agriculture borrows the tools used to sway public opinion on consumer goods and other issues.

For the record

Using antibiotics to produce meat, milk and eggs has become an exploitable issue that professional policy advocates hope can gain the consumer's attention where more radical anti-animal-agriculture positions have failed.

For the Record, sponsored by a grant from ALPHARMA, is designed to help unite the industry and provide a unified, rational message to consumers facing their professional disinformation campaign. Working together, we can clear the record.

Questions or comments? Contact Steve Kopperud, at skopperud@poldir.com.

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Analysis of a scare campaign

Fenton Communications succeeded on behalf of the Natural Resources Defense Council in killing Alar, according to *The Fear Profiteers*, because it planted and then nurtured so much sustained and widely disseminated news coverage that Fenton, in effect, created a pseudo-natural disaster. That success set the standard for other activist campaigns that have followed, including today's Keep Antibiotics Working campaign to ban use of antibiotics in food production. The well-orchestrated movement to spread concern about antibiotics shares these earmarks of professional public influencers:

■ **Dramatize the "so what" factor**, as Fenton counsels. Fenton achieved this step by, first, bypassing the traditional print media in favor of granting "60 Minutes" an exclusive. It followed up by arranging interviews for morning shows and women's magazines, both of which heavily attracted the target audience: mothers of young children who "could be at risk" for cancer.

The same recipe was obviously put to work by Fenton-wannabe M&R Strategic Services in managing the Keep Antibiotics Working campaign on behalf of its client, Environmental Defense Inc. Within a month of the post-9/11 public scare over anthrax, literally dozens of newspaper, broadcast and Internet news stories and editorials appeared, many using common language and common statistics. *The Boston Globe* called farm antibiotics a threat to plunge us "back into medicine's Dark Ages." *The Houston Chronicle* chastised farmers for threatening the health of "cancer patients, premature babies and senior citizens. . . ." *The Minneapolis Star Tribune* accused producers of turning every food consumer into "petri dishes." Even the *Weekly Reader* was enrolled—polling its teenaged

readers online about whether "all poultry and beef producers should stop putting antibiotics in animal feed" (61 percent said yes). All gave short shrift to the "what," in Fenton's words—the science behind the issue—dwelling instead on "the what if:" the hypothetical risks from increasing antibiotic resistance by using the compounds in food animals.

■ **Apply continued public pressure** to force a decision by the smallest necessary group. Continually frustrated in their attempts to impose an antibiotic ban by regulation or legislation, M&R again follows Fenton's model by rousing public pressure against large restaurant chains, supermarkets, farms and processors, hoping they will concede to what they perceive as consumer outcry. Once those large operations give in, they'll be held up as public-spirited examples for everybody else to follow. Those who follow will be forced to promote their acquiescence in the same way, further reinforcing the appearance that true consumer demand is operating, until the cycle makes itself self-fulfilling.

■ **Politicize the issue.** Because antibiotics have already been used for more than 40 years, consumer advocates know forcing their elimination strictly through market choice is unlikely. Thus, their market pressure still typically aims only at "softening up" the climate until they achieve their ends politically, where the power to force a decision is relatively concentrated. Such was precisely the story in Europe, where sub-therapeutic antibiotic use was banned—by law—only in order to bring all EU member countries into compliance with the laws of the strictest members.

■ **Find the right messengers.** "The American public listens to people, not organizations," Fenton advises prospective customers.

M&R and other advocates of ending farm antibiotic use obviously understand that consumers—and the press that informs them—are not scientifically savvy. Thus they rely on running their message through "experts" who lend an air of credibility to weak science. At the same time, they regularly solicit first-person scare stories from ostensibly reliable "regular citizens" to build trust.

CAMPAIGN PRESSURE POINTS

One key strategy in the campaign is to target public attention on large food producers and restaurants, coerce them into removing antibiotics, and then hold them up as examples for the rest of the industry. So far, Keep Antibiotics Working claims the following poultry processors and restaurants have conceded to their demands to remove antibiotic use to some degree:

- Chipotle Mexican Grill
- Dairy Queen
- Domino's Pizza
- CKE Restaurants, Inc., parent company of:
 - Hardee's
 - Carl's Jr.
 - La Salsa Fresh Mexican Grills
 - Green Burrito Restaurants
- KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken)
- McDonald's
- Popeyes
- Subway
- T.G.I. Friday's
- Wendy's
- Tyson Foods
- Gold Kist Inc
- ConAgra Poultry
- Perdue Farms
- Wayne Farms
- Foster Farms
- Claxton

Source: Company correspondence, press releases or news reports, as reported by Keep Antibiotics Working/Institute for Agricultural and Trade Policy, March 2003.

Do the scare tactics work? What consumers say

Livestock producers and others in the food systems chain may be overly sensitive to the constant barrage of negative publicity about antibiotics. Despite the gloom and doom, there's some evidence that the fear profiteers may be suffering a degree of Cry Wolf syndrome—immunizing their target audiences to the fear by the constant low doses of panic.

Case in point. The animal health industry sponsored a series of 22 focused-group interviews specifically about antibiotic use in animals with typical moderate-to-heavy meat-eaters both in the United States and around the world in late 2001. The 194 interview subjects represented a cross section of gender, family make-up and income levels. Some generalizations the researchers concluded from the in-depth interviews included:

- Without being prompted by the interviewer, the participants overall volunteered that they believed the meat supply is safe, plentiful, offering variety and quality to fit any

budget. They tend to believe that locally produced meat tastes better and is safer than imported meat.

- They generally trust the government to ensure safety. USDA's safety standards are recognized as credible not only in the United States, but in the study's other countries.
- Without first being prompted by the interviewer, the consumers' awareness of antibiotic use in food animals was virtually non-existent—in fact, the study's conclusions deemed it a “non-issue.”
- The typical consumer demonstrated no knowledge of the different uses for antibiotics—whether for treatment, prevention or sub-therapeutic purposes.
- They often confused antibiotics with hormones.
- They most often blamed antibiotic resistance on misuse of antibiotics in human medicine.
- When they were given a list of choices by the interviewers, the subjects ranked human health as the most important benefit in meat

purchase decisions. It trumps all others, including animal welfare, environmental compatibility or economic advantages.

- Although disease treatment and prevention are well understood concepts, the consumers didn't like the idea that diseased animals enter the food system. They prefer to believe that they only eat meat from healthy animals. They most often associated use of antibiotics with the treatment and prevention of disease to ensure animal and human health.

Based on the focused-group results, the study suggests the industry can depend on the consumer to believe:

- Products are thoroughly and strictly controlled through government approval and inspection.
- Quality is monitored at every step of the food chain and endorsed by objective third parties.
- Their health is not at risk.
- Antibiotics have caused no adverse effects in humans after 40 years' use.

For the record

Research would suggest the scare campaigns haven't yet made a significant inroad on consumer perception of your product.

For the record

Sociological research demonstrates that who says food is safe is at least as important as the facts being communicated.

INSIGHTS ON THE ISSUE

Where will consumers vest trust?

Iowa State sociologists Gerald Titchener and Stephen Sapp surveyed 2,070 U.S. consumers representing a cross-section of older, well-educated consumers with moderate income. By asking them to rank their agreement with a series of statements about biotechnology and biotech foods, the researchers attempted to gauge the relative importance of two schools of thought about how and why consumers accept or reject new technology:

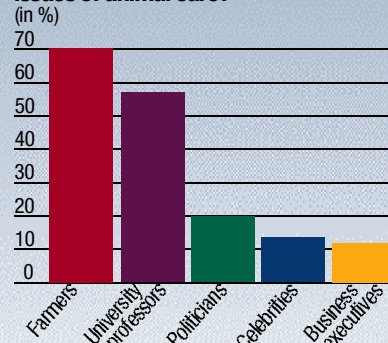
- The cognitive science approach: Consumers buy into new technology based solely on how much factual information they get.
- The sociocultural approach: Although scientific fact is an

essential part, consumer opinion is equally influenced by how well they trust the institutions backing it and the value assumptions they believe underlie the technology.

Based on the consumers' responses and a weighing of those responses against such factors as whether they're concerned about food safety and whether they will likely try biotech foods, the study authors concluded that communicating strictly facts to consumers when trying to explain technology is a recipe to fail. Communication that

The good news: The average consumer still ranks farmers and university professors high on the credibility scale, according to research.

Whose opinion do you trust most on issues of animal care?



Source: Telephone survey of 819 randomly selected U.S. respondents, North Carolina State University, 2002.

aims to build trust and match values is at least as important as communication of factual scientific findings, they conclude.

For the record

If the industry doesn't speak up to defend the practice of prudent antibiotic use, we become silent allies in the fight against us.

Coming in the next issue of For the Record

Frustrated in attempts to link agricultural antibiotic use directly to human health via contamination of the food chain, advocates of a ban are looking for the backdoor that will bring a larger share of the public to their side. Environmental regulation may offer their best hope.

REAL-WORLD PERSPECTIVE ON THE ISSUE

Cede the debate, and we can only blame ourselves

While chairman of the National Turkey Federation, I was fairly outspoken in my opinions about the public's perception of the way animal agriculture manages issues. Animal rights extremists and misguided consumer groups have had an unlikely ally in their battles against animal agriculture—the industry itself.



Ron Prestage, DVM
President
Prestage Farms Inc.

We are losing ground in the battle to protect the proven, safe and necessary practice of using antibiotics in production, because of our inability to coherently respond to false charges. In today's media-hyped, fast-paced world, terms like "growth promotants" and "growth hormones" have been incorrectly tagged to the poultry industry. Many have been misled to believe that these terms are synonymous with our practice of administering antibiotics to

animals. The poultry industry does not use growth hormones which have not been approved for use in turkeys, to quickly boost an animal to market weight. Many don't understand that reducing antibiotic use in agriculture actually could increase the risk to animal health and the food supply. Preventative drugs work to keep the animal healthy and disease-free, which allows the turkey to mature obstacle-free to market weight. It's a practice that's been tested for more than 30 years.

Yet, aided by our industry silence, consumer groups have led many consumers to believe it is a new issue, a new threat. We need to do more to counter these unfounded claims than just hope Congress protects our interests. When outside "experts" and so-called "consumer groups" issue distorting statements and are fortified by our collective silence, everyone's best interests are lost.

SPEAK UP YOUR ROLE IN THE ISSUE

Four steps to help you fight scare campaigns

The bad news is what author Ronald Bailey calls his "Law of Fear Mongering." For every \$1 the fear profiteers spend to spread a scare, it generally takes about \$10 to refute it. The good news is you can get involved in that process, according to Steven Milloy, one of the original contributors to *The Fear Profiteers*, publisher of JunkScience.com, and an adjunct scholar at the [Cato Institute](http://CatoInstitute.org). He suggests:

- 1 Know where to find the good science.** His picks include:
 - American Council on Science and Health: www.acsh.org
 - Competitive Enterprise Institute: www.cei.org
 - Cato Institute: www.cato.org
 - Quackwatch.com
 - Statistical Assessment Service: www.stats.org
 - Author and attorney Michael Fumento: www.fumento.com
 - Milloy's www.JunkScience.com

Other information sources relevant to antibiotic use include:

- Animal Agriculture Alliance: www.animalagalliance.org
- Animal Health Institute and the Coalition for Animal Health: www.ahi.org
- Center for Consumer Freedom: www.consumerfreedom.com and www.activistcash.com
- Past issues of *For the Record*

- 2 Speak up.** Without providing feedback to people and organizations that toss about junk science, you cede the battle. Milloy suggests you complain to broadcasters and publishers over bad news reports, elected officials who act on bad science, and businesses that make supporting claims based on bad science. Support those firms that are attacked by junk science.

- 3 Be vigilant against policy made by bad science.** Scrutinize policy being pushed by your elected officials to see if the science has come from qualified, independent third parties. Lobby for changes in the Administrative Procedures Act to permit greater public challenge of regulatory agencies, and to hold them to substantial scientific evidence.

- 4 Persevere.** Once you raise your head, Milloy believes, you open yourself up to attack. If you persist, be prepared to come under their fire.

A PAGE FROM THE PLAYBOOK

Tips for effectively writing your editor, courtesy of [Center for Science in the Public Interest's](http://CenterforScienceinthePublicInterest.org) Claudia Malloy:

- Think global; write local. Letters are persuasive because they're locally generated and focused. Target community and weekly publications, as well as state, national and trade media. Emphasize the local angle: Detail how your elected officials stand on the issue or how it affects local citizens and groups, for instance.
- Type them, sign them, and include your contact information so editors can verify you as the real author.
- Open with a single persuasive statement, continue with several paragraphs to support that topic, and then conclude.
- Keep it under 400 words. The more you write, the more you risk being ignored or edited so heavily that the original meaning is lost.
- Avoid outbursts, personal attacks, false statements and facts you can't verify.
- Connect your letter to a current news item.
- Spread the impact by sending copies to the person or group you're discussing, and your elected officials.