

15th April, 2014

The Hon Barnaby Joyce MP
Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
PO Box 6500
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Australia

By email: agricultural.competitiveness@pmc.gov.au

Submission to the Agricultural Competitiveness Taskforce

Dear Mr. Joyce,

It is a welcome opportunity to engage and contribute to the Agricultural Competitiveness Task Force. The opportunity for consultation will enable the agriculture sector to stand on robust foundations that are critical for not only the food security of Australia, but also for a healthy export portfolio, contributing to regional and global food security.

The sector has clearly been going through a challenging decade, where the end of drought has given rise to challenges of a different sort – that of a human resource crunch and a significant closure of farms shutting down. ABS data showed over 16,000 farms shut down between the years 2007 and 2011.

My background

As I am making this submission on my own behalf, a brief synopsis of my background is deemed important here. For over 15 years I have been an integral and committed part of the world of marketing and communications. 2 years ago I began my advent into the vast realm of food fiber agriculture and primary production through a Masters in Agricultural Science at the University of Melbourne.

As a marketer, I understand elements that drive choice. I know how imagery shapes minds, views and thought processes and how critical it is, in marketing terms to position our proposition in our prospects mind. In marketing, our philosophy that “perception is reality” plays itself very strongly in the Agriculture Sector in Australia. In reality, the industry is technologically advanced, makes a contribution in solving global food security and economic issues, pays significantly well, and is a critical industry for future survival. However, the perception is one of being a traditional sector, low paying, not a place for future careers and growth and not meant for high achievers. In my experience as a marketer, it is probably this perception that’s led to the decline in the work force.

The focus of my submission will essentially be:

Marketing and image transformation of the sector

My submission is brief. It focuses on fixing one critical issue. And is centered on the belief of focusing on a few high impact programs in order to make an impact, versus doing lots of small impact activities that get lost as noise.

Marketing and image transformation of the sector

Almost every conversation to be had within agriculture, often centers back to the lack of people entering the folds of agriculture. The general lack of interest from the next generation of agriculture workers to enter the field. At the core of this lies a very basic marketing problem:

Imagery.

And this is a critical factor leading to the human resource dearth facing the industry.

Attached to this submission is a very brief, but very telling presentation. It shows the stark difference between what the agricultural industry projects as an image, and what the target audience - essentially the youth making career choices - actually want.

A scan of industries that compete with human resource with agriculture, will show that they invest heavily in marketing and image building to attract the best resource. Mining is a classic example where the industry has promoted itself as rewarding industry to work in. This is aside from the promotion that the individual businesses do. Why is the study of environment in demand and agriculture not? The answer is marketing, imagery and promotion.

In agriculture, small pockets have started putting resources behind the marketing and communication - the “legendary” campaign by Dairy Australia, Great state of Ag by Rural Finance, Career Harvest website by the Council of Deans of Agriculture – these are some examples of movement within the industry to promote itself. But it is a drop in the ocean. The industry is fragmented. The “problem” is deeply entrenched and has literally been brewing since decades when the mining sector started promoting itself and agriculture did nothing. Classically, whether one makes the effort to position itself or not, a position will be developed in the minds of the target audience. If you do nothing, competition will position you. And this is the case with agriculture, where competitors like the mining sector, business, technology, medicine etc. have positioned themselves as state of the art, meaningful careers, agriculture by its sheer absence from this arena has evolved as a sector that’s staid, old, tough and unrewarding.

And by a few players trying to independently change this is essentially leading to a wastage of resources without making much of a dent in the magnitude of the issue. An example is the recent merging of agriculture and veterinary science disciplines at the University of Melbourne. It is critical that the industry has a unified program to change the image from the very grass roots. A synergistic program involving a holistic medium term campaign that is consistent and ongoing is critical.

Key elements of the change campaign should focus on the following:

1. A school program

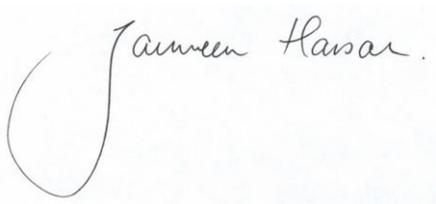
- a. Food and agriculture to be included as part of the curriculum. Each year to have age appropriate information with at least one outbound and one in bound excursion per year.
 - i. The teaching content and material needs be state of the art to show the advancement of agriculture.
 - ii. For secondary school classes farm / agriculture projects that run for the entire year and that involve engagement with a farming / agriculture enterprise on a continuous basis for the year. This will bring in the “cool” factor for agriculture.
2. A professionally run farm mentoring scheme with experienced farmers and potential new farmers at ungraduated and post graduate levels. The mechanism should work in a way that by the end of the mentoring period and on “passing” it, can become a shareholder in the farm and a staged plan be made to successively buy more into the business. The plan will be primarily self-funded to avoid large scale debt. This mechanism would work to solve the problem of ageing farmers who are unable to continue tiling their land, as well as reduce the barriers or entry for the new farmer for whom getting into farming is currently cost prohibitive.
3. A through the line media campaign encompassing all media showing how critical agriculture is, how it contributes and what a meaningful industry it is. All aspects of agriculture need to be represented from science, to growing, to marketing, logistics etc.
 - a. Imagery is critical. The images shown and the way the sector is depicted will shape mindsets.
 - b. Games, apps, TV shows (wholesome real shows – not “the farmer wants a wife” type) and other interactive elements need to be part of the campaign.
 - c. There needs to be consistency of imagery and branding elements that will run through the campaign as well as all other programs.

There are 3 crucial control factors that are critical for such a program to work:

1. A national and country wide scope
2. Centrally controlled to ensure one message is disseminated across every medium
3. Consistency and continuity

Attached to this submission is a brief imagery presentation

Kind Regards,



Zameen Hassan
Masters of Agricultural Science
University of Melbourne



