

How to talk about dairy

Whether you are speaking before a school board or a Rotary Club meeting, following these four steps can help you become a more forceful and effective advocate for dairy products.

By Tammy Anderson-Wise, *Dairy Council of California*

Our nation's schools have become a focal point for the debate on what foods and beverages constitute healthy eating. Where milk and milk products fall within this debate tends to vary, making it critical for professionals in the dairy industry to have the skills necessary to effectively serve as ambassadors for our products.

This is why Dairy Council of California recently embarked on a dairy advocacy training program to equip staff and board members with debate, persuasion and social tools to speak out successfully on behalf of dairy products and the dairy industry.

The advocacy training program was developed to support our staff members who are charged with demonstrating the nutritional value of milk and milk products to consumers, educators and health and wellness professionals every day.

Looking beyond staff we knew there was a need to assist our board members — and ultimately other dairy professionals — who often face tough questions about our business and products.

A four-step method

To refine the skills necessary to improve our mark on the dairy debate, we enlisted Robert H. Gass, a professor in the Department of Human Communication Studies at California State University, Fullerton. He is an expert on persuasion, debate, argumentation and social influence.

Gass stepped in and formally trained our staff and board members. But even without going through the training we did, dairy industry members can boost effectiveness by following Gass' four-step method. As an example, consider the scenario of defending flavored milk in schools at a school district board meeting.

- **Step one.** Provide the audience with a succinct headline statement that is assertive and memorable, such as "We're all concerned about childhood obesity, and the truth is that flavored milk is an excellent nutritional choice."
- **Step two.** Provide evidence and proof for your point of view, such as "Flavored milk has all of the great health benefits of white milk, including protein, calcium and vitamin D, and a surge in research at leading universities is expanding milk's health portfolio beyond the traditional benefits."
- **Step three.** Present an analysis or reasoning that can prove the point, a personal experience or story to share. "Milk, including flavored milk, has a strong track record of supporting bone health. Flavored milk is also extremely versatile and provides a good nutritional and economical bang for your buck."
- **Step four.** Summarize the consequences of the argument. Often people make a succinct argument without backing it up with the possible impact. In this situation we can say, "We know many kids won't drink milk unless

■ Brad Scott, Dairy Council of California board member and co-owner of Scott Brothers Dairy in Chino, Calif., says going through communication training helped him become a more effective advocate for dairy.



■ Serving flavored milk in schools can be a hot button issue with some parents. Dairy proponents need to arm themselves with facts and have a communication strategy to make their points.

it's flavored, so the overwhelming irreplaceable nutritional benefits of having them consume milk in some form outweigh the concern over small amounts of added sugar."

These steps can easily be tailored to work in any scenario, whether it be discussing sustainable practices in a sales meeting or talking to a Rotary Club about hormones in milk. With some forethought and organization around the questions we most come up against, we can have a positive impact on the dairy debate.

Acknowledge the other side

Although all of us in the industry are essentially experts when it comes to dairy, countering an argument is not always easy when put on the spot or when in front of an impassioned group or individual.

No matter the issue, it is crucial not to be adversarial or antagonistic but to acknowledge that an opposing argument is normally well-intended. Consider the earlier example of defending flavored milk at a school board meeting. Remember that parents mean well in not wanting their children to have added sugar. Try to identify the value you share with your "opponent" — the health and wellness of kids, for example.

According to Brad Scott, Dairy Council of California board member and co-owner of Scott Brothers Dairy in Chino, Calif., learning these essential skills will help dairy professionals feel comfortable in any situation.

"It is not a negative thing when someone approaches you with a concern," said Scott. "It is actually an opportunity to build a level of trust in our industry, our products and the people behind milk and dairy foods."

Scott, who has gone through a training himself, has scheduled an advocacy training session with Dairy Council of California for his staff to help boost their effectiveness when communicating with customers.

"Our staff regularly experiences opportunities to talk about dairy products and the issues that surround the products," said Scott. "Going through trainings such as this will help them become more effective communicators and advocates."

Scott adds that those who work in the milk creamery side of his business do not necessarily understand the issues the farm side faces, and learning these communication skills will prepare them for such discussions.

Build a united voice

Dairy Council of California works daily with educators, administrators and school foodservice directors within California schools.



The skills and knowledge learned through our advocacy training program have proven to be invaluable in making us highly effective in sharing key messages about the health benefits and wholesomeness of dairy foods.

Our nutrition education programs, provided free to educators statewide, are used in at least 75% of the elementary schools in California, and our knowledgeable staff of community nutrition advisers works hand-in-hand with schools to help develop and implement local school wellness policies.

We are eager to extend what we have learned beyond Dairy Council of California so industry representatives, in a united voice, can be better ambassadors for milk and milk products.

Moving forward we aim to take the tools we have learned and train dairy professionals. Plans are in place to work with staff within dairy businesses like Scott Brothers Dairy and to conduct seminars at dairy industry events and meetings.

Longer term, plans call for offering health professionals and registered dietitians advocacy training that teaches debate and persuasion techniques to help them stand up for foods required in a healthful diet.

Scott believes that all of us have opportunities to be advocates for the industry, whether being part of a company's sales staff, a secretary, a plant manager or a human resources director. I could not agree more.

The future of our industry lies in being able to effectively communicate the irreplaceable value of milk and milk products in a healthy diet. I invite you to email me (TammyA@DairyCouncilofCA.org) with thoughts on this effort. ■

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