

Host

Hi, Bhawna, Hello and welcome to Mrigashira. Thank you for making the time to talk to us. Let me begin by asking you something which I have often wondered, as communicators, we tend to believe that the tried-and-true ways of communicating with farmers through meetings, field days, consultations, these are still the preferred pathways, how has the communication landscape evolved or has it even evolved?

Bhavna Imran

Thank you, Charu, for having me on this channel. You know, I used to watch my father who used to run an advertising agency and it's interesting because he used to service a big multinational tea brand. The target segment for which was rural India. And watching him from the side-lines as his team designed some campaigns it was so, phenomenal to look at the channels, they used to communicate their messages then, you know, there's a folk-art form called Burrakatha, in this part of the country in South India. And this is a dance drama format and performed at village fairs. So typically, when they had to communicate anything about the tea brand, they leveraged this particular channel quite heavily. And also, of course, the word-of-mouth communication and the interactions, which happens in this phase, and I'm talking about not like 100 years ago, this is the early 90s. But from then I think to now the landscape is certainly evolved, I would rather say transformed. The farmer audience, I think can very comfortably access technology and that has made the difference.

Emerging technologies have definitely leapfrogged and like they say the adoption of telephone communications in India, the point has moved from zero point to a completely mobile state, we've totally skipped the landline generation, right. So, the move to DSM technology has had some, I think, very good positive repercussions on the rural audiences. Today, the communication format, channels of all of those have evolved. And the rural in the farming community, I think has sort of picked up speed and all of this. In our own organization. And a lot of other brands I see and respect most farmers are being communicated through by mobile telephone, not just for reaching out on calls, but you know, leveraging the apps, there are some very interesting apps which talk about smart and precision agriculture, which these brands are able to very successfully leverage. We interact with our farmers on social media like Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp of course, there is a little bit of dependency on infrastructure, right. The apps, we have to look at lightweight apps, which are more functional on 2G/3G, not very heavy apps. But the interaction levels have been phenomenal.

So let me just give you a couple of examples in terms of how the landscape has evolved. Today, it's as communicators, it's not just about interacting with the, you know, helping us ask the media to relay some of the messages, it is we are working with various channels to raise awareness and educate the farmers, be it like, for example, imagine our interaction with the farmers through regional channels and regional Media Communications to help tell the entire message around how it is becoming critical to use the best agronomy practices, so, that the output per hectare increases for the farmers. Talk about trends in terms of mechanization we have done some very interesting conversations with our farmers, where we have told them the advantages of using mechanized tools to help them increase their output to also reduce the labor drudgery and these kinds of messages are not today communicated

as messages which are just helping the company these are things which are communicated to help the industry at large. So going out there and putting forth the messages which are beneficial to the farmers and also leveraging the channels you know, be it regional media interaction or talk to them through traditional media or telling these stories through social media. I think that has changed. So, I would say in all, the format, the messaging, and channels have evolved drastically.

Host

No, that's really interesting to know. who would have thought that we've progressed that much, and we have seem to have those stereotypes in our minds about farmers, but that's really not the case. And I really love the story you just told me about your father, and, how they would communicate in the older days, but I still, I feel that some of those practices could still work in today's day and age. Let me just move to another question.

I believe there's a whole community on YouTube, and you have Instagrammers you have YouTubers who are talking about new practices. They have a good pool of religious followers and who would have imagined these few years back. What do you think of the role of influencers, can they help bond with farmers, can they help introduce new sustainable practices, what could be their role going forward?

Bhavna Imran

Say like I mentioned with growing social media, people, the farmers and they're not just doing things in their own traditional manners, they are very keenly looking at learning various methods of how to you know, make their farm produce better, they yield more, the yield increase and you know, basically more output per hectare. And farmers are very, very interestingly started using social media to educate themselves about the tools and techniques. And also remember, I think off late the entire salience of sustainable agricultural practices has come up right, farmers and most of us in our community are trying to understand what these sustainable practices are, they are constantly grappling with what works for them, but also what also positively influences their environment. This we are not talking about large farmers, having these large hectares of land. In India and actually most of APAC, right, the farmlands are very small, what we call the small farmer holders, small holder farmers, I mean, and the average holding is very small. So for them, understanding what is sustainable, and what is good in terms of Agronomy practices and things like that it doesn't they can't just pick and choose from the trends which are happening or read and just reading aloud as the large macro trends.

For them, they listen and understand people who are able to tell them and tell them more effectively and empathize, empathize with them. And hence I think that is where the social media influencers, your YouTube influences come into play right, these are the guys who actually understand the pain and gain as they say, so, their credibility with the farmers is very high, you know, just like sustainable practices around water, be it crop protection, understanding how a better agronomy practices can be used, what are the profits, what are the risks, all of this, the YouTube influencers are able to share their own story, are able to do a show and tell and hence the farmers are able to understand and empathize better. So, for us, I think this is a community we need to be engaged with. Also, what happens is, see the farmers want to see the benefits, but they are still the traditional kind of want to go by the hearsay. So, the YouTube influences are providing the great balance of the

friendly neighbourhood trust builder at the same time as somebody who is able to show the brushstroke, a big picture of sustainability and climate changes and how their own role. What is their role to influence all of these positive? So, I think those are the people to look out for and watch out for.

Host

No, got that makes sense. You know there have been a lot of misconceptions, and people have kind of, you know, what you call the cancel culture in agriculture. It's kind of becoming very real, it's painful, it's corrosive to the agriculture industry. As a PR professional, what should we do to minimize the impact or repercussions and safeguard farmer's livelihoods?

Bhavna Imran

The problem with cancel culture is there's no reason or rhyme as to why it happens, what is the criteria for cancellation, typically, this happens and the target is a moving target, right. So, I think it is definitely more painful for some industries than the others. But I think all of us as PR professionals are having to worry about this and learning how to actually build on you know, work on this and ensure that we are effectively communicating as against or the different things which are happening, happening around. I would say, especially in industry like agriculture. So today what happens is food has suddenly become an intimate part of everybody's life, the conversations the rising conversations, understanding and tapping into passions, very energized conversations about what is happening from the entire, you know, the value chain, what is happening, the farm to folk, intelligent eating, being a responsibility, all of that is happening. So definitely conversations around this will happen. And there will be folk, folks who are trying to do some things against, you know, talk about a certain trend or a certain message. I think, as a communicator and as something this is I firmly believe and practice, and I believe a lot of our peers do too is keeping the conversation open. I think anytime we shut the door on any conversation and dialogue, that is where the problem arises. Agriculture industry for, I think any industry for that matter and it for that matter, right? I think the issue of it cancel culture as this phrase may be used can be definitely mitigated by smooth and more open information flow.

Host-right,

Bhavna Imran

Keep the communication, keeping the communication channels open between the brand, and the customers, and keep it very transparent. See, we can barely predict what happens between four or five hours from now not just forget about, let alone a week or a month or whatever. But that doesn't justify us to do any knee-jerk reactions, it is important that all our content is very closely knitted. And if companies are able to be guiding and communicators are able to use purpose-driven communication, I think we can navigate, we need to build that trust. And the trust can be only built by having a fine balance between understanding what the concerns are, you know, ensuring that we are able to build the trust by both telling the big picture but also addressing the concerns in a more open and transparent way.

Host

No, I agree with you, because the flip side of a lot of information floating around and people talking about food, people are showing a lot of interest, it leads to a lot of miscommunication and misperceptions as well at times. And I think, as communicators, the more we communicate, the more we are able to, I would use the word drum the same message again and again. And it, kind of then, you know, becomes the larger narrative in the right way, and leads to trust. And just to wrap up, I'm going to ask you, you know, the best way to predict the future is to create it. And what does that mean to you in the context of the agriculture industry?

Bhavna Imran

I wouldn't know if this is absolutely new, but two things responsible communication and proactive communication. Of late like I mentioned, I think the engagement in the industry has been a lot more I mean, not just people who are directly related to the farm enterprise, like farmers and retailers, and Ag companies, but everybody wants to talk about food, there's a lot of knowledge and a lot of interest, which is there in the system. So, if we are able to, you know, use this leverage this democratization of conversation in a much more efficient manner. And we as communicators are able to present messages that are that are educating, that are helping raise awareness that is talking about trends, like sustainability, agronomy practices, and things like that. It is it is important; I think you're able to be able to set definitely set the trends, but also are able to draw a great picture between, you know, I think it's important the farmers and the companies will usually benefit. Like Peter Drucker says right, the most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said, so I think as great communicators it may sound cliché, but we need to tell that story, land the messages effectively so that the audience hears the intent, and also the larger purpose and ultimately, the brand messages and tell bring the trust.