Host

Welcome to Mrigashira. a podcast that communicates with the communicators. It is brought to you in association with Digitales. I am Anisha Nayar Dhawan. Let's begin.

In our podcast today we will be speaking with Mr. Vinayak Sharma, Vice President Marketing Field crops at Seedworks International Private Limited. Thank you so much for speaking with us, Mr. Sharma.

Vinayak Raman Sharma

Thank you so much Anisha it's my pleasure to connect with you.

Host

Mr. Sharma first question, how can an effective communication strategy boost the prospects of sustainable farming in India and why is it so important to communicate the idea of sustainable farming?

Vinayak Raman Sharma

Yeh. Anisha, let's dissect this question into two parts. First, it's very important to understand when we talk about farming, one part is farming sustainability and then we will come to the effective communication strategy part. See when we say farming, farming is not only restricted to the crops, the cultivation of crops, even when you talk about crops, there are multiple crops, cereal, oil seeds, pulses, vegetables, then farming also includes the dairy which is the cattle's and other animals then there is a horticulture there is a fishery. So put together all together is a part of, farming and when we talk about farming, so, there are when we talk about sustainability in farming say in agricultural crops, so, there are a variety of factors like the Integrated Pest Management, there can be Soil Management, Crop Management, Water Management, Disease, Pest Management and Waste Management, there are many factors. So, first of all, there is a need, when we say effective communication strategy. So, there is a need to understand the concerns of the farm, what are the farming issues, what are their concerns, and then also within those, what are the areas of attention, so, where we need to focus when we are planning an effective communication strategy. The third important piece, which I feel is the timing of communication. So, put together all this then the very important part is the modus of communication, whether it will be overall pictorial, video how it can be effective at a farmer level. Finally, coming to the final step of, the effective communication strategy is the comprehensive approach it cannot be, the one part, private is working separately, government is working separately, NGO's are working separately see in that case the farmer will be thrown with lot of variety of information. So, there has to be some linkages if we can create that, if we can work with multiple stakeholders put together prepare an effective communication, so, that will be helpful to the farmer, the second piece, it should not be like, as I said earlier on the specifics.

Host

Right. So, you're saying that, we need a review system as well and we need a lot of stakeholders to come in together, disparate attempts will not get the message across. So, what in your view should be the right approach to reach out to farmers, especially when experts believe that even geo-based targeting is not fetching the desired results?

Vinayak Raman Sharma

If you see India as a terrain, when we are talking about the approach to the farmer, we really need to understand the complexities of the farmer or in agriculture. So, there is a lot of diversity in farming. If we talk about the data, the studies say, majority of our farmers are marginal and small farmer, it's not a small number. 62% in a survey, the government services they are marginal farmers means they have less than one hectare of land, then small farmers are again close to 20% which is a land not more than two hectares. So, there is 80% Plus farming community which is actually having less than two hectares of land. Again, the next complexity is the cultivation practices or the crop diversity, we have more area under cereal crops, there are a variety of cereal crops, pulses, oil seeds, then we have lesser area under vegetable and horticulture crops, we have multiple sowing seasons like the rainy season which is Kharif then post rainy, which is Rabi then we have in between summer or spring crops also the irrigation levels are not so high mechanization is not up to that level, technology penetrations are not good. So, put together when we talk about approach to the farmer, so, these are the factors which are actually should be taken into account, because, we have a very, very complex kind of the farming setup which

is existing in our country, the lands are small, see earlier what we used to do before this geo tagging or technology, it was a typical pen-pencil approach, the data which was coming from the field given by the people who are operating at the ground level or in the field. So, they would be sharing and we are working on that data and we started creating, the different approaches basis the data. But, if I share my personal experience of geo tagging, which we have recently done in one of the crops, which is largest crop, and it has 95% of hybridization when we say I mean the crop, it's one of the largest crops existing in our country. I can name the crop, it's cotton, so when we did this geo tagging so, there was a lot of complexities which we found, now geo tagging is an accurate data saying that these are the villages they have this crop existing and these are the acreages in this this particular geography, but when we found the administrative details of because this data has somewhere linkages to the administrative details, which are available on some government on or some other the platforms. So, when we related it to the to the ground reality. So, there were differences also which were existing like say I mean the administrative data will take Panchayat as the one village but this Panchayat may be covering two three sub villages also, the small villages who doesn't have the panchayat independent Panchayat. So, that is where So, there are a lot of differences which came village as a unit then also further when we say approach to the farmer, it is not that entire village is my targeted village, there can be further segmentations basis land acreages, basis crop and within crop there can be the early maturity, the late maturity there can be the variations in lot of other technical grounds. So, there is a complexity which is existing. So, when we say we have to prepare our approach, I would say still the geo tagging, the geo base technologies, these are still workable, because these are some authentic technologies, but we should have patience and perseverance to reconcile the data for practical use.

Host

Right, now Doordarshan used to have Krishi Darshan, agri based shows, but new media platforms do not offer such programs or products, what we have now is a lot of agricultural experts with a YouTube channel sharing their experiments and opinions, there's always a question of credibility here. So, how do you encourage mainstream media to produce credible yet interesting shows that benefit farmers?

Vinayak Raman Sharma

This is actually very interesting and very good question, I completely understand because I have seen the days my younger age was completely on Doordarshan. So, I could see the Krishi Darshan and some of the programs which are very, very useful, but now with the expansion in the media platforms and there is a literally, completely there are social media, there are other media. So, let me be very honest, it is customer who will decide the channel, it's not like the channel will decide the customer. Okay, they can develop, create their programs I mean keeping in mind that which is the consumer or the audience which they wanted to address, but first of all, coming back you know rural is a very, very important landscape and I don't believe that any of the industry including media can literally go away from the rural because the mass exists there, whether it is in terms of population or in terms of the further the customer base, so, there is a lot of people who are existing in rural areas. So, some of the, coming back to the question, so, why this credibility issue is arising. So, why the information is not all the way wrong, the information is correct what people are sharing on YouTube, on Facebook on some of the other media, it is all the way it is correct, but still, there is an element of doubt, whether the person you know talking on those channels is really making sense or I mean in if I'm in real need being a farmer, I may adopt some, but I may not be completely believing that you are absolutely you're I mean pointing it out, right. But I'll just share one of my example, where I interacted with the farmers and being into marketing for a long time with 29 years of my career. So, there were certain notions strong biasness in my mind that okay, these are areas these advertisement media, these van campaigns, farmer connect activities these are really workable things for branding promotion connecting, approaching and communicating with the farmer.

So, one is clearly that there should be an involvement of a user farmer who has experience, who has himself tried that technology that will be really value addition to any program, which is working around farming. So, that will make sense, that is where the interest of farmer will be high and the whatever the information provided the adoption will be equally high.

The second which I see is **the location of conversation when you are designing a program is very, very important,** the things in studio, the things in live in field, there is a big difference. So, when you are talking in the field showing technology experience farmer and the adopter, right in front of the field, so, there will be a lot of genuinity in the content and there will be lot of impact of that content. The third is I mean in the geography

also matters, So, putting together all this I mean, creating a program where a user case is there, a live demonstration, if that can be shown also the relevance of the technology and thirdly the timings, I think put together this can create an effective program

Host

Right. The government has understood the role of information and communication technology in agriculture for sustainable agriculture farming, we are seeing a lot of startups also reaching out to the farmers using innovative communication techniques. So, what role do you see for startups in this area? And you had said that stakeholders need to come together. How did this aggregation happen?

Vinayak Raman Sharma

Yeah, see, there is a lot of data which is available as well as, agriculture, farming or things are concerned and every company government organization, NGOs, they all have this data and it is available on public and private domains. But this data has lots of asymmetry and there are a lot of gaps and it is lying as different heaps or different bunches of data which is not talking to each other. So, that is where a very, very important see as a seed company person, I may pick the data of my choice and start using it somebody else comes from crop protection, he may pick data of his choice, he will start working on that so likewise different stakeholders they pick data of their choice and they start working and things are going fine and we are utilizing that data. But I tell you that is where startups efforts are already started when I'm saying, I'm suggesting, I have seen quite a few steps has already been taken in these areas. So, startups can work on three, they can be one point solution. So, if I say where they can start, they can do data aggregation, they can create data symmetry, and they can work on knowledge dissemination. So, these are the three clear cut areas where startups can really create a differentiation. So, when they're working on this so, first of all, they will be compiling the data, they will be creating it as a one-point solution.

So, that is one area where I could see startups as a really a big space to play. The second could be, there is lot of market research, which is happening. So, one is the organized market research, which is a big one taking more time, but there are a lot of small, we call it as dipstick studies. So, basically, these are consumer behavior studies, which are more relevant, more sharpen and more focused around key areas. So, these are the two, one is mean in terms of aggregating data, making a symmetry around it and then knowledge dissemination, working with different stakeholders and also Secondly, the small market researches which can give insights to, the different stakeholders for their corrections or for their, some of the things which they can take forward. So, these are the two key areas where I see apart from this there are technology interventions, digital and other thing, but, ultimately the entire thing will be focused around these areas only.

Host

You spoke of digital profiling of farmers, the use of QR code is such an initiative that has gained quite a lot of attention in the post COVID-19 world. So, what are the other steps that industry has taken or can take to ensure that customers and end consumers are also assured of best quality of food?

Vinayak Raman Sharma

Yeah, see, if I understand see when you're talking about QR codes, so you are hinting at traceability of the product, right. So, yes, we are at a very, very niche stage as far as traceability is concerned, but still we have traveled a good, good journey around it. So, if I say the three segments clearly like exports, organic foods and contract farming, the three areas I could clearly these are the high value areas where I could see the traceability is really applicable and we can find I can share my personal experience, I bought a honey, organic honey which is very specified kind of honey and I can trace on that the farmer who provided that honey is sitting somewhere in Haryana, his name, his village, everything is mentioned there. So, there are very specialized products high value products where we have attained traceability, but still again coming back what we discussed in earlier questions, so, some of the complexities of our agriculture business like cereal crops, I said, 80% farmers are having less than two hectares of or up to two hectares of land. So, how to develop a single tool, which can really help a traceability to those smaller levels is a challenge at this point of time, but things are working around, I could see I mean some of the efforts, some of the Tata products where pulses are being sold. Some of the people some of the companies are selling wheat flour, some other food items, where traceability to an extent has been created.

So, it's not possible independently, I think joint efforts by private sector in terms of seed contract farming they are doing, but largely when we talk about cereals, where purchase is happening at a different level, so how we can create a linkages? So, some of the things even in our business, like in seed, we create traceability, my farmer can but traceability, we are linking it to genuineness, so farmer can click on my barcode and find out whether the product is genuine or not. So like this some efforts or small efforts are going on. So But still, we have to exert more, but one more area, which I could clearly see the blockchain technology, which can be really helpful in the in the coming days. So those they can create right at this point of time as small efforts has been made. So, I'm in but I think this will really explode and this will be really helpful, the blockchain technology will be really helpful to develop more of this traceability in as far as food business is concerned.

Host

Right, let's hope we will have startups that will take up the blockchain opportunity to get that transparency and information in for customers to be able to track the quality of products and farmers also to be assured that they will get appreciation for the good product. Thank you so much, Mr. Sharma for joining us, and sharing with us your views on sustainable farming and the right communication strategy that is required for this. It's a pleasure to have you with us. Thank you so much.

Vinayak Raman Sharma

Thank you, Anisha.