

OPINION

Getting the message right

FARMERS are often chastised for not marketing themselves well to consumers, and it does us no favours to be seen as whingeing – however fair and just our cause.

I was trained to always understand the consumer and what motivates them. So I will give an example of something that has worked for The Co-operative Farms, and a humble suggestion that might help towards what may seem an insurmountable problem for some.

We have just launched a new apple juice. It is made from 1,000 different varieties of apple trees we recently acquired from the National Fruit Collection. None of these trees is commercially viable, due to low yield or the apples are a poor shape, don't store well etc.

However, we have made them into a juice, promoting the heritage story and that we are saving the trees. By telling local media in each county which of the apples originated from their area, and how the juice means the variety had been saved, we had four local radio interviews and more than 50 write-ups in regional newspapers. Needless to say, we have now run out of the apple juice, but we will have a bigger crop next year, so hopefully we will be able to match future demand.

Now to the difficult one. The Co-operative Farms is no longer in dairying, and our only beef cattle are safely in Aberdeenshire, a long way from TB-infected areas.

When we dispersed the herds in 2002/2003, of our own accord we tested all the cows for TB: we had one herd that was infected. The



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misery of the repeated tests, having employees not knowing if their jobs were terminating or not as we waited for successive clear tests, was traumatic.

It is tragic the TB situation continues to damage our industry, but I believe that no amount of suffering farmers or cost to the public purse will generate sufficient public sympathy to accept badger culls.

But it is many years since I saw a squashed hedgehog on the road, let alone a live one. When it comes to roadkill, badgers seem to have replaced the hedgehog. When mentioning this to farmers in

Scotland, they say there are plenty of hedgehogs, but few badgers. Is there a connection?

When building some steps recently at home, we found a bumble bee nest. We knew a local expert who came to help: he took 10 minutes carefully extracting the nest, but more than an hour making the new location badger-proof.

Hedgehogs and bumble bees are tasty snacks for badgers and both have declined massively since the explosion in population of badgers.

I'm not suggesting that I'm in favour of a badger cull, but I am in favour of a scientific and evidence-based discussion of the issue and possible solutions.

Public support for the control of badgers may only come about if it can be proved, scientifically and categorically that badgers are a threat to biodiversity, and if the British public itself is convinced the only way to solve the problem is through intervention to control the badger population.

People can make intelligent and informed choices if you present them with relevant facts, on issues which matter to them – whether it is the possible need to control the badger population to protect our biodiversity, or how they can protect a piece of local heritage by buying a bottle of apple juice.

■ *Christine Tacon is general manager of The Co-operative Farms, was awarded the CBE for services to agriculture in 2004, was a member of the Sustainable Food and Farming Implementation Group and is chair of the 2011 Oxford Farming Conference.*