

Through the Looking Glass; Maintaining Consumer Confidence

You know the facts, but do they? Christian Hill Dairy in Lomira, Wisconsin has a long history of quality. For its near 100 years of existence, maintaining a clean and well-organized operation has been the standard; handed down from one generation to the next. As good stewards of the food supply, fourth generation farmers Patrick Christian and his family can't imagine running their farm any other way.

While the benefits of good farming practices haven't changed, the impact those practices have on public perception has. Never before has information been so readily available, nor scrutiny been so high. Consumers have a lot of choices and those choices have created a culture of people who are very interested not only what's in their food, but where their food comes from. Generationally speaking, the average person has never been further removed from the farm but between mainstream news and social media, information is literally at the public's fingertips. Clever marketers with big dollars drive advertising and sensationalism sells. So how do dairy producers like Christian combat the drama? How do you spread a positive message of doing the right thing, when the destructive ones make so much more noise?

For starters, you have to be doing the right thing. The foundation for any successful operation – and one that stands up to scrutiny – is a clean, organized facility. Imagine you've stepped into a restaurant and the first thing you notice is how dirty the place is and how unhappy the staff looks... you're not likely to feel confident about eating there, are you? The same goes for your farm. Cleanliness is the foundation for healthier, happier cows with less risk of disease, as well as happier, healthier employees with less risk of injuries. Take a look around your farm – what would consumers think if they stepped into your 'restaurant'?

Another distinction at Christian Hill is their proactive approach to employee engagement. Each of their twenty-three current employees, plus the four Christian brothers and Mom and Dad, feel the benefit of it. They place an emphasis on continuous training, establishing Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and utilizing a bilingual approach to empower employees. Patrick, who has a background in education himself, says the farm's staff members take more pride in doing a good job when they know what is expected of them. Most producers would agree; good farm help is difficult to find, so retention is key. Liz, a bilingual ANIMART employee, helps make communication easier by visiting the dairy monthly, at times in conjunction with Dr. Sarah Hanson, one of the farm's herd veterinarians. Liz's translating helps to bridge the language gap, which in turn helps employees to learn important skills like how to recognize cow health issues before they happen, rather than after.

So you take good care of your farm; it's clean, your employees are knowledgeable and engaged, your cows are healthy and productive. By all accounts, you're doing everything right, right? So... how does anyone know you're doing it right? You have to tell them. When establishing a positive image, transparency is key. Whether it's answering questions, dispelling misconceptions with clear and honest explanations, being readily available for tours or just engaging the public when the opportunity presents itself, nothing is more convincing or easier to tell than the truth. Even the tough questions get easier to face with open and honest answers.

Patrick finds when he's out and about – particularly when he's outside of Wisconsin – people are very interested in what he has to say about being a dairy farmer. Luckily his family loves to socialize, so whether they're on vacation someplace far away or down the road at the local neighborhood grocery store, they're always willing to chat about what it is that they do.



The final piece in Christian Hill's approach to maintaining good stewardship of the food supply is proactive participation. They participate in organizations and activities that both help to guide the dairy industry in the right direction and share positive messages. Patrick Christian sits on the board of the National Mastitis Council, or NMC – in fact, he's currently the only producer who does. The idea that as a producer he could help to affect milk quality led him to join and he says his involvement helps to give the organization a producer perspective. He's glad to see a focus on issues that directly impact farms such as animal welfare, drug residue avoidance and employee development.

The Christian Family also reaches out locally through farm tours and educational events, and socially through websites like Facebook. While sharing a photo of a happy, healthy cow or calf may not get the press as a story of degrading animal welfare – it does help. On the surface, it may seem as though producers have to work harder and spend more, simply to appease the public – with little to no impact on profit. The opposite is actually true. Producers like Christian see the change in expectations as a positive. Consumer driven awareness of animal welfare is a good thing because it's led their farm to be more educated, more productive and more engaged; all of which combined leads to fewer issues.

Patrick says simply "If you take care of the cow, she'll take care of you." To take that one step further; when we take care of the cow, we're taking care of the consumer and that's a fact everyone should know.

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Don't Let The Heat Hurt Your Farm's Milk Quality

By: Dr. Larry Judge



Unlike cows, mastitis-causing micro-organisms love heat and humidity! While it's not been an extraordinarily hot summer this year, it has been hot enough for many farms to experience a rise in their somatic cell counts (SCC), and in some cases, their clinical mastitis case rate, too. We cannot control the weather, but we can control some of the heat-related factors that affect milk quality.

An increased level of attention to the following areas of your farm can help keep clinical mastitis cases in-check and limit the rise in your farm's SCC during the warmer months of the year:

- Increased frequency of bedding additions/changes, regardless of what type of bedding/housing type your farm utilizes
- Frequent scraping/cleaning of cow areas, such as alleyways, holding areas and special needs pens (sick pen and calving area)
- Close attention to pre-milking teat preparation, including insuring thorough cleaning and adequate contact time for pre-dip products

For some dairy facilities, it is very difficult to keep mastitis cases and SCC's down during the summer months, but attention to the above three critical areas will keep milk quality as good as it can be during this challenging time of year for all farms.

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