

Got organization?



By David E. Frulla and Shaun M. Gehan

Agriculture marketing campaigns have become such a part of the mainstream, we hardly give them much thought. Slogans like “Beef — It’s What’s for Dinner,” “Pork — The Other White Meat,” and the ubiquitous “Got Milk?” have all become part of the lexicon. More importantly, these programs appear to be successful, returning from \$4 to \$10 on each dollar invested, according to some estimates.

The U.S. fishing industry is also a multibillion-dollar industry. If highly competitive dairy, beef, pork, and egg farmers — both of the family and corporate variety — can set aside differences and work toward a common, mutually beneficial end, shouldn’t commercial fishermen and processors consider a similar strategy?

Imagine it: National television and print advertisements showing hardworking fishermen harvesting fresh fish from pristine waters. “Deadliest Catch” popularity is just the latest confirmation that the images associated with commercial fishery — and its dangers, challenges and rewards — are compelling and even iconic. But too often sophisticated and well-funded advocacy groups

control the public dialogue.

The fishing industry, however, has the benefit of an increasing body of rigorous scientific research into the wide array of health benefits accompanying the consumption of fish, from improved cardiovascular health to better brain function. Eat Fish — Live Better.

But here may be the most important message of all: NMFS’ FishWatch Web site confirms, “If you buy fish managed under a U.S. fishery management plan, you can be assured it meets 10 national standards that ensure fish stocks are maintained, overfishing is eliminated, and the long-term socioeconomic benefits to the nation are achieved.”

This campaign would be a good idea even in the unlikely event such a campaign never resulted in a single additional sale of fish. If money from seafood sales could be pooled, even a small levy could generate millions of promotional and educational dollars — in short, funds that create the opportunity to push back against years of junk science and predictions of doom.

Of course, this is not a new idea. The Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute and the Louisiana Seafood Promotion and Marketing Board, to name just two of many fine organizations, provide ready models of what can be accomplished. These and many like them — nearly every coastal state has some seafood marketing program — are prototypes of the type of consumer awareness, education, market development, industry

education, quality assurance programs, and other services on which a national effort can build.

Such a national program could enhance, not displace, state and local initiatives. Existing programs in other fields are established such that monies derived are split between national and state efforts. In fact, the “Got Milk?” program was developed and is owned by the California

Milk Processor Board, which licenses the trademark to the national Milk Processor Education Program — an example of transferring a successful idea to the big stage.

So, how would the industry get there? The milk, beef, pork, and other programs are the result of federal legislation. Generally speaking, these laws, adopted at industry request, allow for creation of a national board, selected to insure geographic diversity, generally by the U.S. Agriculture secretary. The secretary issues an initial order providing for the establishment and administration of advertising and promotion programs, research projects, and disbursement of funds. At the heart of the order is a so-called “check off” or levy of some amount per standard measure of the product (e.g., hundredweight of milk or each head of cattle), assessed against (typically) both domestic and imported goods. Shortly thereafter, a national referendum is held to approve or disapprove the plan.

The advantage of this approach is that it avoids the free-rider problem, that is, non-payers benefiting from the expenditures of others. But it is not the only option. The Fishery Cooperative Marketing Act allows any group of like-minded seafood producers to engage cooperatively in such marketing efforts.

The initial step for the industry is to decide if this idea has merit, and perhaps convene a summit of major domestic fisheries associations, including fishermen, processors and marketers. A focus on the details of financing and governance should follow a decision to embark on a common approach. The ways to ensure equitable participation levels are broad. For now, think about what you would do with 30 seconds of TV time to begin to set the record straight. **NF**

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