

## SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATIONS AT A COMMUNITY LEVEL

Helen Zilm

Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers Association, Moree NSW

*Exhilaration is that feeling you get just after a great idea hits you, and before you realize what's wrong with it.* – Changing Times, The Kiplinger Magazine.

Successful communications at a community level is not a new concept. It is a valuable and worthwhile process that many of us have been striving to achieve for years. Whether you are involved in the local show society, school P & F, sporting club or church group each one of us would strive to have successful communications. I'm sure through experience you can all think of examples when the communication levels weren't going well, broke down or just didn't exist. The key is to identify what is needed and work towards building communication levels, as well as vision and trust.

I believe the Cotton Industry is best broken down into three sections.

Growing

Research

Community

Often the growing of the crop and the importance of research is discussed as the significant areas in our industry. Any thing to do with community is brushed off as 'warm and fuzzy'. Something we do in between sowing, watering, picking and the end of season / pre-season meetings, most often are left for women to do through their other community involvements.

Community activities, ideas, projects serve to get people involved, improve the wider communities knowledge and perception of the cotton industry. They help to generally promote the value of our industry and show that the community side of cotton is just as valuable as growing a successful crop backed with strong sound research.

Cotton Australia have been working with Growers over the past 5 years to help build better communications on a grass roots level with programs such as the Cotton Community & You Workshop. The workshop helps to give individual growers resources and confidence to meet any challenge that may come up within their area.

Good and bad situations can be changed for the better with positive outcomes from using the skills this course will give you; media, negotiation, mediation and communication skills to face any volatile or smoldering situation. Having skills to handle media and knowledge to answer questions on the spot gives you confidence to handle difficult situations.

In very recent years we have been able to see how important it is to communicate with the local community and successfully deal with emotive issues. This is proven through the different CGA's histories and the more memorable 'good neighbours' program with a touch of endosulphan here & there! The lesson learnt from volatile areas and hostile neighbours is to reduce their fears through better communication with acknowledgement of their concerns. In some situations this can take a very long time, with lots of hard thinking and talking. Examples of this have been seen in Gunnedah.

Robyn Watson, a Grower from Gunnedah recently said "now in looking back over the scenario at Gunnedah in the late 1980's to 1990's so much has changed". The successes the community and cotton growers enjoy there today comes from the steps they took, some of which were implemented using the skills I have mentioned above.

As Robyn describes at the time you could be forgiven to thinking 'every man and his dog were involved'! From sheep farmers, wheat farmers, cattle farmers, coalminers, truck drivers, the environmentalists, the EPA, government, the local & state media, and general community all looked to the cotton farmers who were perceived to be doing well while others in the community were hurting.

### **What are the key factors we need to address when communicating with our community?**

Most often the key factors are what's currently affecting them. Each cotton area and Cotton Growers Association will encounter different issues, which will be important to their community needs and concerns.

Commonly they are:-

- Water** - peoples rights, access to it, clean water
- Chemicals** - drift, residues
- Noise** - aircraft, vehicles
- Labour** - loss of employment, extra itinerant workers, unemployment
- Weather** - rain, drought or flood

Once a CGA has identified their community's needs it is important to work out ways in which they can help these needs with ownership and involvement. It is important not to take over or be seen too be. Involve all the stakeholders and most importantly be working towards a common goal wanted by all.

In the Gwydir some of the projects our CGA has been able to either join in with established committees or instigate have been –

- Baby Bags in the local hospital for all new born babies. Over the past three years we have given away 1500 bags.
- Donations to local schools trivia nights. Eight pairs of socks to the table who answers the correct cotton question gives a focus to what can be produced for a simple product.
- Education days, taking local classes out to a cotton farm with fun activities to complete help make the day a learning time as well as a day out of the classroom.
- Cotton Charity Race Day that gives all proceeds to the nominated local charity. Over the past 9 years this day has successfully raised over \$215,000 for charities covering health, the aged and handicapped and emergency services.
- Australian Cotton Trade Show held in Moree for the past three years. Gwydir has had a successful stand their selling Cotton Australia and Cotton Store merchandise. This stand is a great promotion for not only cotton and products produced but also, also the cotton symbol, giving people instant recognition of Australian cotton.
- The Golden Grain Festival Street Parade. This parade introduces the Festival Princess entrants to the people of Moree. All entrants to the parade have a float with a theme and a 'Princess'. For the past 4 years we have entered a float along the theme and ideas of Industry promotion.  
Our themes have been -
  - ❖ Cotton....the fabric of life
  - ❖ Cotton....growing in the community
  - ❖ Our Riverine environment
  - ❖ Cotton....into the new millennium
- The Gwydir Valley Field Day Committee has helped part fund with growers 5 weather stations across the Gwydir Valley
- The Cotton Industry Medical Undergraduate Scholarship has been established. This year two \$5,000 scholarships have been given to graduates to complete their last years of medicine. Funding from this is generously raised from people in the cotton industry who attend the Gwydir Valley Cotton Awards and Charity Dinner held each year during the Cotton Trade Show.
- Indigenous Doctors Scholarships have been set up to start this year, 2000. Once again funds for this have come from the generous donations of cotton farmers and community members who support our commitment to the community at large.
- One of the biggest successes we have had in the Gwydir has been the Aboriginal Employment Strategy. This strategy began 3 years ago as a trial project to help Aboriginal people gain employment within the cotton industry and the local community. To date they have successfully placed 80 fulltime Aboriginal people directly within the cotton industry or within the Moree business community.

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Indigenous Croc Eisteddfod was recently held in Moree. The positive message relayed to the Moree and Districts surrounding youth is to 'respect yourself and respect your culture'. Strong emphasis is put on good health – say no to alcohol, drugs and smoking.
- Street Banners and entrance signs to Moree all carry the message of welcome to our town, a town that is focusing on community futures and reconciliation. The Gwydir Valley Cotton Growers Association and Cotton Australia are both recognized as ongoing supporters to the community.

After such a list you may be thinking we have no community problems. This is certainly not true. Current issues in the Gwydir cover cattle contamination and trace backs, chemical application by air, drift and smell, labor and itinerant workers in summer and water access to name a few. As in all areas we need to continue to inform and educate those we live and work with that cotton farmers are concerned about long term sustainability of the environment, land, rivers, water, our access to water and importantly other industries.

#### **How successful have we been with communications up to date?**

The cotton industry has been successful in many areas up to date. Many organizations within the industry are well established and keen to help one another with new strategies. We currently have 16 local grower associations, food & fibre groups and water users groups. All who have had successes within their local communities on different issues.

As Mike Logan, Director Cotton Australia said in his address to the 1998 Cotton Conference "unless we have the support of the local communities we are doomed to extinction. If communities don't want us growing cotton in those regions, they will eventually agitate to have us legislated out of business by reducing our access to water, chemicals and biotechnology.

These organizations all give growers the opportunities to: -

- explain ourselves face to face
- be real members of a community
- and get our local house in order.

Involvement in the community gives us the chance to increase people's knowledge of the cotton industry, promote the product, promote industry opportunities for employment and show what is being done for long-term sustainability through Best Management Practice and Research.

#### **How do we avoid being seen as buying off the community?**

The answer to this question is not an easy one. Jealousies and perceptions within the community, particularly in relation to the cotton industry are real and cannot be ignored. At the same time though getting involved in negative debate is a sure path to failure. No matter what you may do within your community, how deeply involved you are there will always be people who are quite prepared to knock the cotton industry.

You have to be seen as being genuinely involved, not making a big fuss, not doing something for the glory or expecting huge publicity and recognition.

Growers need to be able to talk about their industry with confidence, and pride. Teamwork and encouragement of others to become involved spreads not only the load, but helps to keep the ideas flowing. Good media programs will help to build community support through understanding.

You don't have to have a 'cotton cup race day', a cotton ball or a cotton street parade. They're maybe other opportunities for you personally to work with in a team to promote the cotton industry sutterly. In September 1999 the Women of the Land Gathering was held in Moree. As Convener for the Gathering with a committee of eight, five women being cotton growers we were given the perfect opportunity to promote cotton. We held a mystery tour for visitors out to a cotton farm and gin gave cotton products as gifts to our speakers and decorated the venues using cotton. This is always worthwhile doing as people who are outside the industry are always amazed by the plant and products generated.

So as you have heard successful communication is nothing new. In closing I would encourage all involved in the cotton industry to invest both time and resources in communication and working with their communities, as the returns will be great.

### **Acknowledgements**

To Robyn Watson for giving me a Gunnedah perspective of her community and its history.

### **References**

Logan. M, Director Cotton Australia (1998) *Proc. 9<sup>th</sup> Australian Cotton Conference*. Pp 633 – 634.

