

Why anonymous sources just don't cut it

IHATE to say it, but there's a lot wrong with journalism.

Media consolidation seems to have sucked every bit of objectivity out of the profession. Last month, I heard a story about a reporter interviewing a farmer under false pretenses. Most recently, I've been irritated with the industry's reliance on confidential sources.



For Starters

By JOSH FLINT

How many times have you read a revealing quote or wild accusation in an article, only to have the source's name withheld because they "asked not to be identified due to the sensitivity of the subject matter"? In college, I was taught to avoid confidential sources if at all possible. After all, if the person's name is withheld, what assurances do

readers have the quote is factual?

While searching for sources regarding Meadowbrook Farms, I found multiple farmers who were willing to discuss the situation off the record. They expressed an overwhelming amount of frustration with the pork co-op.

I chose not to include their quotes and negative comments. Many of them started the conversation with, "I don't want my name in the magazine, but I'll tell you this. ..." For me, that means we're now having a conversation as two friends.

I heard a lot of heartbreaking stories from folks who didn't want their name in print. I also heard a lot of gossip and hearsay.

Reasons for staying silent

When you get down to it, I think many Meadowbrook owners wanted their names withheld for several reasons. First, many of them lost over \$1 million in hogs and stock ownership. Many grain farmers had a record year in 2008; I'm willing to wager the Meadowbrook owners did not.

Next, let's not forget how courageous this move was. The 200 charter members were attempting to take control of their industry and remain independent, albeit with a signed marketing agreement. Still, there's a big difference in raising hogs for a company and raising hogs for your company.

Lastly, I think a lot of folks didn't want to discuss it because it deals with the failure of a business model that has served the U.S. farmer very well: the co-op. This system has reaped tremendous benefits for farmers throughout history.

Plus, like most co-ops, Meadowbrook had a board of directors, which was composed of 12 members. I'm willing to bet a lot of them didn't want to go on record when their friend/neighbor is partially responsible for the co-op's decisions.

My policy

I'm sure folks who wanted their names withheld had a number of good reasons why. Just realize I'm not one to print quotes and information I cannot attribute to someone. In fact, I try to be as transparent as possible. I routinely e-mail sources a rough draft of the article prior to publication. Unlike many big-city reporters, I'm not one to burn sources. After all, if I misrepresent you in the magazine, it's your decision to answer the phone the next time I call.

Lastly, I know some readers are thinking, "So, you're not big on confidential sources, huh? I guess you would've sat on a story about the Watergate scandal?" No, I wouldn't have. I understand that some things are huge stories that people have a right to know about. In these cases, I believe the reporter should also be 100% confident in his/her source's credibility.

That being said, I don't think Meadowbrook was one of those situations. Meadowbrook had a lot of potential, but it just didn't pan out. Hopefully this setback doesn't deter hog farmers from attempting to write their own future.

Farming has changed since 1909, but our service and commitment to our rural customers haven't.



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