

We need to fight for our brand



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OAN EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

It seems like every year, there are challenges that provoke a survival instinct or define how our industry is seen.

We are finding that the family farm is under assault. It is not just shifting political winds, but a systemic disconnection from agriculture as a society.

I did not grow up on a farm. Rather, I was a city boy from Eugene, Oregon where forestry was king. Growing up in a middle-class household, I was shaped by the university a scant 10 minutes away from my neighborhood, but I grew up recognizing brands. Nike was becoming a force, large timber companies like Pope and Talbot as well as Gonyea Timber were giants.

But as we found with the timber industry, dominance and brands can be eroded over time. I am here to challenge our industry to take back our brand. Ag is in trouble.

A brand built over decades

There is a lot to be proud of in our industry. We are the top sector in agriculture, and that did not happen overnight. We've earned a reputation as elite, quality growers of green goods — a collection of families who are good neighbors and good people.

In terms of politics, we have cultivated a reputation for consensus and political moderation, while always keeping our industry vibrant and strong. I have been at OAN for almost 20 years now. I can attest that our strong brand as growers reaches from the Pacific to the Atlantic, and so does our influence on the political front. Generations of growers have brought us to this point through hard work and sweat.

A strong brand signals professionalism, quality, and reliability. In industries such as ours, **trust is everything**. Many see us as a leading voice in the market and the political arena. I wish that were enough, but I must admit it is not.

Our brand is under assault

Home-grown denigration of our

own Farwest Show is eroding our brand. Being your executive director, I ask for and receive a lot of feedback from the membership. Our trade show is one of the most mentioned topics.

First of all, it is a great trade show. It is the biggest in the West, and it is green. That befits the fertile Willamette Valley and the close concentration of the best quality plant material in the country grown by the best nursery innovators.

Is Farwest what it was during our epic growth as an industry over two decades following the 1980s? No. But neither is the industry, nor the market.

Eras have a way of defining any industry. Ours is a mature industry. We are a national brand, not just a growing region riding a show that everyone was traveling to see in person. Despite the mounting pressure of labor shortages and regulation, we grow more material than we have in our history. Our brand remains excellent — come to the Farwest Show on August 20–22 and see it for yourself.

If anything can serve as exhibit A on how the agricultural and nursery brands are under assault, the recently concluded Oregon State Legislative Assembly would be it. Over the past year, common-sense agricultural overtime reform legislation has been pulled at the behest of the unions. If that wasn't enough, the unions this session attempted to create an Agricultural Workforce Standards Board in Oregon law — a first move toward de facto unionization of all farmworkers statewide.

Meanwhile, the environmental community has attempted to pass onerous regulations that would place irreparable harm on the industry's ability to transfer water on the property. This is happening due to the slow erosion of respect toward the agricultural community.

The Legislature likes the idea of “family farms,” but too many members choose policies that would harm, not help, our Oregon growers. In an era of brazen political theater, the narrative by farmworker advocates has become appall-

ing. They refer to “modern slave owners” and tell abstract horror stories of worker abuse as if they were fact. It's now commonplace to stain reputations of farm operations at our state capitol, and too many elected officials remain silent.

Agriculture wants to work across political divides and solve problems. Our association has taken that approach over the past two decades. When we disagree, it's with respect. At the end of the day, we are able to work amicably, create good policy and not simply tear things down.

But our brand is working against us, and I have been struggling to understand why, until a recent nursery tour.

One of our past presidents told me the reason is that ag is not a big player in the state anymore is its economic decline relative to tech. Timber is but a fraction of its former self due to environmental regulations. Even ag's top sector, nurseries, with \$1.3 billion in sales, is a mere fraction of the tech industry. The other factor is that the unions will outspend agriculture 50-to-1 in election cycles. This creates a chasm that we cannot resolve. Money does talk.

A brand revitalized

We must recommit ourselves to being the standard bearer on pest-free plant material, fighting complacency in the public arena, and telling our story in a way that resonates with a new generation of decision-makers, influencers in the media, and within the marketplace. Our best chapter is yet to be written. As your executive director, you have my full measure of effort to make the Oregon nursery industry the best it possibly can be. ©