



2018 Legislative Ag
Chairs Summit
January 5-7
Kansas City, MO

HOW TO SELL THE RURAL STORY

Steve Jarding, Harvard Kennedy School, teaches messaging and communications. Steve lives in rural South Dakota and commutes to Boston for his teaching job. He has studied the non-rural American's image of agriculture.

Rural America has an image problem. There are fewer people out in rural America than there used to be. Less than two percent (2.2 million) of Americans are involved in farming today. It was thirty eight percent 100 years ago.

Jarding has conducted focus groups of non-rural Americans regarding their perceptions about agriculture and rural America. Focus group perceptions of rural America were primarily food-based - and wrong. They described food as not as healthy as it used to be; not cheap enough; people going to bed hungry. They blame that on rural America and agriculture. Non-rural Americans don't understand, misunderstand or turn rural America off. They have a narrow perception of it as a culture of gun owners and church goers with a simple way of life.

Jarding thinks we have a duty and responsibility to educate the rest of America. Less than two percent of the federal budget since 1994 has gone to development in rural America. Wages are 25% lower; poverty is 28% higher; 95% of counties with persistent poverty are rural. The question is why rural Americans are getting so little of the money.

Steve tested a slogan: *"Agriculture and rural America – It's more than just the food we eat."* Responses included values – they work hard, they're honest, they are an important part of our culture, it is the backbone of America. Initially over half of the people in the focus groups had a negative perception of rural America. When the values argument was put to them, they could see its value to a better quality of life.

Messages of fear can be effective. For example: Europe ran out of food twice in the last 130 years. It totally destabilized governments, societies, law and order. America has gone in the other direction but that could change.

The words are important in a message. Trump's "Make America Great Again" and Obama's "Change you can believe in" used [aspirational words](#) that let the audience take ownership.

Rural America has a **branding problem**. People don't know who we are and they don't know what we do. If as a community we can determine what is the best message and the best way to connect that message we will do ourselves a great favor.

Jarding used to think that speech writing was about the words. He has since found that only seven percent of audiences can remember the words. A UCLA study found that 55 percent of audiences connect to a presentation through body language – hand gestures, face gestures and posture; thirty eight percent connect via voice. A 2014 Ohio State University study identified fifteen emotions in addition to the six basic emotions emitted through the human face (happy, sad, surprise, anger, fear and disgust).

Our messages have to go beyond who we think we are. Be aspirational, emotional, simple. Talk to people out of your comfort zone and circle.