



**A**t the Celebration of Small-Scale Farming in Northville last summer, Chris de Waal of Getaway Farm drove home how important the story of your farm is as a marketing tool. Your story is what will resonate with the potential customers you encounter in a way that simply describing the features of your product can never do. It's obvious to see the advantage of making this connection if you're a direct marketer, but even if you sell wholesale or are in a supply-managed commodity, it's important for you to be able to tell your story.

At the TEDx event in Halifax last year, Dr. Jonny White gave a talk on media psychology, about how the stories that the media tells about us shape the way we view our lives and impact our psychological well-being. If you want to watch the clip, follow this link: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_qzxn9L0eRA](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_qzxn9L0eRA).

Dr. White's presentation got me thinking about what the media says about farmers. Farmers in movies or on TV are usually portrayed as dumb hicks. News stories about agriculture are usually bad news stories. This is the story of agriculture that the general public unconsciously absorbs and farmers absorb it about themselves.

Dr. White explains that people who believe their life has a story are psychologically healthier than those who don't, and the psychological benefits are even greater for those who believe their story is a redemptive one. There are many archetypes that we can choose to identify with, such as warrior, provider, nurturer, healer... or "dumb hick". It goes without saying that farmers aren't "dumb hicks", but you might sometimes unconsciously live that story because it's the role that the media says you play. If you haven't already thought about the story of your life and your role in it, I encourage you to do so.

The story of your life is very closely related to your goals. If you know where you've come from and how and why you ended up where you are, it will help you get to where you want to go. Many farmers, especially those who grew up on farms, have a really hard time articulating why they farm. They sometimes just accept that it's "in their blood" and don't think much deeper than that. However, if the reason you're farming is really just "to farm," the story of your farm is: "I got this farm from my parents and I continued to farm it."

No farmer in the province has a story as boring as that and yet that is the story that many of us tell. Think more deeply about the real reasons you are farming, of the challenges you've had to overcome, of the things you really love about what you do. Maybe your story is really something like: "I knew from a young age that I wanted to farm."

I felt a strong connection with the land my family has farmed for generations. When the time was right, I negotiated a handover from my parents, who have been an invaluable source of support for me. It's challenging to maintain the farm's profitability in today's economic climate but I want to leave the farm in a better condition than I received it. I hope that someday I'll be able to pass the farm on to one of my children."

[Note: if I seem to be ignoring those of you who didn't grow up on farms, it's because I generally find that you already tell your stories quite well.]

Once you know your story, what do you do with it? A Google search of "learn to tell your story" brings up links to organizations that will charge you large sums of money to teach you how to tell your story and utilize it. (I'm telling you for free.) The same Google search also yields links to articles claiming that a well-told story of your life will help you ace job interviews and investment pitches, market your products better, motivate your employees, and even change the world! Let's explore each of these.

- 1. Ace job interviews and investment pitches.** Of course, no one has to apply to be a farmer and few farms in Nova Scotia are showing up on Dragon's Den. But almost every farmer will find themselves at some point sitting across from a loan officer asking for money. Being able to tell the story of your life well and communicating clearly the reasons why you want to farm can help strengthen your loan application. [Caveat: if the reasons you want to farm don't include making enough money to pay back your loan, your story *won't* strengthen your loan application.]
- 2. Market your products better.** If you're a direct marketer, telling your story is key to cultivating and retaining customers. People who deliberately seek out opportunities to purchase directly from a farmer have a strong desire to make a personal connection with the person who grew their food. Even if you don't engage in direct marketing, your story can be part of your brand. Letting people know the faces and the stories behind the larger brand, as Farmer's Dairy is currently doing, for example, is a powerful way of engaging consumers. It can motivate them to choose your brand over other brands in the supermarket, even if the other brands are cheaper or have more optimum locations.
- 3. Motivate your employees.** Employees work better when they understand the narrative of the business and the direction it wants to go in. Tell your employees the story of your farm and then make them part of it.
- 4. Change the world!** Really? Well, I started by saying that the media is full of bad news stories about farming and portrayals of farmers as "dumb hicks". So tell *your* story, a different story.

Tell it to your neighbours, who can be great assets to you or thorns in your side. If they know where you've come from and understand where you want to go, they're more likely to support you.

Tell it to children and young people – even if they never have a desire to be a farmer themselves, they'll grow up thinking farmers are cool.

Tell it to the media. Learn how to write a press release and send it to your local newspapers and radio stations. Factories often get in the news when they produce a new product or buy a new piece of equipment – why shouldn't farmers? Press coverage might have a direct impact on your sales, but even if it doesn't, you'll have helped create a more positive image of the farming industry. Isn't that helping to change the world?

The most important change that will come about in learning to tell your story, however, is to yourself. Take advantage of the psychological benefits that knowing the story of your life can offer. Take some time to consider where you've come from so you can chart a clearer course for your future. Think deeply about your farming goals. You'll be glad you did.

Update: After I wrote this article, but before the newsletter was finalized, Farm Credit Canada announced a new campaign to help farmers tell their stories to the public, called Agriculture More Than Ever. You can submit your story and photos online at [www.agriculturemorethanever.ca](http://www.agriculturemorethanever.ca). The campaign is also on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.