

GMO Beyond The Science

When a Farmer and a Dietitian are the Same Person: Telling Stories to Counter Misinformation about Biotechnology



Jennie Schmidt, Third-Generation Maryland Farmer, Registered Dietitian, Member of the Global Farmer Network | March 1, 2024

Highlights:

- *Combining a knowledge of nutrition with that of a farmer increases the credibility of the message that conventional farming is safe and beneficial*
- *Personal stories can help educate consumers who are cut off from the food production system*
- *I'm still waiting for Tom Brady to take up my challenge to visit my farm and learn first-hand about the benefits of genetic engineering*

The four most compelling words in the English language may be: “Once upon a time.”

When we hear them, we know we’re in for a story—and stories are the most powerful form of communication available to us.

Farmers don’t always appreciate this fact, especially when we’re discussing our own business of agriculture. We’re inclined to mention inputs and outputs, moisture levels, yields, commodity prices, and more. You know: farmer talk.

The challenge increases when the conversation turns to technology, and especially when it involves new technologies, including GMO crops, CRISPR gene editing and so on. At this point, our rhetoric can sound like boring passages from science textbooks. They’re about as interesting as the homework that none of us misses from our school days.

Yet every one of us has a story to tell—and if we tell our stories well we’ll both educate the public about what we do

and advance our own interests at a time when farmers face growing threats from government regulators, political activists and skeptical consumers.

I live on a third-generation farm in rural Maryland, where we grow corn, soybeans, canning tomatoes, grapes and fresh-market green beans on about 2,000 acres. I’m also a registered dietitian. Very few RDs have strong agricultural knowledge or experience, which means that I can speak from an uncommon perspective: I know a lot about both food production and food consumption. I look at my role as having a niche with dietitians because they’re my peer group. I can be an effective voice for agriculture within that realm.

Over the years, I’ve learned plenty of lessons, and one of the most important may be that generally, consumers give very little consideration to where their food comes from. They don’t know what farmers do, how we do it; nor are they overly curious or concerned about how the food got to their grocery stores. They take for granted that the food will be there.

In one respect, this is a good thing. Over the years, as we've gotten better at food production, the agriculture industry has needed to rely on fewer people. Not so long ago—perhaps when our grandparents or great grandparents were born—food production dominated employment. Today, less than 2 percent of Americans are directly involved in agriculture. This means that more of us can work as teachers, welders and software engineers (and also dietitians).

It also means that at no point in history do more people know less about farming from first-hand experience than they do right now. Many Americans recognize their own ignorance: Two years ago, in a poll by the [Annenberg Public Policy Center](#), 63 percent of Americans rated their understanding of GMOs as “poor” or “fair.” Only 4 percent called it “excellent.”

I saw this firsthand when the Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation hired me to disseminate a curriculum in agricultural literacy: training teachers how to use agriculture in their classrooms. That experience really highlighted for me how deficient consumer knowledge is about food and farming.

When you talk to consumers and observe them as they make grocery decisions for their family, what most people want is confidence that their food is safe. Their lack of knowledge about agriculture, however, makes them vulnerable to some pretty big misunderstandings. That's doubly true when the misunderstandings are fueled by propaganda.

This is where stories can play a decisive role—and allow farmers to become effective communicators about the realities of farming and the safety of our food supply. The key is to look for opportunities to tell what we know about what we do.

The most effective approach, I've discovered, is to tell my farm's story. Something as simple as describing “a day in the life” can convey an enormous amount of information. It also builds a personal connection and level of credibility. Statistics and research outcomes are good and even necessary, but for most people, they mean almost nothing if they don't also include a personal component.

Here's an example. In 2017, around the time the New England Patriots won their fifth Super Bowl, star quarterback Tom Brady released a book of workout, lifestyle and recipe suggestions. “[The TB12 Method](#)” took its name from Brady's initials and his roster number, and it quickly became a best seller on the promise that readers would learn fitness secrets.

It also included a witless [attack on modern agriculture](#). “Then of course there's genetic engineering,” wrote Brady. “Does that sound like something you'd want to eat? It sounds like a chemistry experiment to me.”

When I learned about this, I knew I had to respond. Not only am I farmer who knows the truth about GMOs, but I'm also a lifelong fan of the New England Patriots. I may live in Maryland, but I was born in Massachusetts—and I had just cheered for Brady to win the big game.

So I told the story of our farm in a website column, “[Invitation to Tom Brady: Visit My Farm and Learn Food Facts](#)”. I pointed out that one of the reasons we grow GMO soybeans, for example, is because they're high in oleic oil, which allows our customers to extract an oil from them that is free of trans fat.

Brady, I thought, ought to cheer for us: “Basically, trans fats are the worst kind of fat out there,” wrote Brady in his book. He urged his readers to avoid them.

So I pointed out all of this, from the incoherence of Brady's quip about “a chemistry experiment” (because GMOs are a feature of biology) to the fact that modern technology allows us to grow crops that carry extra nutritional value.

Then I invited Brady to visit my farm and learn more about what we do. He has not taken me up on this offer, but the invitation stands.

It also helped that I published a photo of myself wearing my [Brady jersey](#) and standing in a field next to one of our tractors. [see lead picture] Pictures, of course, can be as much a part of storytelling as words.

I won't say the column went viral in the way of a YouTube video sensation—but it was popular, if the

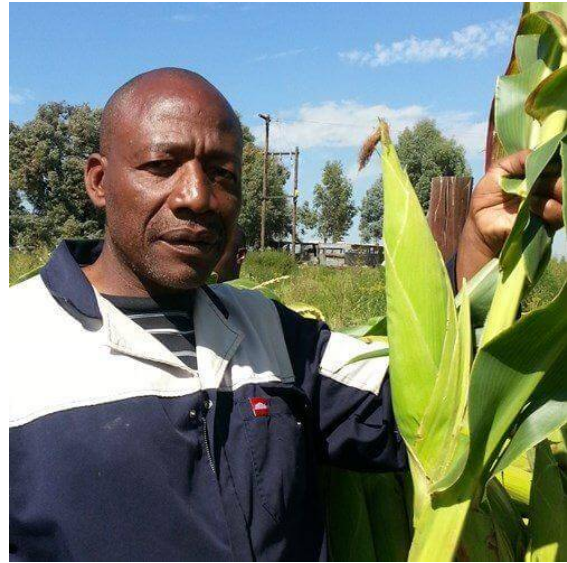
website hits and social-media mentions are any indication.

It worked for a simple reason: It told a story about a farm.

You can find lots of other examples. Watch the documentary “[Food Evolution](#),” which includes stories about GMO adoptions around the world. My favorite segment focuses on Motlatsi Musi, South African farmer who grew up within a racist system of apartheid but became a landowner who now relies on GMOs. Or check out [Pam Ronald’s TED talk](#) or her book “[Tomorrow’s Table](#).” Or go to any number of websites, such as [GMOAnswers.com](#) and [SafeFruitsandVeggies.com](#).

Or perhaps best of all: Keep up with the weekly columns by members of the Global Farmer Network, where real-world farmers tell their personal stories. This was how I first told my story about GMOs and Tom Brady.

Every farmer has a story to tell, whether it’s about the challenges of sustainability or the promise of technology.



Sharing real life experiences about the tools we use and what we do to reduce our environmental footprint while sustaining the farm for the next generation is invaluable. The more stories we tell, the better off we’ll find ourselves.



Jennie Schmidt is a third-generation farmer growing grains, vegetables and wine grapes on a family farm on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. As a farmer, mom and registered dietitian, Jennie is passionate about connecting people with food and farming. Jennie volunteers as a member of the [Global Farmer Network](#). Twitter: [@FarmGirlJen](#)

Global Farmer Network[®] (GFN) is a non-profit advocacy group led by farmers from around the world who support free trade and farmers’ freedom to choose the tools, technologies and strategies they need to maximize productivity and profitability in a sustainable manner. Established in 2000, the Global Farmer Network is committed to inserting the world’s farmers voice in the global dialogue regarding food and nutritional security. The Global Farmer Network identifies, engages and supports strong farmer leaders from around the world who can work with others to innovate, encourage and lead as full stakeholders in the work that is being done to fill the world’s food and nutrition security gap in a sustainable manner.

The **Genetic Literacy Project** is a 501(c)(3) non profit dedicated to helping the public, journalists, policy makers and scientists better communicate the advances and the technological, ethical and religious challenges ushered in by the biotechnology and genetics revolution, including CRISPR gene editing, in biomedicine and agriculture.