

Merchandising Plant Pathology

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Those of us who work in the areas of knowledge generation and dissemination sometimes lose sight of the fact that we produce tangible products and that these products must be sold to the consuming public in competition with other knowledge products. This natural oversight occurs because most of us generate knowledge in the public domain and do not experience the immediate exchange of money or other tangible products. Any and all consumable products must be merchandised by bringing together individuals who have need of the product with those who

either possess or can produce the product.

A high percentage of plant pathologists work in institutions of higher learning and have grown to expect an instant outlet for services performed in the areas of research, teaching, and extension along with consistent support for same. Change in the system often goes unnoticed unless a shortfall occurs in monetary support. This shortfall has occurred in the past, is presently occurring, and will likely continue to occur unless we become more competitive in the art of merchandising.

Traditionally, we plant pathologists have excelled at selling our product to each other. This is done at annual meetings, through journals, and in the halls of our workplaces. There is nothing wrong with this exercise except that it falls short of the goal of effectively selling our product and the need for it to the ultimate consumer.

Believing in one's product is critical in making a sale. Even a cursory review of historical records should convince us that we in plant pathology can take pride in past accomplishments and look forward to a bright future. Phytopathologists have an enviable record for making discoveries leading to control procedures for disease problems of all major crops. The microscopic nature of plant pathogens is in itself enough to capture the imagination of most laypersons. One who knows the microscopic world and how to manage it possesses knowledge that is in constant demand.

As a discipline, we may need to adopt a special form of "plant pathology pride" to boost the spirits of those now on board and to heighten the anticipation of students entering our discipline. If every practicing plant pathologist spoke with enthusiasm and pride about our discipline and its accomplishments, we could surely create a high level of visibility and recognition. One could then predict with almost absolute certainty that support levels would increase markedly.

Much concern has been expressed recently about declining support from state and federal sources. A decline in representation from rural constituencies in favor of urban areas is indeed occurring, but the implied assumption that all urban elected officials are against agriculture is untrue. We must convince these individuals that urban dwellers have an even greater stake in the security of the nation's food supply than those residing in rural areas.

Many raise the issue of surpluses that tends to cast a pall over all of agriculture as if we should cease every such development activity. H. J. and R. L. Nicholson noted in their book *Distant Hunger* (1979, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN) that developed nations can make equivalent exchange among food, money, and other resources to meet their national needs and

goals. An adequate food supply is a pillar of strength for the United States, and it makes no more sense to diminish technology supporting the food production industry than it would to weaken the banking system.

Like our clientele the agricultural producers, we have on occasion "bought retail and sold wholesale" by releasing information through the production disciplines instead of our own extension channels. The production disciplines rightfully take credit for their activities, and those hard-earned research and development dollars for plant pathology fail to regenerate. There is nothing wrong with our sister disciplines championing plant disease control when our contribution is credited.

I believe that enthusiastic merchandising of plant pathology will cause most negatives to disappear. In recent years, the American Phytopathological Society has aggressively marketed the discipline by publishing compendia and, through APS Press, a number of books and by starting two new scientific journals—*PLANT DISEASE* and *Molecular Plant-Microbe Interactions*.

As individual plant pathologists, we must convince those in our sphere of influence about the importance of plant pathology and how it serves their needs and interests. This can be done best by selling with substance and having something truly beneficial to offer. Almost every layperson has some interest in plants accompanied by a desire to learn new information. If benefited by the encounter, that person will return with renewed enthusiasm for more assistance.

Competition is as alive and well in the information marketplace as it is for automobiles, toothpaste, and designer jeans. Individuals have a finite amount of time to listen, read, and view information, and they establish personal priorities about what is of interest. We compete best by having factual and creditable information pertinent to their needs and appropriately designed for a particular audience.

One of the greatest shortcomings of our discipline is in the area of well-prepared popular articles. Most of us have been taught to prepare scientific journal articles but may or may not have experience in writing popular articles. Those who do not have outlets for popular articles may want to convince a journalist to do an article in a specified area of plant pathology.

At some time in our careers, most of us hope that an organization such as APS will sell our product and make us indispensable to society. This wish never seems to come true because these organizations are designed to support the individual professional and advance certain professional goals. They can furnish a collective voice in some instances and perform services such as publishing journals, books, and compendia and managing national meetings—but it is still up to the individual to sell plant pathology on a day-to-day basis.

The discipline of plant pathology will develop to its full potential when we plant pathologists commit ourselves individually and collectively to effective merchandising of the discipline. If every professional plant pathologist will develop a wholesome discontent about discipline advancement and become committed to pursuing attainable excellence, we will see young people clamoring to enter the profession and investors wanting to buy stock in its future.

Individual plant pathologists need to make a personal commitment to doing those things well that sell the discipline. Departments also need to be more conscious of the need to sell the discipline and to posture themselves favorably for doing it. Finally, our Society should publish good science, serve as a resource base for individual scientists, and do everything possible to raise discipline visibility.

Plant pathology will be merchandised when we—individually and collectively—deliberately invest sufficient time and effort to sell our services and the need for them to the consuming public.