Early Career Members

As scientists, many of us are involved in some type of research to varying degrees. Research and experimentation are interesting endeavors that involve identifying problems, solving those problems, and ultimately disseminating the information. What type of scientist are you? Are you basic or applied or some type of hybrid? Someone pointed this out to me early on: “Most people (stakeholders) think we sit up in an ivory tower and play with test tubes all day.” There are some questions that I want you to ponder as you read this article. Who are my stakeholders? Do my stakeholders know what I do and how it impacts them? This may sound like a trivial process, but stop and think about it. For those of you who don’t interact with your stakeholders on a daily basis, this may not be as easy as you think. Unfortunately, I think as scientists, we are growing further and further from our stakeholders all the time. So how do we reconnect with the people or groups we are trying to serve?

Who Are My Stakeholders?
The first step is to identify your stakeholders, which can vary greatly depending on your area of science, position, and type of research that you do. Stakeholders come in different shapes and sizes and so do their problems and questions. Contrary to what you might think, most funding agencies are not stakeholders. Other than farmer-based commodity groups, funding agencies generally work on behalf of stakeholders. EPA, and NSF are not stakeholders, they often control the purse strings and dictate the direction of research in the United States. In some ways, I think that scientific funding is a wedge that is slowly being driven between agriculture science clientele. When was the last time you had a great idea for a project and submitted a proposal to solve a problem? Most often, we are relegated to scouring RFP’s in our wheelhouse to pay the bills. In many ways, the scientific process is severely limited by the way science is funded in the United States.

I encourage you to identify your stakeholders and develop a plan to either connect or stay connected with them. Take the time to sit down and make a list of stakeholders and determine how often you interact with them. Use this as a tool to better understand your clientele and develop a plan to either connect or stay connected with them.

Develop a Turn-row Talk

I am sure everyone has heard of the “elevator talk,” but my version of this is the “turn-row talk.” If you only had 30 seconds on the tailgate of a truck between two corn fields could you explain to a farmer what you do and how it impacts them? For most of us involved in agriculture, farmers are the primary stakeholders, so for the purpose of this article, I will use farmers as the example stakeholders.