

Mondstuk van die Suid-Afrikaanse aartappelbedryf • Mouthpiece of the South African potato industry

CHIPS

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The future of agriculture: Innovation bridges the gap between producers and consumers

By Phindiwe Nkosi

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought several industries to their knees. Despite this, agriculture has stood the test of time, so much so, that the Bureau for Food and Agricultural Policy (BFAP) reported that 2020 had been a remarkable year for African agriculture.

“While the national economy as a whole experienced its greatest contraction since at least 1946, amounting to a decline of 7% in gross domestic product (GDP), the agricultural sector experienced an annualised real GDP growth rate of 13.1%. The total agricultural sector income rose by 7.3% last year,” Creamer Media’s senior deputy editor, Rebecca Campbell, wrote in an article published in March 2021 on the *Engineering News* website.

Theo Venter, an independent political and policy analyst, reaffirmed this in a *Farmer’s Weekly* online article, also published in March 2021. According to Venter, despite the many challenges brought about by Covid-19, the State of the Nation Address (Sona) “was upbeat about the role of agriculture”. Venter further asserted that “the agricultural sector still offers huge opportunities for risk-takers”.

Windows of opportunity

This exceptional performance during a global crisis has caught attention further afield, attracting people and organisations other than producers and typical role-players to the agricultural industry. Experts across the world, including those from Maryville University in the United States, have described agriculture as one of the ten hottest

fields for software developers to become involved in.

Contenders on this esteemed top-ten list of fired-up fields in line for radical digitisation, evolving technology, and innovative change include, but are not limited to, chatbots, the Internet of Things, wearable tech, cybersecurity, and artificial intelligence.

It is with this in mind that experts foresee the rise of an agricultural innovation system gaining momentum to propel people, knowledge, technology, infrastructure and cultures forward. Yet, with the introduction of both trusted and experimental advancements disrupting the way the advancement of knowledge is viewed, supported and interpreted, comes the need for revolutionary agricultural marketing communication to bridge the gap between potato producers and consumers.

Agri-marketing communication

The marketing division strives to inform, educate, and inspire consumers. The role of communication within the agricultural sector, particularly at grassroots level, cannot be overstated. We need to interrogate that which we send out. Innovation is a part of this new dispensation, but to fully embrace it and not leave our target audience behind, we must make it a priority to continuously check whether our messages are decoded as intended, lest we lose connection.


Initiatives by the marketing department include an informal sector study aimed at unpacking the size and potential of farmgate sales, product development that

seeks to find innovative ways of enhancing our product offering through tailor-made potato spices, as well as initiating foreign market development studies, of which the chief objective is to identify new markets for South African potatoes in the Southern African Development Community region.

Our preliminary studies into the informal sector, point to the rising phenomenon of farmgate trading (*bakkie trading*) – a phenomenon that is not backed by any literature – to ensure that those interested pursue this route as a way of diversifying the industry’s route-to-market offering. Agricultural marketing communication is key and needs to be based on research if it is to have any chance of advancing the industry.

Credibility and co-operation

Agricultural innovation systems, particularly those with a focus on niche marketing and communication, must be based on facts in order to be credible. It is not only top-down communication from Potatoes South Africa to our constituents that matters; all facets need to work together.

This is an ongoing process to ensure that we are neither left behind nor trailblazing to the extent that we are downright irrelevant. The State of the Potato Industry Address (SOPIA) held on 5 May 2021, was but one such initiative to bring industry stakeholders together to listen, learn and connect. 

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