

# MATTHEW NAYLOR

## Generic advertising is a waste of money



“Coca-Cola spends £200m/year on advertising. This is what the milk industry should do.” There’s a ludicrous idea that I heard from a farmer recently. “Farmers could learn a thing or two about branding from Apple.” And there’s another one. Stupid ideas are like buses, aren’t they?

Such remarks probably explain why agriculture is in such dire straits. Do people really misunderstand the nature of their produce and their market so badly? No wonder the industry is working harder but getting poorer.

It is erroneous to draw parallels between a strategically marketed, branded drink like Coke and an overproduced commodity like milk. For one thing, Coke is laced with delicious addictive substances such as processed sugar and caffeine. The biggest difference, though, is that manufacturers of branded products manage their supply; they alter their production to protect the value of their goods. Farmers seem to do the exact opposite in an oversupplied market; we increase output in pursuit of lower unit costs.

I have some sympathy for the milk producers, but one must pause to question the intelligence, and perhaps the sanity, of an industry which each year forces more litres on a public which patently neither wants nor requires them. No amount of advertising can ever alter the basic supply and demand principle.

Similarly, suggestions that Apple owes its success to nice logos and packaging misread the real situation. Apple is profitable because it outclasses its competitors, it manufactures in low-cost territories and spends US\$2bn (£1.43bn) annually on new product development. Maybe there is a lesson in there for us, but how you implement that on a 200-acre Grade 3 farm in the UK is less easily stated.

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This is a free country and farmers are entitled to make ridiculous suggestions about advertising if they want to, but I object when people call for AHDB levy money to be diverted from research and into generic market campaigns.

The red meat sector especially has always been fond of blowing money on small, messy publicity campaigns. Past evidence suggests these have had modest effect other than in massaging farmers’ egos and providing work for waning celebrities. New Zealanders succeed in selling us lamb without needing to pay an ancient cricketer to promote the stuff; they manage it on the basis of their lower costs.

We should focus on raising our game rather than trying to promote methods and breeds from 30 years ago. Guilt-tripping consumers into buying British might resonate with a few mildly racist consumers. It might give us a nice fuzzy feeling. Unfortunately it won’t give us long-term success. Our mining industry would not have been saved by “Buy British Coal” banners on motorways and nor will we.

It is possible to effectively market farm produce through advertising. Bernard Matthews was a leading example. Albert Bartlett with Rooster potatoes and Yeo Valley have both had notable results more recently. The salient point is that the production efficiency of each of these three businesses was world-class before they started advertising. Generic promotion of general agriculture is completely different. Farmers would derive more long-term benefit from focusing on lobbying, co-ordinated marketing and R&D.

It is tough at the moment and our survival depends upon us facing up to the unpleasant reality that agriculture is not a heritage-themed cottage industry but a globally influenced trade. Farmers shouldn’t be wasting precious money feeding this myth.

**Matthew Naylor** is the managing director of Naylor Flowers, a Lincolnshire business that grows cut flowers and potatoes for supermarkets. He is a Nuffield scholar, a mentor for the Prince’s Trust and on the governing body of the Marshal Papworth Fund.

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Ian Pigott and David Alvis

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## On Farm This Week

with **Jez Wardman**  
Agronomist, Yara UK Ltd.



### Sulphur deficiencies risk lower yield and quality

Sulphur is an essential nutrient for all crops and if deficient crops cannot make full use of applied nitrogen; resulting in both yield and quality suffering. The majority of arable soils analysed by Lancrop in 2015 were deficient in sulphur, with 88% classified as low or very low. This is because most mineral soils are poor at retaining sulphur which is typically leached through the soil over winter prior to soil sampling in early spring.

The results of tissue analyses conducted in 2015 show that over a quarter of oilseed rape samples and half the cereal samples were deficient in sulphur. So more attention is being paid to sulphur in OSR than in cereals, but many growers are still not applying sufficient sulphur and risk a loss of yield and quality.

### All nutrient management plans should include sulphur

This is a reminder that all nutrient management plans should include sulphur. Field specific recommendations for both nitrogen and sulphur can be created using the free Yara N-Plan tool available at [www.yara.co.uk/n-plan](http://www.yara.co.uk/n-plan).

Yara field trials confirm the optimum timings for sulphur are ‘little and often’ in combination with nitrogen rather than ‘all at once’. This ensures sulphur is always available when the plant requires it and reduces the potential for it to leach. Trials also confirm the optimum rate of sulphur to be 60-75kg/ha SO<sub>3</sub> on oilseed rape and 35-40kg/ha SO<sub>3</sub> on winter cereals.

Yara supply a wide range of nitrogen plus sulphur fertilizers suitable for most situations, with a choice of Chafer N+S grades of liquid fertilizers and the YaraBela range of nitrate based N+S solid fertilizers.