



BSR Conference 2009
Reset Economy. Reset World.

When Good Intentions Collide

Breakout Session Summary
Wednesday, October 21, 2009 | 9:45-10:45 a.m.

Speakers

- » **Jerry Steiner**, Executive Vice President, Sustainability and Corporate Affairs, Monsanto Company
- » **Diane Osgood**, Vice President, CSR Strategy, BSR (moderator)

Highlights

- » Some critics may look at agricultural technology as an either-or, black-and-white issue, but it shouldn't be that way.
- » Addressing sustainability challenges will be impossible if we search for a single solution—there is no single solution. We must find holistic solutions.
- » For companies that face technology challenges, it is critical to be open with all stakeholders, to continually engage in dialogue with critics, and to make scientific methodologies as transparent as possible.

Memorable Quotes

"We are going to have to use innovation to use less, otherwise this global equation won't work. Technology needs to be a part of that." —Jerry Steiner, Monsanto Company

"For companies facing [technology] issues—not just agricultural companies, but those in nuclear, pharmaceuticals, or any other industry—don't just share the results of your science, share your methodology too. This will help with transparency and ensure a complete understanding in the public sphere." —Diane Osgood, BSR

"I believe that GMOs will bring a lot of benefits to society. But it is a choice, not the choice, and we have to keep looking at this in a holistic way." —Jerry Steiner, Monsanto Company

Overview

Osgood opened the session with the central question: "What happens when the good intentions of a technology provider collide with the equally good intentions of an opposing group—that is, when the two parties don't agree on whether a certain technology provides the right solutions?" She noted how a recent global study of agriculture found that there are two actively discussed and debated agricultural paradigms: the organic, small-scale producer and the large-scale, industrial producer. The agriculture world is working to understand what sustainable agriculture looks like, and whether—or how—these two paradigms can coexist.

Steiner began by sharing that it is easy for people to go into an "election mode" when they read about an issue. They feel that they have to decide between candidate X or candidate Y. Steiner added that in the real world, especially in agriculture, systems can easily coexist via a "good neighbor" policy.

Steiner emphasized that in a world of growing population, climate change, and other pressing resource challenges, technology will have to be part of the solutions to innovate and provide answers. He mentioned that sustainable agriculture needs to provide an economically viable solution, whether you are a farmer in Kenya, Burkina Faso, or Iowa. In order for agriculture to be



economically sustainable in many areas of the world, farmers must be able to obtain high yields from their crops and increase their own incomes.

New technologies are often very complex. In some cases, the average citizen only understands the rudimentary level of science involved in the technology, making it very difficult to enable informed choice. Furthermore, much of the data and scientific methodologies are not in the public domain. Osgood asked what the role of business is in bringing facts to the debate, since companies often have the resources and information but are too often mistrusted. Steiner believes that there are several key actions companies can take. First, companies need to be completely transparent and not hide from hard questions. Monsanto, for example, posts all of the questions they receive from activists and critics on their website, as well as their responses to those questions. Second, business needs to engage in multi-stakeholder initiatives like the Keystone sustainable agriculture initiative. In this group, the stakeholders do not agree all of the time, but they do all learn from each other. Third, actions and facts can speak for themselves. To illustrate this point, Steiner used Monsanto's response to criticism that intellectual property rights prevent poor farmers from benefiting from their technologies. He pointed out that Monsanto recently partnered with CIMMYT—a global, public research organization for maize and wheat—to donate germplasm to African farmers. Because farmers do not need to pay cash upfront, they have easy access to the technology. This, he said, is one of the many ways Monsanto provides solutions that reach farmers and increase their incomes.

A participant from Proctor & Gamble asked about the precautionary principle, and how Monsanto moves beyond the challenge that no matter how much science is out there, there are still things we don't know. Another participant followed with a question about the public perception of the dangers and risks of agricultural technology like GMOs. He reminded the audience that other industries—such as tobacco—have tarnished the image of company-produced scientific data. Steiner urged the audience to examine publicly funded science by institutions such as the EU. He pointed out that the known risks of agricultural technology have all been answered by science. The other questions, he said, are only the “unknown unknowns,” and those will always exist by definition. But he emphasized that by *not* moving forward with such technology has risks too, and this is a point that critics often forget. Without moving forward, the farmers in Burkina Faso will not have access to technology that could potentially double their crop yields and increase their incomes. He concluded by saying that we need to look at all sides of issues and find holistic solutions.

Osgood closed the session by calling for a continued conversation about the role of choice in technology adoption.

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