

Just what is that SAVE ON FOOD ad saying?

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How many of you saw the recent (July) SAVE-ON FOODS ad on TV? For those who didn't, a quick rendition (from memory - excuse the flaws):

A man — early 60's, wearing a gaunt, haggard look, obviously tense — sits straight-backed on a metal chair in a darkened room.

His unblinking eyes stare intently at a projection screen in front of him, upon which pictures of vegetables are flashed in rapid succession.

His voice cracks in staccato rhythm to the quickly changing slides: "Carrots... Onions.... Turnips..." You can almost *feel* the drops of perspiration breaking out on his forehead.

The next slide appears — this time, not of a vegetable but of a small pile of earth.

"Soil" he retorts. The furrows of his face deepen concentration. A hesitation, then "pH 6.8."

Red lights flash on either side of the man's head as sirens go off — weee-uuuh! weee-uuuh! weee-uuuh! WRONG! WRONG! WRONG!

The man's countenance clouds in panic. His now-raspy voice hurriedly offers: "No, no, I meant pH 7."

NEXT! booms a disembodied voice from somewhere above. The man stands and quickly exits stage left, shoulders slumped.

The tag line? "At SAVE-ON foods, we're not just picky about our produce, we're picky about our farmers..."

What's being said here? Beyond the tag line, I mean... The five or six in-store produce managers I phoned were very polite, but they too seemed unclear as to the message.

Not all had seen it, although most knew of it. Some suggested it was meant to be funny. Some said they personally didn't care for it; all replied they had little input into such decision-making and suggested I call "head office" for further comment.

Several managers were located in the heart of farming country:

ME: I don't get it... What are these ads saying?

MGR: That SAVE-ON FOOD'S is very picky about the produce we buy and, I guess, the farmers we buy from...

ME: I still don't get it. What you're saying is that SAVE-ON won't buy produce from farmers who can't tell the pH of a picture flashed in front of them? That doesn't make much sense. And the "farmer" you're depicting looked like he just came off skid road. This is pretty negative stuff. Just what is it that SAVE-ON's saying about the people who grow food in our community?

MGR: I think the ad was meant to 'spoof' farmers.

ME: Excuse me?

MGR: You know, make fun of the fact that some farmers don't have all the answers...

At a time when intelligent corporate life is busily forging strategic alliances between market chain participants, building bridges in their communities and seeking advice from their customers, these ads leave me cold.

Uncomfortably cold. Chilled, actually.

Instead of depicting B.C.'s farmers as the knowledgeable and independent community participants that they are — men and women who proudly rank their skills against the best in the world (many of whom travel all the way to B.C. just to study the way we farm) — these ads conjure up images of the highly concentrated, farmer-as-serf approach to contract agriculture adopted by our neighbours to the South.

You know the one. Constructed like an hour glass, with many producers at one end and millions of consumers at the other and a few firms in the middle that control the industry through control of the processing sector.

Firms like ConAgra (the second largest food processor in the United States and the fourth largest in the world), Cargill (which operates in over 60 countries), Archer Daniels Midland, Ferruzzi, Tyson, Grand Metropolitan and IBP, many of which control the system "from seed to shelf" through their control of farm input markets such as feed, seed, fertilizers and agricultural chemicals.

Firms that cut contracts with individual producers across a very unlevel bargaining table. Contracts which (not surprisingly) work fully in the interests of the multinational to extract maximum profits from the farm-gate. Take-it-or-leave-it contracts that often leave farmers with less than enough money to go broke.

Apparently, this is just the first in a series of ads that are part of a new, aggressive advertising campaign by Vancouver-based agency Palmer Jarvis.

Portraying farmers as indigent losers (literally) in a large game of corporate pick and choose smacks of the sort of mean-spirited message we saw first appear about a decade ago in U.S. election campaigns and, more recently, embodied in the NIKE ads at the Summer Olympics ("*You Don't Win Silver, You Lose Gold*"...).

NOT APPROPRIATE.

There are so many more positive ways to get the message across.

In their 1996 Report Card Assessing Progress Towards Sustainability on the Fraser Basin, the Fraser Basin Management Board profiles agriculture's important contribution to the economic and social fabric on the Basin's communities, adding that "*there is a need for increased awareness in the non-agricultural community of the benefits of a strong agricultural sector.*"

Funny... Thrifty's Foods seems to get it... What, do you suppose, does it take to get retailers like SAVE-ON on side with this message and this community?