This country is built on a foundation of open and free communication. While this is an ideal we need to work toward, food safety is an area in which we need to understand a great deal more before opening communication channels to all people. The government and big businesses are often not trusted, and activist groups play on public fears, regardless of scientific facts. People don’t know what to believe or whom to trust.

One of the problems in communicating risk about safety problems and health issues is the big difference between what is considered the scientific standard of proof and the standard the public accepts as proof. The public perceives science to be the absolute truth, so when a scientist says that something is potentially hazardous, the public perception is that the hazard is real. Instead, they want the scientist to say that no hazards are associated with the science and/or technology. However, scientists have long realized that zero-risk is unattainable.

To close this gap and build trust, scientists, industries and the government need to develop a language that says, “We are concerned. We don’t know for sure, but there are links that give us some concern.” Often there is a trade-off. Pesticides, for example, may not have been the best option for the health and well-being of people and wildlife, but the case can be made that more people would have starved without the green revolution that extensively used pesticides and synthetic fertilizers.

Additionally, many people do not have a clear understanding as to the origin and source of their food. In earlier years, there was a face on food, and consumers knew where it came from and could see first-hand who raised it and how it was produced. Now, the general public is removed from food production and processing and have little understanding
of the scale and methods used to keep the cost of food low and readily accessible. While some are able to pay for locally grown or organic foods, these are still beyond the means of many. Opening the flow of communication from food producers and processors to the general public is an invitation to higher food prices and higher outrage.

The potential good resulting from genetically modified organisms (GMOs) is astounding, but we have not begun to use and develop this technology. As new technologies are developed, we make mistakes. If history is any guide, GMOs are going to cause problems along with the miracles. Rather than to force the issue and impose products onto the customers, industry should say, “We think this has tremendous potential, but we really have to look at the down side. We want to work with you, the public, so that we make sure what we are doing is okay.”

Industry and government must become more proactive in their approaches to risk communication, seeking areas that could be potentially harmful or beneficial, instead of waiting for a crisis to emerge. In addition, more groups should be invited to participate in decision-making processes.

It has been said that the world eats because farmers produce. This is an extremely important franchise. It is not something that agriculture should lose, nor can the United States afford to lose the trust of the rest of the world. The future of agriculture is not one of information wars, but it depends upon looking at critical issues and making constructive changes so that agriculture can continue to supply the world with safe, nutritious and delicious food.