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# Perception is Reality

by Brad Chambliss

**Editor's Note:** The following essay was written by Brad Chambliss, one of the top four winners of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange (CME) Beef Industry Scholarship.

A junior at the University of Kentucky, Brad received a \$2,500 scholarship and a trip to the 1991 National Cattlemen's Association Convention.

The CME Beef Industry Scholarship, started in 1989, recognizes students who intend to pursue a career in the beef industry — talented and thoughtful students who may emerge as industry leaders.

**"Why are you here?"**

**"I'm here because I know of the cruel acts that are being directed at animals in laboratories and farms across this country, and I'm here to stop it."**

**"How do you know of this cruelty?"**

**"I've seen the pictures."**

**"You mean to tell me you've never been on a farm or step foot in a laboratory?"**

**"Yes. But I have a friend who has visited many farms and he comes from a family whose ancestors were farmers and he knows."**

At first glance, this conversation would seem too ridiculous to take seriously. It is, however, a very realistic scenario.

I know this conversation is true, because I was the one who asked this young lady why she was dedicating her entire summer enduring Washington, D.C. humidity to sit in the PETA tent located on the Smithsonian Mall.

Her answer was frightening and challenging. It was frightening because her actions were driven by firmly fixed convictions that were not based on scientific fact or even personal observations, but by a friend whose "ancestors were farmers."

This scenario is challenging and at times frustrating, not just because of this one lady but because she represents what is perhaps the greatest challenge to the livestock industry. This challenge I talk of

is not an animal rights issue, but something larger and more encompassing — perception.

We live in the Age of Information. We are confronted daily with new developments. New information is developed at such a staggering rate that every 20 months all the information known to mankind doubles. This is why every 30 months, 50 percent of our information becomes obsolete.

We live in a society that is accustomed to rapid change. Change and the introduction of new information has become such a commonplace in our daily lives that new information is neither shocking nor surprising and is continually becoming easier for us to accept. Accepting change is not a problem, in fact it is essential. The problem arises when we fail to differentiate between new opinions and fact.

In the past the cattle industry's worries were limited to such factors as a fluctuating dollar, droughts, disease, pestilence and the price of grain. Now there has been

a new animal released that has the potential to completely reshape our entire industry. This animal is public opinion.

We felt its power in 1984 when the National Institute of Health released the Lipid Research Clinics (LRC) Report on Cholesterol. In 1984, there were feature articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* magazines about cholesterol. *Readers Digest* reported that "cholesterol is the culprit in coronary heart disease." The LRC report caused an avalanche of articles that implied that cholesterol in any amount is hazardous to your health. The tie was quickly made by the popular press between the evils of cholesterol and beef.

Even though their over-zealous, misleading and enthusiastic reporting had no substantial scientific backing, it was enough to convince many consumers. The consumption of beef took a nose-dive not because beef suddenly turned into an unhealthy product, but because many consumers perceived it as bad. And to the consumer, perception is reality!

We have been able to correct many of the misconceptions about beef through a massive informative campaign. This campaign was possible because of funds generated through the checkoff program. The "cholesterol crisis" taught us an invaluable lesson. We can no longer afford to

wait for a crisis, instead we must be proactive. Granted we will not be able to foresee every crisis, but we must not allow the beef industry to be one of the best kept secrets in America.

If the young lady on the Mall had known the truth about livestock management before her friend had falsely informed her, she would not have been in a position where she was disseminating false information.

With an ever decreasing agricultural population our task is more paramount than ever. For not only do we have health concerns and animal rights issues, we also have environmental issues with which to contend. Instead of spending our resources on scientific developments and marketing advancements that will enable us to continue to lead the world livestock industry, we must invest in programs just to maintain the status quo. It is something we must do.

We are now competing to influence public opinion against numerous, diverse activist groups, most of which are well financed and very focused in purpose. It is neither practical nor realistic to attempt to address each group's concerns, and we should not feel obligated to do so.

We can not waste our time chasing activist groups trying to cure only symptoms. We need to continue informative and promotional campaigns for our products and industry. A cure, however, for perception does not lie with a lobbying or advertising agency, but instead with our educational system.

America is now an agriculturally illiterate society. Very little is known about agriculture or production practices. We can provide a solution by actively monitoring our school's curriculum and continuing to infuse agriculture into all aspects of education. Full support should be given to FFA, 4-H, and junior breed organizations and their programs.

These organizations are not only helping to produce our industry's future leaders, but they are also a great median to disseminate information through exhibits, farm days, and Food for America Programs. We can also implement incentives such as essay contests or even scholarships for students not directly associated with the beef industry.

The future of any organization, society or cause is only one generation away from extinction. As we strive to train and prepare the future leaders of this industry, we must assume more of the responsibility of educating the next generation of consumers. It is difficult to mislead someone who is properly informed, therefore our job will not be completed until no one has to ask, "Why are we here?"

