

BARN TOURS

A Better Way to Communicate With the Public

by Barbara LaBarbara

How many times have you heard a child in the show barn ask, "Does that cow bite?" Or heard a teacher tell her kindergarten class those Angus cattle are Limousin? Or an animal rights activist tell a crowd that we mistreat our animals?

Such fallacies prompted Sondra Wallace to begin BARN TOURS. She has taken a pro-active approach to informing the public about the livestock industry. It is a bigger challenge and more rewarding than she ever dreamed.

When Wallace set out to communicate with the general public, she had to find a different way to convey her message because the industry's vocabulary and attitude do not work with the public.

She grew up exhibiting Horned Hereford cattle and has three daughters who have shown cattle. The realization that we needed to reach the public came when an animal rights activist made a vicious verbal attack on her 13-year-old.

Having been trained as a spokesperson for the beef industry by the California Council of Growers allowed her to retain her composure and confront her daughter's attacker. The crowd that had gathered cheered as the activist was confronted head-on. Wallace



An employee of BARN TOURS explains all the byproducts we get from cattle to this group of state fair visitors.

and her daughter then spent over an hour answering questions about beef cattle.

"I had thought about getting information to the public for a long time," says Wallace. "That incident made me realize the time was now and fairs were the place to start."

She spent the next three months gathering information regarding all aspects of the livestock industry. That has proved to be the hardest part of her job.

Today BARN TOURS has more than 20,000 hours of re-

search to its credit. Tour guides have to know about cattle, emu, buffalo, poultry, swine, goats, sheep, rabbits – any animal that can be exhibited.

Reading and retaining what is in the training manual demands hours of study. New tour guides watch training tapes and go through an apprenticeship with experienced guides. As a result they are able to discuss nearly any issue the public wants to talk about.

The tours are not "canned." One group may want to talk about the impact of the live-

stock industry on world economics. Another may be interested in animal byproducts, such as freon gas which is used in refrigeration. The guide can tell them freon and 78 other widely used industrial gases come from chicken manure.

How many people, even those in agriculture, know that without animal production our economy would be destroyed in 10 days? There is not one product in the United States that does not come from animal byproducts or is not influenced by the use of animal byproducts. For example, steel cannot be manufactured without them. Without steel we could not cut down a tree, build a house or harvest a crop.

After doing the initial research, Wallace called five friends, told them what she was doing and asked if they would help test it.

The business has grown to 70 paid tour guides and more are needed. They are paid per day plus travel expenses. Teachers, college students, fair managers, farmers, ranchers, and retirees make up the roster of BARN TOURS associates. Many guides travel with the group all summer and work every fair while others work only one or two.

When Wallace approached Mike Bradley, California State Fair agriculture manag-

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE A TOUR GUIDE

- A desire to make a positive difference for agriculture
- A sense of humor and ability to laugh
- A willingness to share a bathroom with five other people because of travel situations.
- Eyes that smile • An accessible personality



er, with her BARN TOURS idea, he was excited. There had been successful tours of the farming area at the fair since 1983, but none in the livestock barns.

The first BARN TOURS effort was launched at the California State Fair in 1990 without a public address system. Wallace's friends just started asking people who came into the barn if they would like a guided tour. The response was unbelievable. When Wallace called the second place about testing it, they wanted to hire them.

In 1994 BARN TOURS is booked at 20 locations in August — the height of the fair season — including Wyoming and Colorado. Their travels have taken them to Massachusetts, Florida, California, Vancouver British Columbia, Iowa, Minnesota, Ohio, New Jersey, Idaho, Utah and Canada.

Fairs throughout the United States and Canada pay BARN TOURS a fee plus expenses. Half of the fairs underwrite it in their entertainment budget and the other half have sponsors. The money goes toward salaries, liability insurance of a million dollars and equipment. Every portable PA system has \$70 worth of rechargeable batteries. Uniforms of red T-shirts, walking shorts and tennis shoes dispel the image many children have of Farmer Brown in his bib overalls and straw hat. Less than half of one percent of their flyers and stickers are found in trash cans at the end of the day.

Wallace believes they are successful because the tour guides start a thought process. People begin to think about agriculture in a positive way.

Bradley says most of his feedback comes from parents of young children and teachers who gain a more clear image and understanding of agriculture. Seeing attitudes change is Wallace's reward. When

people finish the tour they are proud their families have been associated with agriculture.

"You begin to realize it is not a question of us against them," she says. "These people aren't against us, we just haven't given them a way to communicate with us."

Wallace says their biggest difficulty is overcoming the bias of people in agriculture. They think the guides are going to tell them "this is a cow" or "this is a sheep." Many of them have the attitude "I grew up on a farm and I know what a cow looks like." The tour guide's job is to tell them that 98 percent of their car, not including the upholstery, has that cow in it.

"Many agriculture people have a preconception that they don't have something to learn about agriculture," says Wallace. "If every person in the industry knew the information my tour guides have to know, we would have never had a problem with the image of agriculture. The animal rights movement would have

died. There would have never been a controversy over the safety of our food. Even our leaders, including those in the USDA, don't know this stuff."

In the future, Wallace would like to develop a speakers' bureau outside the industry. For example, the auto industry or plumbers — people who do not realize their industry depends on us. She would also like to see BARN TOURS in the classroom. Her most immediate goals include gathering more information and acquiring additional tour guides.

"BARN TOURS is a good investment," Bradley says. "It is a pro-active approach to what the livestock industry is all about."

Editor's note:

You can join this effort to gain respect and understanding for the livestock industry. Contact Sondra Wallace, president, BARN TOURS, P.O. Box 1177, Templeton, CA 93455; (805) 239-9150.

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