



Setting the PACE

► by **Susan Rhode**, director of communications and public relations

The power of the PRESS

In case you haven't noticed, the powerful monster known as the "free press" has a license to do just about anything it wants to these days, with the protection of the U.S. Constitution to boot. They tell you what to eat and what to wear, convince you of the best way to raise your children, and even change your political and religious beliefs. Most Americans underestimate the influence media have on our society, and even on them as individuals. We're all more susceptible than we think.

Still ...

Even though this monster may have more power than we want it to, and even though it gets out of control on certain issues, it's part of what makes this country the greatest place in the world to live. The freedoms of the press ensure our safety and well-being as citizens and consumers. So even though I get frustrated with the small issues they sometimes blow out of proportion, I wouldn't trade the system for the world.

For those of us in agriculture, the media can be our best friend and our worst enemy. It seems like some editors are willing to help the farmer and put production agriculture in a positive light to consumers. But some are also looking for ways to "unveil" the truth about the evils of livestock production and food safety, or even the government subsidies some farmers receive. There's no question, today's world of agriculture involves many controversial topics, and members of the media are keenly aware of all of them.

A prime opportunity

In the eyes of public relations folks like me, media represent a prime opportunity. Convincing an editor, reporter or broadcaster that the activities of Angus breeders or junior members are newsworthy is part of our daily lives here in the Saint Joseph, Mo., office. Putting you, the members, in a positive light in your hometown newspaper, on a local radio station or in a state beef publication is a victory for both you and the American Angus Association. It makes you look good, and it makes the breed, as a whole, look even better. It even helps agriculture.

But sometimes editors can put a different spin on beef production, or nutrition and lifestyles in general. I received an e-mail a few weeks ago from Sharon Sommers, an Angus

breeder and former junior Angus mom from Silver Lake, Ind., about an article that had appeared in her local county paper.

The article was titled "Feel fitter, younger and reduce weight." It sounded innocent enough at first, but when you started reading, it was clear the writer had more than the health and well-being of her readers in mind. She had an agenda.

The article focused on the rising popularity of a vegetarian lifestyle in the area and the ethical and moral issues surrounding the idea of being vegetarian. Hidden in the text were plenty of anti-meat editorials, including "the harsh cruelties animals must endure" and the statement that vegetarians "may only exclude beef from the diet, but still enjoy healthy meats like turkey, chicken and fish." I guess that depends on your definition of "healthy."

Of course this infuriated Sharon and her friends and neighbors. The newspaper their families had read and trusted for years had betrayed them and their livelihoods. After several outraged phone calls and complaints, the editors printed a retraction stating that, "Last week's front page feature was in no way meant to offend the local farming and agricultural communities." Whether they *meant* to offend someone or not, we don't know. But the reality is they did, and at the expense of many farmers who provide economic support for their publication and community.

The point is made

Now, I'll be the first to admit that everyone has the right to live the way they want and where they want, but I also agreed with Sharon and her neighbors. The newspaper had crossed the line on this one. Beef producers don't go around telling everyone

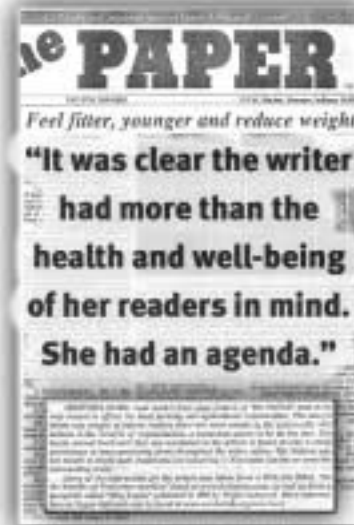
how they eat a diet of only beef or protein and that fruits and vegetables are Satan's candy. Fair comparison? I think so. Those of us in agriculture realize that people need to eat a balanced diet, including all the food groups, to live a long, healthy life.

I promptly wrote a letter to the editor of the paper on Sharon's behalf and encouraged her to do the same. She also contacted the Indiana Beef Council and others in her state so they were aware of the article and its effects. I thanked

Sharon for the opportunity to become involved in the issue so I could be one more voice speaking out for agriculture. I hope the editor of her paper will think twice before printing such a one-sided story again.

So, in this case, the press worked against us. But this wasn't the first time something like this has happened, and it definitely won't be the last. As the population that is involved in agriculture continues to decline, so will the editors and publishers who are willing to speak the truth about agriculture and eating a healthy diet. It's an uphill battle that we're all going to have to fight together. So next time you're reading your local newspaper, or any publication for that matter, and you read something that doesn't quite tell the truth, speak up. It's your right as a citizen of this country to exercise your freedom of speech.

Thanks, Sharon, for setting the PACE!



GRAPHIC COURTESY OF SHARON SOMMERS

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