



# TOUGH talks

*Talking to consumers about the tough topics.*

*by Lindsay King, assistant editor*

Your first responsibility as an agriculturalist is to the land and your animals, but your second is to your industry through transparent communication to those who matter most: your consumers.

“Twenty years ago, we did not worry about animal rights activists,” says Gerald Fitch, Oklahoma State University animal science professor. “Back then, consumers knew what we were doing and why. We laughed off the activists at the time. Now because we did not do what we needed to 20 years ago, we have to take back agriculture.”

The most difficult topics to discuss with consumers concern animal welfare, related to on the farm and during the slaughter process. Branching off those two topics is the misinformation Fitch says comes from the “other side” of animal agriculture. He referenced People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the latter being the most vocal.

“Animal welfare is hard to talk about simply because many groups have done a great job demonizing producers,” says Allison Burenheide,



Merck Animal Health food animal marketing coordinator. “It is hard to combat the image painted for producers by groups who have only seen the one bad apple in the industry.”

Producers have their work cut out for them when it comes to starting conversations with consumers. However, Fitch and Burenheide agree that it truly is simple: just tell your story, the truth of agriculture.

“We need to start the story, talk to consumers about how we take care of our animals before we take care of ourselves,” Fitch says. “An important part of our story that is difficult to talk about is the fact that these animals have to die for us to eat them. That is the main goal after all. Our objective is to show consumers that we do everything we can to give those animals the best life possible until they reach the captive bolt.”

Fitch referenced a video filmed in San Francisco, Calif., condemning animal agriculture for killing animals and urging consumers to simply head to the grocery store to get their meat instead. However, he also discussed a research study showing consumers the slaughter process and measuring their subsequent meat consumption. Though it declined the days following the video explanation of the slaughter facility, consumers were back to eating meat within a week afterwards.

“When you start talking about those things, your passion for your craft is abundantly evident, that consumers eat it up,” Fitch adds. “They might not believe me because I am a professor, but they will listen to a cattleman who is out there doing it every day. They really are easy conversations, we just have to start them.”

## Your role in the CONVERSATION

It is easy to see how the consumer could be confused by all the jargon and slang terms used for procedures in agriculture. That is why it is

important to establish a simple bumper sticker for your operation, specifically for these conversations.

“The industry has never needed to defend itself and now that we do, we are finding it difficult to know where to start,” Burenheide says. “One great place to start is defining your operation in a simple statement, a tagline if you will, that reflects positively. For example, as an animal advocate my bumper sticker is, ‘It is vital for us to tell our story to the consumer, because it is a great story to tell.’”

Both Fitch and Burenheide agreed that taking a defensive stance was the best way to ensure a negative conversation with the consumer would ensue.

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Recognizing that most questions come from a genuine desire to learn more is essential for producers to hold on to when they feel attacked.

“A lot of our issues in the conversation with consumers is mental,”

Burenheide says. “We have to remember to stick to the basics without avoiding the difficult topics. Something we can all agree on is that the practices we do today have the best interest of the animal in mind.”

Your role as a producer in the conversation is to tell your personal story; no consumer wants a script about agriculture read to them. The problem today is far too many rely on a select few to advocate coast to coast.

“It starts with each individual producer speaking up,” Fitch says. “Every time I get on a plane I have a conversation with someone about agriculture. But the possibilities are endless. Producers have the opportunity to tell their story wherever they go, just a simple question at a town meeting can lead to a productive conversation.”

The ripple effect of telling one consumer your story is everlasting, they share that conversation with a friend who shares it with another.

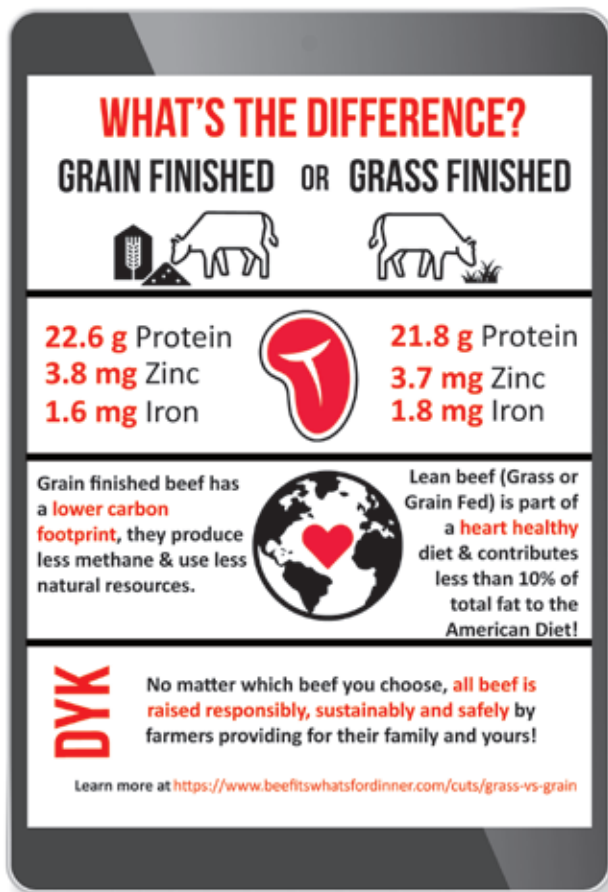
Going into it with an open mind is another recommendation.

“Something I have had to learn is the difference between a productive conversation and a dead end,”

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Burenheide says about engaging in thousands of in-person and online discussions about agriculture. “I have had conversations with people that truly want to know where their food is coming from. There is about 1% of the population whose main goal is to shut down commercial agriculture, they are not the ones to target.”

Burenheide says the moveable middle is the audience producers should seek out for these conversations. Many of her positive conversations have taken place in a grocery store aisle. Meeting consumers on their turf is an easy way to make the conversation comfortable from the beginning.



*Shared more than 10,000 times worldwide on Facebook, Allison Burenhiede took second place in a national advocacy contest last spring.*

## Avenues for the CONVERSATION

A social media guru on advocating for agriculture, Burenheide won second in a national advocacy contest utilizing Facebook, Twitter and Instagram this past spring. One of her graphics, depicting the differences between grass-fed and grain-fed beef, has been shared more than 10,000 times, worldwide.

“Social media is a great tool for producers to share their story, giving them the ability to be fully transparent about what they are doing every day,” Burenheide explains. “This is a huge part of my generation and now our industry, it is where a lot of people are getting their information from, true and false.”

Burenheide warns that posting on social media is great, but to remember that a picture is worth 1,000 words. She says to share the whole truth but know that a picture of tools pulling a calf will probably not be well received by a consumer who does not understand what is happening. She recommends pictures and posts of families working on the farm, proper handling techniques, dispelling the myth of overusing antibiotics, or using facts and figures to explain why you do something on your operation.


“I recently heard about a producer who volunteered in an elementary classroom, telling students about his operation and bringing things they use every day to show the kids,” Burenheide says. “Not only should we be focused on the current consumers, but also the next generation. We are already short on farmers, we cannot rely on others to introduce kids in our community to agriculture, it is up to each one of us.”


Recommendations for volunteering include: YMCA after-school programs, local elementary school classrooms, scout troop meetings, or even conducting farm tours for class field trips.


“We are starting to see more producers allow the public on their operation, showing them what they do,” Fitch says. “The ultimate transparency is to let people see what we do firsthand. Some producers have taken to shooting videos for YouTube about their everyday work.”


## CONVERSATION tips


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 Relating the conversation to the consumer, whether that is on a peer-to-peer level or a comparison level, has been successful for Gerald Fitch, Oklahoma State University animal science professor.


 "I try to take it to the human side of things, pulling a calf is similar to a C-section for a woman," Fitch explains. "We do everything we can to make sure the calf gets on the ground alive and the momma is in the least amount of pain as possible. It's the same with people, in every situation basically."


 Word choice is also a big part of keeping the conversation positive, many things can have a negative connotation to the untrained ear. This includes the word slaughter, for which many now use harvest as a substitute.


 Something Fitch has pulled from teaching advocacy in his senior-level animal science course is to remove the idea that producers need to educate consumers. This mentality can discount the knowledge the consumer does have and potentially lead them to be defensive for their own sake.


 "Something producers need to remember is that agriculture is not perfect, there are always ways to improve and we want to be open to that," Fitch says. "Part of that is listening to the consumer. Through research, we can prove what is in the best interest of the animal. Overall, we need to listen to the consumer and allow science to ultimately make the decision of what the animal needs."

**"Talk from the heart, it is that simple,"**  
Fitch says. "Talking from the heart is the easiest thing about it. Every farmer and rancher can do that because they know what it is all about."

 In any industry, there are bad apples. Those within agriculture are responsible for the negative light shed on the industry. From forklifts moving live dairy cows to stomping piglets to death, Fitch says it is the responsibility of those in agriculture who know better to turn them in.

 "We cannot be afraid to call a bad egg what it is and prosecute them to protect our industry and livelihood," Fitch adds. "We try to keep the bad eggs to a minimum. If we have producers out there doing things wrong, we can no longer stand up for them."

 When all else fails, producers can cling to the fact that they do everything in their power to raise these animals to the best of their abilities in their circumstances.

 "Talk from the heart, it is that simple," Fitch says. "Talking from the heart is the easiest thing about it. Every farmer and rancher can do that because they know what it is all about." 