

Setting the PACE

by Susan Waters, director of communications and public relations



Don't Be Afraid to CATCH A WAVE

Those of you who travel much know that, on an airplane, the seat you're assigned or — maybe even more importantly — who's assigned to the seat next to you has everything to do with the success of the trip.

I've pretty much run the gamut on neighbors in flight: young and old, big and small, chatty and mute, fragrant and foul. But on a recent flight from Kansas City to Denver I had the opportunity to sit next to two 18-year-old boys who were like no one I've ever had to battle for the armrest.

I could tell two things right from the start. One, they were identical twins; and two, they weren't from anywhere in the Midwest. Their golden suntans, bleached-blond hair, collection of surfing magazines and beach-bum vocabulary quickly blew their cover. They talked faster than the plane we were sitting in could fly, and it was all the flight attendants could do to keep these antsy teenagers in their seats — and we hadn't even pushed back from the gate.

As soon as I settled into the seat, I became the focus of attention for my soon-to-be buddies, Ryan and Curt. They were from San Diego, Calif., and on their way home from a week-long visit with their grandparents at the Lake of the Ozarks. Needless to say, the slow-paced lifestyle they'd been confined to had them thirsting for surfboards and hot California sun.

We chatted back and forth while they



showed me their surfing magazines and footage, on their portable camcorder, of their fishing adventures at the lake. We had almost reached cruising altitude when Ryan asked, "So what do you do?" I knew my answer would throw these city boys for a loop, but here goes ...

"I work for the American Angus Association," I answered.

After a brief hesitation, one looked up and said, "What's that?"

I asked if they had ever heard of the beef breed *Angus* and explained that I do advertising and public relations for the people who raise Angus cattle.

"Are you cow killers?!" they shrieked. This was going to be more challenging than I thought.

Chance to EXPLAIN

I calmly and politely explained to the boys that no, we're not "cow killers." Members of our Association are beef producers, and farming or ranching is one of the most humane and noble professions a person could enter. I told them how farmers and ranchers were stewards of the land and concerned about the quality, taste and healthfulness of the products they produced.

We also talked about the fact that, yes, every "cow" had to face his or her fate some day and that McDonald's was a likely destination for the afterlife, but that beef and products from beef carcasses satisfied the needs of millions of consumers every day.

These young men had never met a farmer or rancher before, so it was hard for them to relate. I did my best to give them honest and accurate information about the beef industry. Much to my surprise, the boys were beef eaters and, after a little schooling, I had them thinking that beef producers weren't "cow killers" after all.

Probably 99% of the people on that flight wouldn't even have taken the time to talk to a couple of hyperactive teenagers

like Ryan and Curt. Instead, they probably would ask to be reseated. But I was willing to accept their perspectives on life, even though they were a little different than yours and mine, and I was inspired by the challenge of helping them understand a part of life about which they knew nothing.

I appreciated their eyes-wide-open approach to the world around them and, maybe most of all, their zest for life. A large majority of potential beef consumers in this country have a lot in common with Ryan and Curt — they know nothing about production agriculture.

Not ALONE

As beef producers, we have to realize that in order to increase demand for our products, we first have to learn to communicate with consumers — on their level. In fact, when you get down to the basics of living and working in this country, you'll begin to realize that we're all an awful lot alike.

Every day is an opportunity to educate someone with the facts about the beef industry and with the idea that beef is a delicious and healthful part of a balanced diet. If every beef producer would make an effort to visit with two people just like Ryan and Curt, we could start making a difference for agriculture and the beef industry.

We were so busy sharing stories and talking about their week on the lake that, before I knew it, the plane had landed. After making sure my friends knew how to get to their connecting flight, it was time for good-byes. Thinking back, I'm pretty sure I taught them a little about agriculture and the beef industry.

And even though I didn't learn much about surfing, they did teach me a bit about life.

Susan Waters

e-mail: swaters@angus.org

The Last WORD . . .

"Minds are like parachutes — they only work when open." — UNKNOWN