



Setting the PACE

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

Be a Boy Scout

Who knew that three little letters could change our lives forever? The letters B-S-E, short for bovine spongiform encephalopathy, sure did change things.

The announcement of the presumptive positive, and later confirmed, case of BSE last December sent the beef industry, the media, beef cattle producers and consumers into a tailspin. And even though the spin has slowed down a bit, rest assured, it's still spinning.

Weathering the storm

From an outsider's point of view, we've weathered the BSE storm fairly well. Consumer confidence in beef remains strong. "Mad cow" is no longer the top story on the nightly news, and the cattle market is on its way to recovery. However, a view from the inside might give you a little more cause for concern.

The government, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), and organizations like the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) continue to work in the trenches daily to reopen trade channels and construct a better system for identifying and handling suspect animals. The media continues to do follow-up stories, and a percentage of consumers still don't have the stomach for steak. The road to complete recovery from this issue will be long and hard. But maybe the most disappointing part is we can't say we haven't had a case of BSE in the United States anymore.

NCBA launches www.beefusa.org

The National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) launched a new interactive Web site specifically for NCBA members and other cattle producers. This new site gathers information cattle producers need on a daily, weekly or monthly basis and makes it available in one location. Topics range from governmental affairs, U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) cattle and beef market data to weather, beef checkoff information, interactive discussion boards and information on upcoming events.

This new Web site will be a valuable resource to all producers, since it provides a one-stop shop for news and information about the beef cattle business. Staying current on the latest information is a critical part of being an effective spokesperson for the beef industry and for agriculture.



On a positive note, the beef industry was fortunate that USDA and NCBA were ready when crisis hit. Announcements were made, news conferences were scheduled and e-mail servers hummed, distributing the facts as they surfaced. We had a plan, and that plan worked to the benefit of everyone involved — from the farm to the retail and foodservice sectors. Without a crisis management plan in place and a well-informed team to carry it out, our industry would have suffered greater losses and a longer recovery. In this case, living by the Boy Scouts of America motto, *Be Prepared*, sure paid off.

The pressure is still on

Even though this issue is now largely in the hands of professionals, there are still ways that you, the grassroots producer, can help.

Since the BSE story broke, many producers are finding news reporters at their doors. Producers are the hands-on, local voice from whom consumers want to hear about the safety of their food. Using them as a credible source adds a unique angle and local importance to the story. However, being interviewed by a reporter can be a nerve-racking and intimidating experience. The key to success includes the Boy Scouts motto — *Be Prepared*.

Here are some tips:

► **First, get the facts.** Ask who the reporter is, who they work for, what they want to talk about, when the story deadline is, and when you can call them back. You don't have to talk with reporters the moment they call — they generally understand that you will need to call them back. But they do have deadlines and will expect you to get back with them quickly. Use the extra time to get the answers you'll need and outline

some talking points. If you don't feel comfortable talking with them, refer them to a state or national cattle industry organization. It's a good idea to let a state or national organization you're affiliated with know you are doing the interview. They may have information that would be helpful.

- **Focus on your message.** Reporters can sometimes stray from the issue. Select three main points you want to get across and repeat them throughout the interview. As much as possible, maintain control of the direction of the interview by returning to your main message. Use the basic technique of briefly answering the reporter's question, even if the answer is a simple "yes" or "no," and then bridge to one of your prepared messages.
- **Never speculate.** Focus on the facts, and don't allow reporters to lead you into speculation, conjecture or places where you don't want to go. It is perfectly acceptable to tell a reporter, "I don't know the answer to that, but I will find the answer and get back to you." Then get the reporter's contact information and get back to them as soon as possible.
- **Take advantage of the experts.** There is a lot of good information available. Direct reporters to places they can find it, including your local cattle or beef association, NCBA, and Web sites like www.bseinfo.org or www.usda.gov.
- **Be positive.** You can set the tone of the article or interview by your attitude. Avoid repeating negative language, and look for ways to bridge the discussion to positive messages, for example, "The United States has the safest beef supply in the world."
- **Be prepared.** Last, but certainly not least, being prepared is the key to a successful interview and to communicating the most positive, factual message to the media. Take the time to do your homework. It will pay off in the end.

Susan

E-MAIL: srhode@angus.org

The Last WORD...

**The will to win is important,
but the will to prepare is vital.**

— *Joe Paterno*