

Managing the Media



Befriending local TV, radio and newspaper resources could be the beef industry's best tactic for garnering consumer support.

by *Kindra Gordon*

Admittedly, the media are not often viewed as a friend of the beef industry or agriculture in general. When bad news befalls the industry — such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) scares, *E. coli* outbreaks or environmental land use issues — the prime-time television programs and big city newspaper headlines often seem bent on making farmers, ranchers and feeders appear to be the bad guys.

But Barb Wilkinson, director of communications with the Colorado Livestock Association, says the media do not have to be the monster. Instead, she advocates that livestock producers be proactive about working with the media in their local communities, and says that as a result, ranchers can positively influence medias' message.

Wilkinson previously worked with the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) in coordinating the Myth Stoppers program in the 1990s. From that experience she has seen grassroots efforts be very effective.

"The goal of that program was to get producers comfortable with writing letters to the editor, media interviews and talking to groups," she explains. "Once people were trained, they were asked to do 12 positive

actions for the industry during the next year and report their efforts so we could monitor the impact."

Wilkinson says that by 1998, it was estimated that Myth Stoppers trainees reached more than 341 million people.

Promote positive messages

Wilkinson says the message you need to share is simply telling people what you do every day — how you raise your crops and cattle and care for the land. "As we've moved so many generations away from the farm, there's a lot of curiosity. Consumers are concerned about having a safe, wholesome product, and we need to reassure them of what we are doing to make their product safe," she says.

She adds, "There is a newspaper every day and a 10 o'clock news every night, whether anything newsworthy happens or not. The challenge for the media is finding sources and stories." Thus, she says, by getting to know your local news media and inviting them to ag industry events, they are more likely to feature positive stories and give the public a chance to learn about farmers and ranchers.

Additionally, Wilkinson says working with the media can be a valuable tool to educate and influence important groups of

people across time. "City councils and elected officials all pay attention to the news," Wilkinson points out. By having positive ag messages portrayed, there is another avenue to influence those decision makers.

Media opportunities

So how do you make friends with the media? Wilkinson says to start by simply stopping in and introducing yourself to the local newspaper editor or TV or radio reporter. She suggests going to lunch with them so they can get to know you and feel comfortable contacting you for a comment in the future.

After that, Wilkinson recommends regularly inviting media personnel to events that you are involved with — be it a school visit, an ag-related tour or workshop, and even annual conventions. "Invite the media to your association meetings, especially when you elect officers or have a special speaker," Wilkinson says. "Sometimes we may think it's not an important activity because it is such a regular part of our routine, but the media may see it as a newsworthy story."

Taylor Brown, a farm broadcaster with the Northern Ag Network based in Billings, Mont., also encourages livestock producers to take the initiative in working with their local media. He suggests following the national news on industry issues, then helping local media find local sources that provide your viewpoint. Even if you simply help the media

set up places to get ag-related video footage, they'll be grateful to you, he says.

Brown also suggests including local media on mailing lists for your local or state newsletter, press releases, listings of upcoming events, Web sites, and contact information for leadership in your organization, so they have ag-friendly sources readily available.

Another angle is to approach the media around special events and holidays such as National Ag Day, Farm Safety Week or Memorial Day weekend, when the industry kicks off its annual summer grilling campaign.

"You can hand-deliver promotional materials for these events to the media and then offer to be a source to put a local spin on it," Wilkinson says. "Use those days to work with the media and tell what ag means to your community."

Make it a priority

Most importantly, Wilkinson says people in the livestock industry need to make working with the media a priority. "It is hard to ask busy people to do more. But it is a necessity for the future of our industry, and producers need to make the time to do this," she says.

"We need to be ready and willing to speak up about our issues," Wilkinson says, and she credits involvement in livestock associations and state organizations as a valuable resource to help producers stay informed about those issues. She advises young people planning careers in agriculture to enhance their communication skills through speech and writing classes.

Sid Viebrock, former president of the Washington Cattlemen's Association (WCA), recommends that producers practice their abilities to be spokespersons for the industry. Viebrock was president of the WCA when the Dec. 23, 2003, announcement was made that a Holstein cow with BSE was identified in Washington state.

He says that after the news broke, the media wanted a producer response, so his association had to act quickly. There wasn't time to conduct a media training session, but the state association wanted members to be informed and present a unified message when talking to the media. So, shortly after Christmas, Viebrock hosted a conference call with his executive board, and talking points were developed for members to work from.

He says, "Our goal with the talking points was to keep them simple and avoid creating opportunities for the media to pressure

producers into talking about things that they didn't want to or didn't feel comfortable with.

"Our message was that we wanted the public to know that the system worked. Most importantly, we emphasized that the American beef supply is safe, and that BSE in cattle and CJD (Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease) in humans is a minimal risk. We also wanted the public to know that our message was truthful and factual," Viebrock adds.

From the experience, Viebrock says, "Media training of producer members is extremely invaluable." He also emphasizes the importance of having numerous producers participate in media training in advance so they can be spokespeople for the industry in the event of a crisis.

Additionally, as future generations have less connection and understanding for agriculture, Wilkinson says it will become even more critically important to tell ag's stories. "We can do ourselves a lot of good if we can logically present our story. The bottom line is that we must put a face on the industry and show people, 'here is the producer behind the beef that's on your table.'"

