

Personal Experiences Showcase Beef Industry

Checkoff funded farm-to-fork tours reach key audiences, improve knowledge and shift perceptions about the beef industry.

by **Walt Barnhart**, National Cattlemen's Beef Association

Our communications world today is dominated by computers, iPhones, tablets and other forms of impersonal contact. Checkoff-funded farm-to-fork tours conducted by state beef councils, however, have shown that more face-to-face forms of interaction are a valuable tool in shifting perceptions about the beef industry.

State beef council managers who have been active in farm-to-fork tours during the past decade are enthusiastic about the ability of the tours to improve knowledge of and move attitudes about the industry. Ashley Hughes, executive director of the Florida Beef Council (FBC), says direct engagement through person-to-person contact is a great way to shift perceptions.

"It's the chance to give influencers firsthand experience in beef production, and allow them to network with producers themselves," she says. "They've never seen this science-based information in person, or experienced the process. They have no idea, for example, that there is so much involved with the care of animals, or in the production of beef."

"Tour participants get to shake the hand of a producer, to talk to their family, to

walk through their fields and their ranch," says Jackie Madill, director of consumer information for the Washington State Beef Commission (WSBC). "By conducting these tours, we're helping to put a face on the industry itself. That experience is invaluable."

"It's a lot easier to change someone's mind when they're right there on the farm," according to Angie Horkan, director of marketing for the Wisconsin Beef Council. "It's just a more effective way of sharing information.

"Tour participants realize that producers are just like them," adds Horkan. "They have families, concerns and are committed to what they do."

The producer's operation is often multi-generational, and this too connotes a positive message. "We can talk about stewardship and taking care of the land and animals, and making maximum utilization of the feed," Horkan says. "They understand the very human, commonsense, practical approaches taken by these producers."

"This is one of the best returns on investment in the checkoff," according to Hughes. "We're shifting opinions about our industry and producing incredible results.

Attitudes have significantly changed."

Adam Wegner, director of marketing for the Nebraska Beef Council (NBC), agrees.

"The time commitment is priceless, because when attendees go on these tours they become advocates for the industry. They can help tell the positive story for us," he says. "It pays off for years and years down the road."

Not for everyone

Because they're so effective, any consumer would benefit from these checkoff-funded farm-to-fork tours. Yet most of the time, they aren't for everyone.

"We often say we would love to take every single beef-eating Washington consumer on one of these tours, but that's obviously impossible," says Madill. "Because we don't have an unlimited budget, we have very targeted audiences."

Wegner says from the beginning the NBC has focused on influencer targets as participants in Nebraska tour events. "They have the best opportunities to share their experiences with other people," he says. For most state councils these individuals

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include chefs, bloggers, retail meat managers, dietitians, culinary instructors and students.

Each tour group in Nebraska involves about 20-25 people, Wegner says. “We figure that’s the most efficient size of group,” he says, factoring in budgets and tour logistics. In the state of Washington they have found that 30-35 people is “the optimum number to take to have quality, one-on-one conversations,” says Madill.

According to Nikki Richardson, who helps coordinate national farm-to-fork tours on behalf of the Beef Checkoff Program, the number on a tour is not nearly as important as the content.

“We stress quality over quantity,” she says. “If you don’t have the time to follow up and foster a relationship, then you’re taking too many people.

“We try to take the right people on these events — ones who will influence their followers,” says Richardson, who is director of reputation management at the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), a beef checkoff contractor. She says tours coordinated nationally are referred to as “production immersion experiences,” because they give participants full exposure to the working of the beef cycle.

“These on-the-ground events are the most effective way to show how beef is raised,” she

says. “It’s much more impactful than a fact sheet, for example, a person may or may not read.”

Significant perception changes

Surveys conducted both pre- and posttours support that view. For instance, a survey of participants in a beef checkoff-funded tour coordinated at the national level showed that 92% of participants before the tour were somewhat or very concerned about humane treatment of cattle, and 8% were somewhat or very concerned afterward. Eighty two percent were somewhat or very concerned about environmental impact pretour, and 25% were afterward.

States, too, conduct these kinds of surveys to assess their impact, and have demonstrated similar results. In one tour in Wisconsin in May 2016, two of 19 tour participants thought themselves knowledgeable or somewhat knowledgeable about raising cattle. After the tour, 14 of the participants knew cattle raising well or somewhat well.

Many people have gone on these kinds of tours in states during the past decade. However, tour participation isn’t measured in attendance, and the program doesn’t stop when the tour bus finishes its route.

Maximizing reach

According to Richardson, getting the right influencers to attend the tours is just the first step. “It’s not a one and done,” she says. “If we do a good job, these people continue to use the beef industry as a resource, and they carry the impact much further than we could as third-party advocates.”

Reach is extended through social media. “Participants share their own experiences, pictures and quotes, and these spread all over the country very quickly,” says Hughes.

Madill says the Washington program is starting to focus more on lifestyle, food and “mommy” bloggers.

“Those on the tours can connect the dots and share their story for us,” she says. “In one way, it’s creating an army of beef soldiers for us.

“Our goal isn’t just to change opinion,” she adds. “It’s to give these influencers an experience that would influence how they share their stories with those they reach. These tours provide an extremely effective method of doing that.”

Benefits to producer participants

Horkan says they choose a variety of operations and beef producers from all over the state to share the beef industry’s message.

“It’s been very valuable to show producers

Angus tours

As part of the checkoff-funded farm-to-fork tours, Angie Horkan, director of marketing for the Wisconsin Beef Council and an Angus producer with her family at Onion Hollow Angus, says there are Angus producers throughout the state who are eager to open their gates to tour groups.

“The Wisconsin Beef Council invites food and nutrition influencers (chefs, foodservice industry personnel, culinary students, dietitians, dietetic students and other health industry personnel, media and bloggers) on our farm-to-fork tours, and we have a pretour and a posttour survey to help us know what we’re doing well and what we need to change,” Horkan says. “We recently hosted a tour for the foodservice and nutrition staff for the Eau Claire area Mayo Clinic.”

Horkan says tours have been hosted by Angus operations since 2011, and the most recent tours included S&R Angus, owned and operated by the Radcliffe family in Schofield; K-Lund Angus, Woodville; and Mindemann Farms, owned and operated by Rick and Leslie Mindemann in Sullivan. Attendees at S&R were University of Wisconsin–Steven’s Point dietetic students. In addition to the farm, the tour visited Renee Radcliffe’s family’s meat market, Country Fresh Meats, which is currently operated by her brother, Matthew Bayer, who is also in the Angus business.

Radcliffe says she enjoyed hosting the tour and would definitely do it again. Though the students who toured their operation were from a school only 30 miles away, she says none of them had actually been to a farm that raised cattle for beef, and they were not familiar with the concept of purebred cattle.

“I believe that people actually coming to a working farm was the most successful and best received thing about the tour,” Radcliffe

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says. “They had a lot of questions about the technologies used in cattle production, such as artificial insemination, embryo transfer, and the performance and ultrasound data used in decision making.”

Because the tour they hosted was in September, they had cattle out on pasture, and while she says their pasture is not easily accessible, the group did get to see their show cattle at the home place. Because some in the group believed all beef cattle were kept in confinement, she was happy to talk about their pastured cattle

that this is what their checkoff dollars are doing,” she says. “The producers that get involved want to do it again. They’re proud of their operations.”

As Wegner puts it, “They see it as a great way to tell their story.”

That isn’t always easy, says Richardson.

“The tours often open up our industry to some tough conversations,” she says, “but [the questions] represent the reality we’re in. That’s beneficial. We need to hear what’s on their minds.”

According to Hughes, producers chosen to participate are carefully selected in a range of specialties. They also reach out to the University of Florida to provide educators who are familiar with the industry.

“We want to give [tour participants] not just one experience, but experiences in a wide range of industry segments,” she says.

Wegner says his organization looks for “ag leaders who are willing to spend the time with the groups and whose operations are easily accessible.”

It’s important that the visits not be too disruptive to regular ranch operations, he adds

A partnership

Farm-to-fork tours help build consumer trust in beef and beef production, which is one of four core strategies of the Beef Industry 2016-2020 Long Range Plan. Coordination between state beef councils

and the national beef checkoff teams provide cooperative momentum toward that goal.

For instance, checkoff-funded experts at the national level often assist state tour efforts in a number of ways. Beef-checkoff-funded chef Dave Zino often will attend tours to deliver culinary instruction and insights, and Bridget Wasser, NCBA executive director of meat science and technology, sometimes shares information on meat cutting and cuts, for example.

State beef councils also get assistance from the national checkoff team in other ways, getting help in identifying appropriate tour participants, or providing spokesperson training for producers, developing materials and securing correct checkoff-funded information for delivery to appropriate audiences.

“We are really plugged into what’s going on nationally, and try to work together to make it all work,” says Madill. For tours conducted by the national-checkoff-funded team, beef councils in states where the tours will be hosted give critical assistance and guidance. The Federation of State Beef Councils has also supported several state beef-council-conducted tours financially.

Future of program

“There will always be a place for in-person production experiences,” says Richardson. Nevertheless, the industry is building on these kinds of events to produce other types

of communications programs, such as virtual experiences via video.

“It can help us reach people who aren’t able to go on a tour,” Richardson says, “or who are in a geographical area of the country where one or another segment of the beef industry isn’t represented.

“There are only a couple of places we can go where we’re able to show the entire beef life cycle,” she says. “We always try to emphasize there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to raising cattle.”

Richardson says the checkoff is always trying to improve on ways of getting the right production images to the right people at the right time. Video shot in Nebraska and Texas in 2014 and 2015 is helping provide images that share a view of cattle production with consumers. Some of these images and additional information can be found on <https://FactsAboutBeef.com>.

Because of the value of face-to-face communications, however, the production immersion experiences will be at the very core of the program.

“It’s an exercise in transparency,” says Richardson. “Those of us who work for state beef councils and the Beef Checkoff Program can do a lot to help gather the information, coordinate the events and manage the followup. But these firsthand visits and non-scripted conversations allow the producers themselves to be the storytellers about how beef is raised.”

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and explain the concept of show cattle, and let them view them “up close and personally.”

While she thought the tour was a great opportunity for all involved, she says she believes the participants enjoyed coming to the farm and having their questions answered by someone working with cattle on a day-to-day basis.

“I think the one-on-one interaction with people who consume our product was the most enjoyable part for me,” Radcliffe says.

Horkan says the Waukesha County Technical College culinary students and their instructors were on the farm tour that visited the Mindemann’s operation, though Rick Mindemann adds that, in addition to the farm-to-fork tours, they have hosted several farm tours that included advertising agencies and foreign contingencies. Mindemann says a favorite topic during the tours is how beef is produced in the cow-calf operation and in the chain of businesses it takes to get it from their farm to the consumer.

“Most people don’t think about the scientific aspects of production that include nutrition, health care and reproduction, so that generates lots of questions,” Mindemann says. “In targeting genetic improvement in breeding stock, not all animals produced here meet our standards, so some end up in local markets as freezer beef,” he explains. “This adds to our discussion of how genetic selection benefits the ‘fork’ side.”

When asked if there is a downside to hosting farm tours, Mindemann says there isn’t one. Other than clarifying misinformation presented by activist groups and some media sources, Mindemann says they consider themselves educators, so all questions are good questions.

“It’s our job to generate conversation on all aspects of the beef industry and present the facts,” Mindemann says. “Of course, we always prefer to have good weather for a tour, but we’re ready rain or shine.”

He says having a variety of cattle age groups around the barn can be a plus, but everything on their operation is a close walk, so any time is a good time for them to host a tour. The one addition to their farm tours Mindemann would add is serving samples of slow-cooked Angus pot roast, a family favorite.

Horkan says the answers on the posttour surveys are almost always positive. She shared a few answers from attendees when asked what they liked best about the tour and what could have made it better.

- ▶ “Farmers really care about what they do and how it affects the animal and the consumer. They do everything they can to provide a safe product for the consumer.”
- ▶ “I would highly recommend the tour. I think it is beneficial to anyone who is working in the food or healthcare industry as there are so many misconceptions flying around. Being able to see the passion the farmers exhibit, as well as hear their side of the story was truly informative.”
- ▶ “It was a great experience that promoted a lot of respect for farmers. Everyone was very knowledgeable and gave us straight answers and good information.”

— by Linda Robbins, assistant editor