

Open the Gate, Host a Tour

Beef industry tours can bridge the gap between producers and consumers.

by Kindra Gordon



Two out of three American consumers do not personally know a farmer or rancher, according to the findings of a recent beef checkoff-funded research study.

“This really shows the disconnect that exists between consumers and the people who produce their food. Oftentimes that disconnect results in a lack of understanding and, in some cases, an acceptance of misinformation about food production and agricultural practices,” says Jennifer Stolp, who manages issues communication for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA).

Stolp suggests hosting a beef tour can be a powerful way for cattle producers to put a face on the industry and correct misconceptions consumers and policymakers may have.

“A tour allows participants to witness cattle care, interact with beef producers and ask questions,” says Stolp, which goes a long way toward creating transparency for the industry.

NCBA recently compiled a best practices guide for producer organizations or individual producers interested in hosting a beef industry tour. Here are some of the

parameters to consider if you are thinking of opening your farm or ranch gate:

Determine the scope and audience for the tour. Consider what segment of the beef production process the tour will showcase to attendees. Stolp says you may choose to feature a select segment, such as a single visit to a cow-calf operation, or highlight the entire chain from pasture to plate with multiple tour stops.

To help identify the focus for your tour, Stolp says it is important to consider the target audience and what they might be interested in. To this point, she adds that



rather than offering a general tour for the public, aim to engage key consumer influencers. These are people who ultimately will influence a broader group of consumers.

Examples might include youth gatekeepers such as teachers, coaches and moms; health professionals such as doctors, dietitians and nutritionists; retail and foodservice directors and particularly meatcase managers; culinary professionals and local “foodies;” elected officials and politicians; community leaders and civic groups; as well as local, regional or state media.

Prepare the message. Prior to the tour, it’s critically important that the tour hosts know what key messages they plan to share with the audience and that they are prepared to answer a variety of questions, emphasizes Stolp.

She suggests asking yourself what things or activities the audience needs to see and do on the tour to best demonstrate how animals are kept healthy, safe and secure so consumers can enjoy a safe, wholesome and healthy product.

She notes that beef producers and their family members (or staff) are the most credible tour leaders. However, “experts” can provide supplemental information to the tour – such as a university animal care specialist for discussing animal handling or a veterinarian for discussing animal health programs.

As a guideline for a tour “agenda,” Stolp suggests the following:

- ▶ Welcome guests and thank them for coming.
- ▶ Give an overview of what they are going to see and experience during the tour.
- ▶ Have the producer introduce himself/herself and the operation. Include what kind of operation it is (number of cattle, breed, etc.), if it is a family entity and, if so, how many years it has been operating as well as how many family members work on the farm/ranch or feedlot.
- ▶ Discuss how cattle are raised from the

When’s the best time to host a tour?

Summer and early fall are typically cited as the best times of the year to host a beef tour, often because the weather is the most cooperative.

Other things to consider as you pick the date for your event:

- ▶ What will the operation look like during that month?
- ▶ Is your audience available? For instance, teachers would only be available in the summer, and politicians might be more available in the fall.
- ▶ Are there conferences or meetings that may bring target attendees to the area that you could piggyback?
- ▶ Similarly, is there a special event that would enable you to capitalize on surrounding publicity?

farm/ranch to the market.

- ▶ Show and/or talk about the feeding and water facilities and pasture management. Show what cattle are fed. The ingredients can be a good visual to include.
- ▶ Show and/or talk about fencing and housing.
- ▶ Show and/or talk about proper moving and handling of cattle.
- ▶ Talk about recordkeeping practices.
- ▶ Give an overview of disease prevention practices and the health care program.
- ▶ Show and/or describe any conservation practices in place.
- ▶ Discuss what type of marketing program is used.
- ▶ To conclude the tour, reiterate what the audience has seen and experienced. Thank the group again for their participation and offer to answer questions or take comments. Additionally, make sure the participants have your contact information for future questions or opportunities.

Details to consider. Just like any event, planning every detail will be key to hosting a successful tour. Stolp offers these factors to consider.

When inviting guests, focus on what they will gain from the experience instead of what you want to tell them. Some examples might include pitching the tour as a networking opportunity for professionals, providing a component to your tour that will bring publicity to guests and their businesses, offering take-home classroom materials or recipes and fact sheets, arranging to have a sought-after expert as a guest speaker, or highlighting a special beef meal or snack that will be part of the event. Also, when inviting guests, make sure they understand to dress appropriately (i.e., for outside conditions) and to wear sturdy shoes that may get dirty.

Determine a timeline for the tour and stick to it. If it’s a one-stop tour, two hours is a good rule of thumb for the visit. If the tour will travel to multiple locations, eight hours should be the maximum time allotted for a full-day tour. This includes travel times, tour

New Mexico’s efforts to take consumers from gate-to-plate

The New Mexico Beef Council is committed to showcasing all aspects of the beef industry with its Gate-to-Plate Beef Tour. Hosted every other year and highlighting different regions of New Mexico, the two-day bus tour includes an audience of media folk, influential political leaders, food industry leaders, and others interested in learning about beef production in New Mexico. Participants are given a crash course in a gamut of subjects — from beef grading and beef value cuts to beef safety.

Angus producer Tammy Ogilvie of the U Bar Ranch at Silver City, N.M., has been a part of the tour in the past and says, “Hosting a tour allows you to tell your story, and beef producers have a positive story to tell.”

Ogilvie points out that a ranch tour provides an opportunity to talk about everything from conservation practices to protect wildlife habitats to how landowners contribute to the county tax base.

“The majority of people just want to know about what you do and want you to be successful and sincere,” says Ogilvie.

Ogilvie encourages others to host ranch tours as well.

“It takes work and courage,” she admits, but adds, “These tours can positively affect public perception and circumvent negative media exposure. It’s a way to share the real story.”

For more about the New Mexico Gate-to-Plate Tour, contact New Mexico Beef Council executive director Dina Chacon-Reitzel at dinareitzel@nmbeef.com or call 505-841-9407.



stops, meals, etc. Stolp says it is imperative to keep the audience’s needs in mind.

Keep group size in mind for the tour. Make sure everyone can see and hear what is being said.

Be sure to inquire about insurance coverage for liability issues that may result from an accident on the tour. Some insurance companies offer policies for a one-day event.

Keep biosecurity in mind. Particularly if the tour includes international guests, use precautions to keep visitors away from animals and equipment.

