

dairy cows were forced to stand for 24 hours a day and be milked.”

It was this kind of frustration and misperception that Farmers Fight aimed to listen to and hopefully dispel.

Other tools

Parish, Dillon and Pilger say there are many tools to help bridge the gap between consumers and agricultural producers. Programs like 4-H and FFA bring agriculture in the classroom with a hands-on and proactive approach. However, there are other avenues.

They suggest advocacy means such as the Masters of Beef Advocacy program or using social media, like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, explains Dillon. These digital methods of connection allow your message to reach those you may have never met.

These are powerful tools and have been used in successful ways already, like the Peterson Brothers in Kansas with their videos or Ryan Goodman, a graduate student from Arkansas, with his blogs. The Petersons' video "I'm Farming and I Grow It" has had more than 8 million views on YouTube, while their "Farmer Style" video has had more than 11 million views. Goodman hosts both his own personal blogs (*AgricultureProud.com* and *www.arranchhand.blogspot.com*) and contributes to CNN's food blog "Eatocracy," which is available at <http://eatocracy.cnn.com/>. Both of these examples have been brought to the national stage to tell their story because of social media.

"Social media is not the future. Social media



PHOTO BY KASEY MILLER

► From left, Jasmine Dillon, Victoria Pilger and Mason Parish are three of the founders of the Farmers Fight effort, through which 220 Texas A&M University students have been trained to tell agriculture's story by engaging in conversations about all sectors of agriculture.

is a tool for today. It's what we're using right now to reach out to people," asserts Dillon.

The future

The three students explain that their vision of the future of agriculture included all industry actions being justifiable to the public, conversations being started by industry leaders and, finally, everyone in the industry taking proactive action.

Unfortunately, everyone has seen an example of a news story that illustrates animal abuse on a farm, and Parish says that the goal of Farmers Fight is to create more justifiable means of production practices and being able to communicate those practices.

"Every time one negative article or negative video is released on YouTube, that takes away the positive impact that 100 producers, or 100 advocates, do each and every day. We as an industry have to make sure that we start to hold each other accountable," says Parish. He

grants that no one is perfect and admits that all of us probably have an incidence on our own operation that could be misconstrued if caught on video.

"We as producers must hold each other accountable, but we also must be sure that we justify every action that we do, so that if somebody comes in with a camera, they can, first off, not feel as if we are inappropriately misleading them or ruining their trust, but also make sure that we can explain it," he notes.

He suggests performing individual audits that have been created by universities and industry organizations so that every action can be justified.

Another big issue is being proactive, they say. Dillon gives the example of Chef Jamie Oliver's YouTube video about ammonia in beef a full year before the "pink slime" national media debacle, but no one in the beef industry acted.

"Where were we? We didn't even give ourselves the chance to fail, because we didn't act in the first place," she says.

The Farmers Fight group created a spoken word video entitled *Farmers Fight — Stand Up* to reach more urban audiences. It can be viewed at www.youtube.com/watch?v=yFoGib8AfZo.

The Farmers Fight group plans to continue its efforts with another advocate conference in March of 2013, passing out more coloring books in April, another campus connection event April 11 (themed 4-1-1) and a national conference Oct. 4-5 to share ideas with other student advocacy groups nationwide.

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Ready to Advocate

The Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program offered through the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) has trained nearly 4,000 graduates from 48 states since it was launched three-and-a-half years ago. Daren Williams, who serves as executive director of communications for NCBA and oversees the MBA program, says the success of the program has exceeded his expectations.

Williams provided an update on the MBA program during the International Livestock Congress in Denver Jan. 15. He noted that Maine and Alaska are the only two states that have not yet had an individual complete the MBA training.

Williams explained that the MBA program was created in late 2009 to "put a face on agriculture" by developing a grassroots network of beef enthusiasts who would help share positive messages about the beef industry.

The program includes six self-study online courses that cover topics including beef nutrition, how beef is produced, beef safety and the beef checkoff. With this training, MBA graduates can be better prepared to have conversations with others about the positive aspects of beef.

Williams said, "It is mind-boggling some of the questions we get from mainstream media and consumers today, and we (the beef industry) have got to be the ones out there answering their questions."



He continued, "When they go online and do a Google search, we need to be the ones to answer their questions."

Williams reported that MBA graduates are making that happen through a grassroots effort — from talking one-on-one to people, writing editorials to local publications, responding to comments posted online, as well as through individual blogs that tout the industry.

As two examples, Williams pointed to Debbie Lyons-Blythe, an Angus producer from Kansas, and Anne Burkholder, who operates a cattle feedyard in Nebraska. Both women have created their own beef-related blogs — *Life on a Kansas Cattle Ranch* and *Feedyard Foodie*, respectively — and have also garnered national media attention for their roles in helping everyday consumers better understand the beef industry.

"We do a great job talking to each other," he said, "but we've got to reach beyond the choir."

Consumers want to know they can trust their food, Williams said. "You build trust by building relationships, and relationships are built through conversations."

To learn more about the Masters of Beef Advocacy program visit www.beef.org/MBA. Find Blythe's blog at: <http://kansascattleranch.blogspot.com/> and Burkholder's at <http://feedyardfoodie.wordpress.com/>.

— Kindra Gordon