

The *Tipping Point* for

Consumer concerns over animal welfare issues are reshaping the beef industry's future.

by *Kindra Gordon*

The “tipping point” is a term used to define a critical point in an evolving situation that leads to a new and irreversible development. In other words, it is a change that may suddenly change everything. Author Malcolm Gladwell wrote about the phenomenon of tipping points in our society in his best-selling book simply titled, “The Tipping Point.”

Now, that term is finding its way into the beef industry, with specific regard to animal welfare issues.

Renowned livestock handling specialist and Colorado State University faculty member Temple Grandin says, “2008 was a big animal welfare tipping point.” She cites the passage of Proposition 2 in California relating to standards for confining farm animals and the video footage of animal abuse at Westland/Hallmark as two major events that are changing the future for the beef industry.

Likewise, Tom Field, executive director of producer education with the National

Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), says, “We [the beef industry] are approaching a tipping point.”

He bases his comment on the erosion of consumer trust in the beef industry — and the lack of understanding consumers have about where their food comes from. “It stuns me how many questions we [at] NCBA answer every day about myths about animal ag,” Field adds.

Time to speak up

Grandin and Field both advocate that beef producers need to recognize this change is occurring and start doing a better job of communicating and connecting with consumers.

“The industry has done a lousy job of communicating with the public. And, unfortunately, the public is seeing only the bad things, and we've got to change that. Good things are happening, and we've got to communicate with the public ... but it can't be fluff,” Grandin says.

“We cannot survive as a food-producing nation if we allow animal agriculture to remain in a defensive position,” Field adds. Instead, he says producers within the beef industry need to share the beef industry's story with consumers and, by doing so, start better directing the industry's future.

“And here is the good news from the perspective of the beef industry: We have a great experience and great story to share with the world's consumers,” he adds.

As the beef industry prepares for a new relationship with consumers, Field says it is essential for producers to recognize that the consumer matters.

He points out that the food industry has become consumer-driven and has invited consumers into decision-making. Thus, he says, “Our daily challenge is to answer the question, ‘What do they want?’”

Additionally, Field emphasizes, “Food is an emotional purchase. Consumers don't function on a rational scientific level. ... We have to accept this reality. Consumers purchase with their hearts as much as with their heads — maybe more so.”

He lists food safety, cost, wellness and well-being as some of the factors important to consumers.

“Consumers are time-crunched, health-focused and brand value-driven. ... They are security-conscious, supply-chain-educated, and want accountability,” Fields says. “These



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Animal Agriculture?

are pressure points that drive choices.”

Most importantly for the beef industry, Field says, consumers care about the story behind the products they consume.

“That caring isn’t about the practices used; it’s more about if they feel connected to those who produce the food they consume,” he says.

“It’s not just about the product anymore. It’s also the process it took to create the product. And then it’s about the experience,” Field says.

Documentation part of new process

Both Field and Grandin believe that documentation by beef producers of their animal handling procedures — and then third-party audits to verify those standards — is something consumers want to hear about.

“It’s no longer enough to say, ‘Here is what we do; trust us.’ Now producers have to say, ‘Here’s what we do; trust us because here is the report that verifies it.’ That buys us consumer trust,” Field says.

Grandin shares how she worked with McDonald’s Corp. more than 10 years ago to implement animal handling and auditing practices with their beef suppliers. Today, not only is the corporate world asking for documentation (Field reports that many national retailers and foodservice companies are considering the development of standards for animal well-being), but the everyday consumer wants it for the retail beef they buy, as well.

While documentation and auditing may be relatively new processes for beef producers, the beef quality practices behind them are already fairly standard in the beef industry. “This is not new stuff,” Field assures beef producers. “The practices are all relatively simple and in place in the industry — but we must adopt them, document them, and then tell our story.”

Grandin adds, “Auditing should look at things that can be directly observed.” But she adds that it takes constant vigilance by ranches and feedyards.

Field cites the industry’s Code of Cattle Care, Beef Quality Assurance (BQA), and Feedyard and Stocker Assessment programs and, more recently, the Master Cattle Transporter Guide as examples of practices that must be documented.

“All of these things move us in the right direction ... and all are principles we’ve

known about for a long time,” he says. “The industry has set the standard; now we must deliver on it.”

He adds, “Any person who willfully mistreats animals must not be tolerated by the industry.”

Field says that through documentation of animal handling, the industry can also begin to create benchmarking that can be used for future trend analysis.

Real stories

Field says the bottom line is that the beef industry must recapture the image around its industry.

“We need to back the science up with stories of farmers and ranchers. ... At the end of the day we must be able to connect the pieces from production to transport, so

the story we tell consumers is the best.”

Grandin agrees. “The majority of cattle are handled well, the problem is most of the public doesn’t know about it,” she says. “It is time for real farmers and ranchers to get on the road and be real.”

Looking forward, Field says, NCBA plans to take the issue of animal welfare to a new level. He says NCBA’s future efforts will help “provide a lot more clarity to consumers about how our industry behaves.”

And, ultimately, Field says, the aim is to ensure that animal ag survives in this country and abroad. “I’m hopeful on issues of environmental management and animal welfare. As an industry, we need to do the right thing and document the right thing,” he concludes.



Additional issues for the beef industry

As the beef industry retools itself to meet future consumer demand, National Cattlemen’s Beef Association’s (NCBA’s) Tom Field and animal-handling expert Temple Grandin point out additional issues to consider:

Field acknowledges that another “gorilla in the room” when it comes to pleasing consumers is the industrialization and concentration within the beef industry.

“We cannot deny the concentration in this industry,” he says, pointing out that it exists at every level of the food chain — from cow-calf to feedlot to packer to supermarket to foodservice and restaurants.

“That’s real,” he says, but he suggests that if consumers can connect with real producers, they may gain a better understanding of why the beef industry operates as it does.

He also suggests that the door is open for differentiating beef products.

“Differentiation of product is still the future for our members of NCBA. We have to help find new markets, help producers market what they do produce and find profitable ways to gain access to markets,” he says.

Field says, “It’s not a one-size-fits-all game ... some consumers want taste and story, some want price, taste and convenience. I don’t think we will ever produce one beef product for all consumers. It’s kind of like athletic shoes and why Nike has figured out how to make so many different styles.”

He adds, “We know with increased verification, management and telling beef’s story, we can increase the value of the product beyond that commodity level.”

Field’s challenge to the beef industry is this: “Much of the last decade the beef industry has been relatively profitable — but that often leads to complacency, and that doesn’t work. It gets you in trouble. We (the industry) have to get out on the cutting edge.”

One of Grandin’s biggest concerns for the future with regard to animal welfare is overloading the animal’s biology. “Yes, you can make animals produce more and more, but there is a tipping point when animals fall apart,” she says. “We’ve seen examples of animals with super productivity in the dairy, poultry, hog and now beef industries. But we need to avoid biological system overload through excess focus on single-trait selection.”

As an example, she cites a 2006 report in the *Journal of Dairy Science* that says 24.6% of dairy cows are lame. How did this happen? Grandin blames it on bad culling management and, she says, “It reflects on other industries, too.”

Her challenge to producers is to use balanced genetic selection and culling criteria. “The single-most-important issue [with regard to animal welfare] is having an animal that is fit for transport,” she concludes. “Select breeding stock with sound feet and legs.”