

'We Care; We're Capable'



As consumer interest in the topic of animal welfare mounts, the livestock industry must better demonstrate and communicate animal care practices.

by **Kindra Gordon**

A common mantra for business success is to “give the customer what they want.” And today in the food industry, the customer wants to know where their food comes from.

This includes understanding that the product they are eating was raised — and harvested — safely and humanely. The term “animal welfare” is fast becoming a buzzword to encompass this concern.

So, how do beef producers assure consumers that they are raising a safe, wholesome product that has been cared for well at every step of the beef production chain?

It starts with communication.

Share your story

Daren Williams, executive director of communications with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), says communicating with consumers does not need to be complicated. Instead, producers simply need to share their everyday stories.

“The stories of how you care for your livestock are powerful,” he says, adding that personal stories are often a key way to connect with consumers on an emotional level.

Some examples of your personal stories might address:

- ▶ How did you get into the beef business? Is your family ranch multi-generational, and has it been passed down for decades? Or are you new to ranching because you are passionate about the industry?
- ▶ Why do you care about beef safety? Do you have children or grandchildren and feed them the beef you raise?
- ▶ How do you care for your animals? What do you do to protect them when it’s a blizzard or sweltering hot outside?
- ▶ What steps do you take to protect the environment? Do you plant trees, practice rotational grazing, provide wildlife habitat and focus on other stewardship practices?

Connect with consumers

Each of these stories can describe your role in modern beef production and offers a message that resonates with consumers, Williams says.

Of the importance of connecting with consumers, Williams points out the quote: *People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.*

To that he says, “Beef producers have to meet consumers on the emotional level —

to show how much we care and that we are family operations — and then once we’ve made that connection, it is important to educate consumers by backing up our story with science.”

To combine the story and science in conversations with consumers, Williams suggests producers remember to use the two C’s: We care; We’re capable.

Here’s an example. On the topic of beef

safety, he says: Share the message that you **care**, by telling consumers that the beef you raise on your farm is the beef you feed your own family. Then, to illustrate that the industry is **capable** of delivering a safe product, point out that through the beef checkoff millions of dollars have been invested in beef safety research and development.

To share how you **care** for your cattle, tell how you feed and care for your cattle every day — no matter what the weather. Then inform them that you are **capable** because you and your ranch crew follow Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) standards for animal care and have had training on animal handling and safety.

Share your personal stories, like how you protect your animals when it’s a blizzard or sweltering hot outside?

— **Daren Williams**



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Become a Master Beef Advocate

To aid in the effort of sharing ag's story with the public, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) — through funding from the beef checkoff — is launching the Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program, a six-week, self-directed online educational course to help individuals become better spokespeople for the industry.

The course covers beef nutrition, environmental issues, media training and much more.

With consumer surveys consistently showing that farmers and ranchers are considered one of the most credible sources — even more so than government officials, corporate CEOs and scientists — the new program is being developed to initiate a grassroots level of spokespeople for the industry.

Consumers want to hear ag's story, and they want to hear it directly from beef producers, says NCBA's Daren Williams.

Williams points out that many consumers are concerned about factory farms, mistreatment of animals, if beef is safe to serve to their family, if cows cause global warming, and if eating beef increases the risk of heart disease and cancer.

This educational course is designed to help beef advocates address those questions and help inform consumers with factual information. For more information about the program e-mail MBA@beef.org.

Similarly, the American Farm Bureau Federation has launched its Conversations on Animal Care initiative to address consumer concerns about the care provided to farm animals for food production.

A major component of the Conversations on Animal Care initiative is a training program that teaches producers to share their stories effectively, help them find an audience and amplify their message of dedicated care of livestock.

Visit www.conversationsoncare.com for more information and to read spokesperson testimonials.



Regarding environmental stewardship, Williams says you might tell a story about how you **care** for the land because that is your livelihood and legacy to future generations. To illustrate that you are **capable** of protecting the environment, you might share that you follow best practices for conservation, which have included planting trees, crossfencing, developing watering sites, etc., and that your goal is to leave the land better for the next generation.

Be proactive

Williams also emphasizes that the beef industry can't just give lip service to these activities. "We've got to keep our own house in order," he says, and encourages producers to regularly participate in beef industry meetings and trainings; be part of beef quality assurance; and implement conservation and animal care practices that are beneficial.

Likewise, Janet Riley, senior vice president of public affairs for the American Meat Institute (AMI), stresses to the ag community that animal welfare information is being sought by consumers and must be documented by producers.

"We are increasingly hearing from our retail and foodservice customers that they want to see action in the area of animal welfare — and they want to see it all the way through the chain," she says. "They are looking for programs that can be measured objectively and critically evaluated."

She says it is essential for the meat industry to be proactive about animal welfare, because

"those who are not may have programs [or protocols] created for them."

Fortunately, she emphasizes to livestock producers and the general public, the science of animal welfare is a win-win platform.

"One of the best things about ensuring optimal animal welfare is that it's good for livestock, ethically appropriate and has measurable economic benefits," she says. "Animals that are well cared for on the farm and calmly handled at the plant

create a higher-quality meat product. It's wonderful when biology and economics come together."

Start in your own backyard

Where can beef producers start better communicating with consumers about their dedication to animal care? You need look no further than your own community. Williams says there are many opportunities to tell your story. Some examples are to:

- ▶ Communicate one-on-one with someone at church or the local ball game about your role in the beef industry.
- ▶ Consider making a presentation to a local civic or school group, or visit with legislative leaders or committees.
- ▶ Be trained and participate in media interviews to ensure real information from farms and ranches is portrayed in the news media.
- ▶ Write letters to the editor or utilize the Internet to comment on news stories to better inform others about the beef industry and agriculture.
- ▶ Create your own web site or blog to provide

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— Janet Riley

information about what you do in the industry. This might be focused on beef's positive nutrition message, animal care, conservation or all facets of the industry.

Williams says no matter what outlet you choose, the important thing is to talk about how you do the right thing to ensure safe, wholesome beef in the industry.

But it is also important to be willing to listen. If you encounter someone who is not supportive of the beef industry, spend time listening to them, Williams advises. "Before you try to get them to change their mind, ask where they got their information and why they came to their decisions. It will give you a better understanding of where they are coming from and maybe identify some misperceptions that you can address," he says.

The bottom line for the beef industry is that consumers' interest in food is forever changed. As a result, beef producers must better demonstrate and communicate their commitment to producing safe food products.

Williams believes that can be achieved through the industry's people sharing their passion for beef. He points out how animal activists are often very passionate about swaying consumers not to be supportive of animal agriculture. To combat that, Williams says the beef industry also must have passion and purpose in telling their stories.

"Beef's nutrition message along with the fact that eating beef supports the family farmers and ranchers who raised them and cared about the land, is something to be passionate about," he concludes.

