



# Backing Up Beef

NJAA member Peter Scharpe represents the beef industry as a National Beef Ambassador.

Story & photos by *Chelsea Good*

Last year, National Junior Angus Association (NJAA) member Peter Scharpe attended a private briefing with Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns in Washington, D.C.; served beef at the Boston Marathon; and attended issues forums at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) Cattle Industry Annual Convention in Denver, Colo. These experiences were just a few of his duties as a National Beef Ambassador.

## Becoming an ambassador

The National Beef Ambassador Program (NBAP) is a checkoff-funded program sponsored by the American National Cattlewomen (ANCW). Each year, 17- to 20-year-olds from around the country compete for scholarship money and a spot on the five-person NBAP traveling team.

Contestants give original 5- to 8-minute speeches highlighting the importance of beef. A panel of judges also interviews the

candidates to determine their interpersonal communication skills.

Scharpe was selected as a 2006 ambassador at the national contest in Austin, Texas. His speech, titled "Beef's Triple Advantage," talked about the nutritional, economic and environmental benefits of eating beef.

While at the competition, Scharpe also completed a media-training program.

"We learned how to present information and the proper words to use when working with the media," Scharpe says. "We even learned about how to stand when being interviewed."

NBAP manager Carol Abrahamzon echoed Scharpe. "The media training helps make sure beef ambassadors are prepared to represent their industry," she says. Abrahamzon adds that one key skill they learn is how to turn a negative question into a positive situation. The ambassadors are also trained to go into an interview with a

couple of speaking points they'd like to present.

## Consumer focus

Once the five ambassadors complete their media training, it's time to hit the road.

"The ambassadors' main job is to tell the production story," Abrahamzon says. She traveled with Scharpe and his ambassador team to consumer events where they served beef samples. At these events, the ambassadors educated consumers about beef's role in a healthy diet and answered their questions.

"Peter is great at relating with the consumers," Abrahamzon says. "He's very genuine, and that is something consumers are looking for." She adds that the ambassadors are most effective at gaining consumer trust when they tell stories of their own experience as cattle producers.

Scharpe grew up on a small Angus farm outside of Arlington, Minn. He comes from a large family of beef advocates and says he's always talked about beef to whomever would listen.

"As an ambassador I had an excellent opportunity to spread the word about beef," Scharpe says. Still, he admits he had some adjustments to make when he was selected as an ambassador.

"I've always been outspoken about my belief in *Certified Angus Beef®* (CAB®) brand quality,"



►Above: Peter Scharpe participates in an NJAS Cook-Off skit. Presentation skills he learned in NJAS contests helped prepare him for the National Beef Ambassador contest.

►Right: Beef Ambassadors Peter Scharpe and Amanda Nolz serve beef samples to consumers at the Pennsylvania Farm Show.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL ABRAHAMZON



► Scharpe brushes his heifer at the 2007 NJAS.

Scharpe says. “One shift I had to make as a beef ambassador was to realize I was no longer representing a specific breed but promoting the beef industry as a whole.”

He also had to realize this includes some niche markets he had not been directly involved with. At one event in Hershey, Pa., he promoted the veal industry. At the World Ag Expo in Tulare, Calif., he spoke with dairy producers about their involvement in the beef industry and the beef checkoff program. Other segments he hadn’t dealt with before included natural and organic beef.

“I think quite a few producers don’t accept natural or organic beef products,” Scharpe says. “What I’ve come to realize is while the programs may be different, it’s still beef. The important thing is that we are getting another consumer eating beef.”

Scharpe says learning about and representing the beef industry as a whole strengthened his convictions about the importance of beef production.

### D.C. or bust

Twice during his yearlong term, Scharpe was able to take these convictions to the heart of the nation — Washington, D.C.

Thanks to an anonymous donor, Scharpe and his ambassador team were able to attend the NCBA Spring Conference on Capitol Hill. The ambassadors learned about political issues affecting beef production and shared their opinions with congressmen and congresswomen from

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### Five steps to being heard online

The National Beef Ambassadors hosted a training session at the Cattle Industry Summer Conference in July, where American National Cattlewomen (ANCW) members learned how to respond to blogs and online articles. At the session, Daren Williams and Jacque Matsen, both with the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association (NCBA), presented these five tips for being heard online:

#### 1. Know where to look.

Search news sites, Google,™ Yahoo!® and MSN® for beef-related terms. It’s beneficial to search terms that have a negative connotation, like “factory farming,” in order to find articles that shed a negative light on agriculture.

“If you search ‘cattlemen are environmental stewards’ on Google, you’ll probably be directed to the NCBA web site,” Matsen jokes.

Williams has a caution when using this approach. “Don’t repeat the negative message,” he warns. Instead, he’d recommend writing something like this: “Modern beef production is often called factory farming, but here is the real story.” Williams calls this bridging to the point where you can present your message.

#### 2. Craft your comments.

Identify the misinformation you’d like to correct or positive message you want to reinforce and craft your comment.

Williams says a good way to do this is incorporating personal stories. He gives the example of a beef producer who answered an animal welfare question by telling the reporter about a calf he saved from a blizzard and brought inside his house to warm up. The producer told the reporter that it wasn’t just the right thing to do; he was also protecting his livelihood.

“Stories like that really resonate with consumers,” Williams says.

#### 3. Post your perspective.

“Determine what you want to say and find an opportunity to say it,” Matsen says. “Don’t wait for someone to ask you about what you’re dying to talk about.”

This can easily be done by searching for places where your comments are relevant and posting them wherever they are applicable.

#### 4. Link to positive web sites.

Inside your message, provide links to industry and consumer web sites where interested parties can find more detailed information.

#### 5. Repeat the first four steps regularly.

Matsen and Williams encourage people to commit a certain amount of time to submitting online responses about the beef industry each week or month and then develop a schedule. A great way to save time is keeping a record of previous comments and reusing them when the issue resurfaces.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL ABRAHAMZON

► NCBA’s Jacque Matsen looks on as ANCW members post a response to an online article. Matsen and her coworker Daren Williams taught ANCW members how to respond to negative information about agriculture found on the internet in a session hosted by the ambassadors at the Cattle Industry Summer Conference.

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their home states. The next day they met with U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agents.

During this trip, the group also attended a private briefing where Secretary Johanns was informed about changes in the hog market. The ambassadors were in a lock-down area, which they couldn't leave until the numbers were released to the public.

In June, Scharpe returned to the nation's capital for Safeway's 14th Annual National

Capital BBQ Battle. On the last day, he won the build-a-better-steak-sandwich competition.

### **Continuous cheerleaders**

Scharpe recognizes that his travels as an ambassador provided him exceptional opportunities to promote the beef industry. However, he also says there are plenty of ways to represent the beef industry without going far. Abrahamzon agrees, giving the example of the internet community.

"Anybody can and should get involved in the online environment," Abrahamzon says. "The best way to respond to negative information about agriculture is to respond with the truth." She adds that responses don't have to be long. A brief post responding to a derogatory comment is all that's usually necessary to help set the facts straight.

Abrahamzon also recommends posting your own, positive information about the beef industry online. Scharpe's ambassador

team went through blog training and posted comments about a book they were reading called *Chew on This*.

“The book was meant to be a spin-off from *Fast Food Nation* targeting kids,” Scharpe says. “We would read chapters of the book and then post our comments on the blog.”

The blog, *chewingthecud.org*, is currently being maintained by Scharpe’s ambassador teammate Amanda Nolz, who is completing an internship program with USDA. The USDA offers an annual summer internship

for youth who were involved in the beef ambassador program. Knowles posts about her experiences in Washington, D.C., as an advocate for the beef industry. Current ambassador Chris Molinaro also keeps a blog at *beefmatters.com*.

Scharpe says having one-on-one conversations with people about the beef industry, like the ones Nolz and Molinaro write about, is a wonderful way people can promote the industry in their everyday lives.

Another suggestion that Abrahamzon

offers is visiting schools and telling them about beef production. She maintains that relaying your personal story to consumers, young and old, is the best way to get the point across.

Scharpe’s final advice is to stay informed and always be prepared to talk about the beef industry — wherever you are. Whether traveling to consumer shows across the nation or shopping at their local grocery stores, beef advocates all have the same message — *Beef, it’s what’s for dinner.*

