

Social Media Misconceptions

In the digital age, misinformation about agriculture can spread faster than wildfire.

by **Bridget Beran**

Technology is ever-changing, and its effect on the agriculture industry changes just as quickly. When misinformation appears on social media sites, it can spread across the country in the blink of an eye. Maddee Moore, owner of Crown M Marketing and president-elect

of the National Hereford Women, cites the past explosion of the lean, finely-textured beef or “pink slime” controversy as an example of how not to handle misinformation.

“We didn’t respond fast enough, but it was a lesson for the industry and all those involved,” Moore says. “As an industry we’re still reeling from those attacks. While it wasn’t a big issue initially, it grew rapidly with consumers. And with the power and breadth of social media the story took off rapidly.”

In the know

While scare tactics from animal rights organizations and food chains often dominate the misinformation being spread, Moore says it’s important to know what’s being said about the agriculture industry because of the chain reaction that often follows sensational videos and articles.

“Media travels faster than it ever has and we do a disservice to ourselves to not spread our story,”

Moore says. “There are various bloggers and social media users that add to the misinformation stream by continuing to share a story that does not present quality information or agriculture in a positive manner. Media stories can cause emotions to run high in those passionate about agriculture and the beef industry. Overreacting and acting out through social media can add more to the story that was ever intended by the reporter.”

Easy-to-understand information is the quickest to spread through social media because consumers are more willing to send it on, even if it’s inaccurate or not sourced. Moore says it’s important that producers ensure that their information is just as easy to consume so that the truth is spread.

“There are so many posts on social media that don’t really represent modern ag and what our producers are actually like,” says Cindy Cunningham, assistant vice



president of communications for the National Pork Board and director for the Livestock Publications Council board. “They’re spread by people with hidden agendas and sometimes innocently by people who just don’t have the background and knowledge to understand the industry.”

Cunningham and Moore agree that misinformation has a large effect on how producers are viewed by the public. It causes distrust from consumers and makes them more likely to conform with trends like antibiotic-free or hormone-free because they are fearful of their food.

Moore says she feels it’s important that members of the livestock industry come together to share information about the various choices that are available to consumers and to embrace the diversity of the market place for a unified front against trends and marketing tactics.

Beyond words

However, misinformation can also have other effects on the livestock industry, according to Daren Williams, executive director of communications for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Misinformation about mistreatment of animals can lead to additional regulations on ranchers.

“It ultimately does come back and impact the way producers do business and it can hurt the producer’s ability to make choices about how they care for their animals,” Williams says. “We’ve got to walk the walk and do the right things. But you also have to talk the talk and talk about how we raise beef. Explain why we make the decisions that we do so consumers are hearing it directly from someone with their boots on the ground who are doing the work, every single day.”

Williams suggests producers get Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) certified. This shows consumers that the industry has a standard for animal care that is followed and that producers take these issues just as seriously as the consumers. He also recommends producers complete the Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program by the Beef Check-off, which is about to launch the MBA 2.0 updated program, to be

as knowledgeable as possible about the beef industry. The MBA program was developed in reaction to the explosion of social media and the need for advocates of the beef industry to be educated about every aspect.

“The most common mistake I see is when producers try to tell someone that they’re wrong right off the bat, rather than listening to what the consumer is saying and trying to explain our side of things. If we jump on social media and say ‘Oh, that’s a rare occurrence’ or ‘They shouldn’t have been there in the first place,’ we look like we’re trying to hide something or brush it off,” Williams says.

“It’s better to say ‘Hey, we understand that your expectation is that your beef is treated properly and videos like this make us just as angry and frustrated. Here’s what we’re doing to correct this.’ Rather than defending it, we have to start by listening, acknowledging that they have

legitimate concerns and then talking about what we’re doing to correct that.”

Stepping up

Reaching beyond the ranch is also an important step in being a good advocate. Cunningham says one of the biggest issues she sees is that people within the agriculture industry tend to talk to each other about misinformation and forget to reach out to audiences outside of agriculture.

Producers are urged now more than ever to share their story of agriculture and to take an active part in representing the industry. While the industry has done better in past years about telling its story, producers should not just be reactive, but proactive.

Cunningham says, “I think it’s important that we tell our story because if we don’t, someone else will and it won’t necessarily be the true story of modern agriculture.” **HW**

Advocating effectively

There are a variety of ways to use social media to tell agriculture’s story, but Maddee Moore, owner of Crown M Marketing and president-elect of the National Hereford Women, and Cindy Cunningham, assistant vice president of communications for the National Pork Board, provide some tips to help you create effective posts and communication.

Be authentic: Speaking from the heart about your ranch and your experiences humanizes the issues combatting our industry and makes your side of the story more relatable.

Know your audience: Urban consumers don’t know what an EPD is and sometimes need the harvesting process simplified. It’s important to remember to reach people where they are.

A picture is worth a thousand words: Photos not only make posts more interesting to look at, but people are more likely to “like” and “share” a post with a picture.

Listen before you respond: It’s easy to get defensive when people speak negatively about your livelihood but hear out concerns and address what the industry is doing to prevent their concerns, instead of dismissing them as invalid.

Facts over fads: Sharing statistics and data about the benefits of the

beef industry provides legitimacy to your cause and mission.

Watch the clock: Depending on the site you’re choosing to post to will influence when it is the most likely to be seen. According to SumAll, an analytics app, the best time to post on Twitter is 1-3 p.m. For Facebook it’s 1-4 p.m. Instagram is best between 5-6 p.m. Pinterest checks in with the latest time with its best time being from 8-11 p.m. All times are EST.

Know the power of a hashtag: Also known as the pound sign, adding a hashtag to the end of post will boost its views and help increase the amount of people hearing your message. When posting about Herefords, be sure to add #Hereford, #BuyHereford, #Profitabull or #TeamHereford.

Be kind: Not every person on the Internet is going to agree with what you do. They may not always be nice about their opinions either. However, it’s always better to take the high road. **HW**