



Media Training 101

These key techniques can help beef enthusiasts master the ability to share positive messages about the industry with the media.

by Kindra Gordon

The phone rings and there's a reporter on the line wanting to ask you some questions about your beef operation. What should you do?

With increasing consumer interest — and concern — toward agriculture and where food comes from, an opportunity to share your story with the media is one you don't want to miss. But it's also one that you want to make sure puts a positive light on the industry and what you do.

That's why it is important to be prepared to be a spokesperson for your business and your industry, says Kathy Kerchner, an Arizona-based media and speaking expert.

Kerchner is a former TV news anchor and reporter who has worked as a media/presentation coach for the past 20 years. She says the key to "mastering your message" is learning how to focus the interview on what you want to say rather than what the reporter wants to ask.

This ability to focus begins long before you have a reporter on the phone or in your face asking questions.

Kerchner's advice is simple. "Plan your agenda," she says and suggests writing out the key positive messages or "talking

points" that you would want to emphasize about your business and industry in any interview.

As you do this, she suggests anticipating the questions that a reporter will likely ask about your role in the industry and then planning and preparing your answers. As well, consider the questions that might be more difficult to answer. "Where are you vulnerable?" questions Kerchner.

Additionally, be prepared to supplement your comments with supporting information — such as real-life examples from your farm or ranch, research findings, or third party endorsements.

Take it step-by-step

With Kerchner's advice under your belt and some time devoted to preparing your talking points, let's take it back to the phone ringing and a reporter on the line — what should you do?

Step 1 — Kerchner suggests avoiding "cold calls" from reporters. Instead, she says, buy yourself some time to prepare your thoughts — even if it's just 5-10 minutes until you call the reporter back.

She suggests saying, "I'd like to be part of your story, but I'm in the middle of something right now. What's your deadline? May I

call you back?" Additionally, you might ask what medium will the story be broadcast in (TV, radio, print, podcast, blog)? What topics they want to focus on discussing? Who else have they talked to or will they talk to for the story?

As a former reporter, Kerchner says, "You do want to get in on the story as early as possible so you can help shape the reporter's thinking, but you are on the record the minute you pick up the phone, so you also want to be prepared."

Step 2 — As the interview gets underway, Kerchner advises looking for opportunities to "bridge" from the questions being asked to the message you want to emphasize.

She tells, "Those who are best at doing interviews have mastered the art of 'bridging.' Bridging helps you transition from the question you were asked to an answer that you want to give (your message) without making it seem as if you are avoiding the question."

She describes this as a three-step process:

- Answer or acknowledge the reporter's question as briefly as possible
- Then bridge
- Add your positive messages with supporting information and examples. Useful bridge phrases include: but...; the real issue is...; you may also want to know...; let me put that in perspective...; however, research shows...; here's something equally important to consider...

Step 3 — What if you don't have the answer to a question? Kerchner says you should never say "no comment." Rather, if you do not know how to respond to something, she suggests bridging back to your key message or admitting, "I am not the best person to answer that; it's not my area of expertise. Let me have someone give you a call back."

Likewise, Kerchner says, "Don't feel trapped into giving a yes or no answer if the reporter demands one. If you can't answer, instead say, 'The answer is not that simple' and then bridge to one of your talking points."

Additional advice

To help you polish your media skills, Kerchner shares these additional tips for mastering the media and your message:

Pause before you answer.

Pausing gives you a chance to think about what you want to say and can make your response seem less rehearsed or "canned," she says.

Use empathy. "You can — and should — show genuine human emotion about death, injury and other losses. Just because you say you're saddened, doesn't mean you admit guilt or negligence," Kerchner says.

Clarify unclear questions.

"Don't answer a question you don't understand," says Kerchner. Either rephrase it yourself or ask for clarification. And, if you are doing a taped radio or TV interview, you can stop and ask the reporter to repeat the question.

Keep cool. Never lose your temper or become defensive with a reporter — being emotional won't help your story.

Add as much as you can. If a reporter concludes the interview by asking if you have anything to add, by all means do. Kerchner concludes, "Always take the opportunity to summarize or repeat key messages."

Kerchner is the author of the book "Soundbites: A Business Guide for Working with the Media." For more information, visit her website masteryourmessage.com. **HW**

Another media tip: Have photos on hand

It's said that a picture is worth a thousand words, so one easy way to help convey a positive image of you and your beef operation is to have high quality (and high resolution) photos available for reporters to use along with the story that features your comments.

Often, today's reporters will conduct a phone or e-mail interview, or they may interview you at an industry conference — meaning they never actually visited your place to take photos. Or, they may interview you in January — or another time of year — when the weather offers photos that are less than ideal.

So have a high resolution (300 dpi) professional photograph of yourself available in a digital format that can be easily e-mailed to a reporter. As well, have some stock photos of your ranch sign and scenic settings of cattle on grass available that could be shared with reporters, too. Those photos will go a long way in presenting a professional image for your cattle operation. **HW**

More media dos & don'ts

Media expert Kathy Kerchner offers these additional tips for a successful interview with a reporter:

- Don't repeat a reporter's negative language, even to deny it. Instead, go right to a positive response.
- Don't offer an opinion speculating why something happened. "When you answer questions about what could have happened or what might happen, you risk tempting the reporter to turn your guesses into conclusions," she says.
- Don't speak for others or criticize and blame others. These tactics usually backfire, says Kerchner.
- Never say something "off the record." To be safe, Kerchner says,

"Don't say anything to a reporter you don't want to read in the paper, hear on the radio or see on TV. Just because you think the interview is over doesn't mean the reporter isn't still taking mental notes."

- Do hold your ground. Kerchner says no matter how many times a reporter asks you the same question, continue to repeat your major points.
- Do dress appropriately. If you are in an interview that will be broadcast on TV (or via the Internet), dress in solid colors and a simple outfit that will not distract viewers. For print articles, a photo is also often taken to run with the article, so be sure to be dressed professionally. **HW**