



# Emphasizing Beef's Attributes

*The Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA) program launched by NCBA is helping people in the beef industry better tell their story.*

by *Kindra Gordon*

**W**e've all been in a situation where someone starts asking questions about beef — like “Why is beef healthy for you?” or “How can I be sure beef is safe?” And we know we should be able to provide a well-educated answer, but we're just not quite sure what to say.

Thankfully, a new program launched by the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) last fall called the Masters of Beef Advocacy program, or MBA for short, is designed to help beef supporters learn the facts and find just the right words to help answer beef-related questions.

The program, which is funded with checkoff dollars, is free, self-directed online training that focuses on the topics of beef safety, beef nutrition, animal care, environmental stewardship, modern beef production and the beef checkoff. After completing six courses, graduates are invited to attend a full-day final exam/graduation ceremony focusing on

public speaking and working with the media.

Beef industry experts say the program was created to help beef producers become better advocates for sharing with consumers how beef is raised, its health benefits and nutrition facts. Recent trends indicate that consumers are interested in learning more about where their food comes from — and they are particularly interested in hearing from real farmers and ranchers.

“As an industry we face many opponents, like the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), who are highly skilled at what they do. We're also faced with a situation where the vast majority of Americans are a couple generations removed from agriculture,” points out Chelsea Good, a beef advocate from Kansas.

She adds, “The good news is that people still trust farmers and consider them a highly reliable source of information. What we need to do as an industry is figure out a way to reach out to these

people and help put a face with their food.” Good says the MBA program is doing just that.

## **Bridging the gap**

Good learned firsthand about the disconnect between consumers and beef producers a few years ago when she served as a National Beef Ambassador during her senior year in high school. Of that experience, she says, “I got to interact with wonderful people in the beef industry as well as consumers. And I found that consumers are removed from agriculture and often times misinformed about beef production.”

She also says, “I think we have an excellent motivated communicator group in the beef industry but often times producers are unsure of how to reach out and talk about what they do. Programs like MBA can help bridge this gap.”

Today, Good is a communications studies graduate student and Beef Cattle Institute (BCI) graduate assistant at Kansas State University (K-State). After hearing about the MBA program, she worked hand-in-hand with the Kansas Beef Council and the BCI to help recruit Kansas participants for MBA training in March. The Kansas class was the first group in the nation to finish the program with a hands-on training and graduation ceremony.

Of the MBA participants in the Kansas class, Good says, “We had a great mix of students, producers, business people and veterinarians.”

Good adds that since completing the training, many of the participants have made comments to her about how the training made them feel



Hereford breeder Emilie Miller of Host, Pa., is actively recruiting people to participate in the MBA program, and she plans to take the course as well this fall. She presently works with the Pennsylvania Beef Council promoting beef to Northeast retail stores and consumers.



more comfortable advocating for the beef industry in their everyday lives — from talking to people they sit next to on a plane about what they do to correcting the misperceptions of the people talking about beef in the grocery store.

Several participants have also joined the MBA Alumni Association, which works as a network to respond to negative information about the beef industry, particularly in the online community.

“The online advocacy component in particular is a good way for people who want to help the industry to easily get involved,” Good points out. “If people in the industry committed 20 minutes a couple times a week to searching for stories and blog posts about agriculture on the Internet and then post responses with their personal experiences, I think we’d come a long way in improving the perspective of agriculture in the online environment. This is especially important as the younger generations get the majority of their information from the Internet.”

Good says the Kansas class will continue to actively promote agriculture with the guidance of the MBA Alumni Association as well as the Kansas Beef Council’s in-state Beef Advocacy Network, which encourages speaking up for the beef industry at schools and community or civic organizations and through local newspapers.

Good adds that there has been enough interest from others that Kansas will likely coordinate another MBA training in the future, but she adds that individuals can also sign up to do the training on their own.

### Signing up

Emilie Miller of Host, Pa., is actively recruiting people to participate in the MBA program, and she plans to take the course as well this fall. Miller is a former National Junior Hereford Association (NJHA) board member and K-State graduate who presently works with the Pennsylvania Beef Council promoting beef to retail stores in Northeast metro



Junior Hereford member Thomas Smith completed his MBA training in July. Smith is currently president of the New York Junior Hereford Association and the New York Junior Beef Producers Association (NYJPB). Pictured here Tom is leading a NYJPB meeting.

areas like Boston and Washington, D.C. Miller also still raises registered Hereford cattle with her parents in Pennsylvania, and they have established a growing freezer beef business, selling to local consumers.

Miller says, “I’ve already had media training for my job, but I’m interested in participating in the MBA program so I am able to answer consumer questions more confidently and be better able to emphasize important beef industry points.”

She adds, “I attend many events in the major metro areas and meet consumers who are more than one generation removed from the farm. They want to know more about beef, so these are good opportunities to interact with them and tell them more about beef production.”

As current president of the Pennsylvania CattleWomen, Miller

is working to coordinate several of the women to take the MBA class this fall. “We are trying to be an involved, proactive organization for the industry,” she says and adds that the MBA class will be a good training tool to assist their efforts. Miller says the Penn State Collegiate CattleWoman’s group is also planning to participate in the MBA course this fall.

Miller concludes, “I’ve heard awesome comments from people who’ve gone through the MBA program. They say it’s a really good way to get you thinking out of the box about questions consumers may have and how to best represent our beef industry.”

Thomas Smith of TP Farm at Hamlin, N.Y., has learned that firsthand. He completed his MBA training in July. Smith is currently

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## How can you be an advocate?

Being an advocate for the beef industry can take many different forms — it may be as simple as talking to friends, family and neighbors about positive things in the beef industry, or you may feel comfortable going out to broader audiences, such as schools, businesses and civic groups, to tell the beef story.

Here are some opportunities to consider:

**Write a letter.** Respond to negative attacks on the beef industry and submit proactive letters to the editor or submit blog posts in online chat rooms.

**Pick up the phone.** Contact your local media — newspaper, radio or TV — and offer to do an interview sharing the perspective of the beef industry.

**Open the gate.** Host tours of your beef operation for school groups or local civic organizations and leaders.

**Be on the program.** Take the time to tell about the beef industry and your own operation to civic groups and schools. **HW**

president of the New York Junior Hereford Association and the New York Junior Beef Producers Association. He will be a sophomore pre-vet major at Cornell University this fall.

Smith says he learned about the MBA program from his state beef council representative. He says, "I decided to do the MBA program because it is my responsibility along with that of all other beef producers to promote and protect our industry. There is a great deal of misinformation among the general public about everything from animal welfare to *E. coli* risk to the environmental impact of beef production. This program helps to provide producers with the facts and the skills to promote our industry in several different capacities including online blogging, media interviews and talking face to face with consumers."

Smith, who is an active Hereford showman at local, state and national shows, says since completing the MBA program, he has been blogging and posting comments online in local and national news Web sites.

He concludes, "I also plan to write some articles in the Cornell student newspapers when I return to school this fall. I want the general public to understand that beef is a safe, wholesome, nutritious choice that is also environmentally friendly."

### **The bottom line**

The bottom line for the beef industry is that taking part in programs like MBA are important because if we aren't prepared to be the most passionate and informed advocates for our way of life and our products, who will be?

Daren Williams, NCBA executive director of communications, oversees the MBA program, and he reports that response to the training has been overwhelmingly positive.

"In four months since we opened the doors on the MBA 'virtual classroom,' we have enrolled 803 students, and 220 have completed the six online courses. This is well beyond my expectations for what we would achieve in the first year. I believe MBA struck a chord with producers

across the country who were feeling overwhelmed with the constant attacks on the industry but didn't feel empowered to do anything about it," Williams says.

He says this program will have a lasting beneficial impact on the beef industry. He concludes, "MBA students are already hard at work reclaiming our legacy as the original stewards of the land and genuine caretakers of animals. As they share their stories, they are reconnecting consumers with the people who produce their food. The impact on the beef industry will be felt one consumer at a time when they visit their local grocery store or favorite restaurant and choose beef because they feel good about supporting the farmers and ranchers who produce it." **HW**

**Editor's Note:** *MBA participants can take the courses on their own or participate in a class organized within their state. For more information about the program, contact your state beef council or NCBA's Daren Williams at (303) 850-3346 or MBA@beef.org.*