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The 2009 Allen D. Leman conference proceedings book is made possible by the generous support of **IDEXX**.

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Formatting

Tina Smith

CD-ROM

David Brown

Logo Design

Ruth Cronje, and Jan Swanson;
based on the original design by Dr. Robert Dunlop

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What do we say

Tom Burkgren, DVM

For animal agriculture, opportunities to effectively communicate to a wide public audience are not common. The public is not readily accessible or open to the positive messages we may wish to carry forth. Despite the communication barriers, our ability to bring the “good” side of modern hog production to light is essential for building public trust, understanding, and confidence. Veterinarians and pork producers must continually seek out opportunities to get the message to the public, whether in a one-on-one conversation or via a nationally broadcast interview on the nightly news.

The “good news” about pork production is not easily conveyed when there is no readily available platform for publication. The public and the press may not necessarily want to hear about the great efficiency of production, quality assurance efforts or the daily application of animal welfare on farms. Regardless, each individual and organization within the pork industry must be prepared to deliver a clear and concise message about the production of a nutritious, safe and economical food source known as pork.

The rare occasion to inform and educate the public about the positive aspects of pork production may present itself within the midst of a negative situation. Recent issues with allegations of animal abuse have highlighted the need for effective communications with the public. This need is often urgent and sparked by volatile situations involving producers and veterinarians. Attention must be paid to any situation where the public may perceive a conflict with the public interest. If the public perceives the conflict to be severe then a public relations crisis may develop.

The perception of a conflict with the public interest usually draws the attention of the press. Controversy usually drives the interest of the press and may involve many, if not all, forms of media. Today’s technology makes publication of an issue to a broad audience more feasible than ever before. The wide involvement of the press can complicate the issue and how it is resolved.

Contentious issues also draw the attention of activist organizations with an agenda to demonize animal agriculture. These organizations often create and publicize the conflict as a means to achieve their goals for fund-raising and to

leverage the involved parties to change or even discontinue methods of production. These groups often seek to maintain the conflict in order to continue to capitalize on the issue. Resolution of the conflict may not be the desired outcome from the activist perspective.

The individuals involved in a public relations conflict must carefully assess the situation so that an appropriate response can be delivered. This assessment must critically examine the severity of the conflict in terms of acceleration into a crisis and the resulting impact. The impact can be on the individuals, a production system, a company, the profession of veterinary medicine and/or the industry. An accurate assessment may be difficult to achieve in the initial stages of a conflict. Therefore the assessment must be ongoing as the conflict progresses.

The management of a public relations crisis is based on the goal of immediately satisfying the public and the press, thus eliminating the perception that you are somehow in conflict with the public interest. Part of the goal is to limit the interest of the press to one news cycle, typically 24 hours. The shorter the time in the public eye, the less damage can be done. The sooner the press moves on to other unrelated stories, the less attention will be drawn to your situation.

A critical strategy of managing a public relations crisis is the first contact with the press. This first contact should be based on providing a brief, accurate and informed statement in response to media inquiries. In most cases it is better to respond with a statement than to maintain a “no comment” stance. The designation of the spokesperson role should be limited. Where possible, utilize the minimum number of spokespeople so that a consistent message can be carried forth to the public.

An informed statement requires that the spokesperson understands the situation and has all available information at hand. If time allows, the crafting of a statement is best accomplished through extensive cooperation and communication with personnel within the affected organizations as well as with other allies and experts within the industry. The ongoing evaluation of the situation involves a sustained effort to maintain and even increase the level of cooperation and communication amongst the

What do we say

affected entities. Advanced preparation will strengthen the spokesperson's ability to establish credibility and his or her status as an expert.

The use of tools such as written statements and talking points can be useful. Statements should be succinct, self-contained and not require extensive explanation. Talking points need to be non-speculative, accurate, fact-based and provide solutions wherever possible. These tools should avoid acronyms, buzz words and negative connotations. Consistency in messaging is a goal that must be kept in mind whenever interacting with the public and the press. The ongoing training of spokespeople in media relations will provide opportunities for them to improve their skills and develop confidence in delivering the right messages.

There is no shortage of "pressure points" within the pork industry. Some of these include animal abuse, painful procedures without analgesia/anesthesia, euthanasia, antimicrobial use and resistance, confinement, and zoonotic diseases. The challenges arising from these points can be overlapping. They are often leveraged with each

other to cast pork production in a negative light. One of the greatest public challenges faced by the industry is to develop a portfolio of positive messages that offset and overcome the negativity.

The development and delivery of the "good story" about pork production is an effort that can not be left solely to the organizations that represent the pork producers and swine veterinarians. Every level of communication, from one-on-one with individuals in the check-out line at your local grocery store to a visit to Capital Hill in Washington, DC, can have an impact. You never know when your involvement and what you say will have a positive impact. We do know that if you do not become involved, the vacuum created by your absence may be filled with a message against pork production.

