POSITIONING THE ANIMAL WELFARE MESSAGE

Dan Murphy, Communications Strategist
OUTSOURCE MARKETING
4122 Factoria Blvd SE, Suite 202
Bellevue, WA 98006
USA

*Why producers must re-define the terms, repackage the concept and reposition the debate over what constitutes humane livestock production*

Few issues are as controversial to both producers and consumers as animal welfare. Broadly defined, AW encompasses a number of controversial areas, including:

- genetics and breeding technologies (such as cloning)
- confinement production systems (such as stalls, crates and cages)
- transport standards
- animal handling tactics on farm and at feed yards, auction pens and packing plants

By far, animal welfare is the primary lever used by anti-industry activist groups to sway public opinion, influence proposed laws and regulations and, of course, fire up their never-ending fundraising efforts.

For the most part, although industry groups and trade associations have engaged their members and their resources to neutralize the damage done to public perceptions of livestock producers, feeders and processors on this issue, the results have often been less than satisfactory.

Why? Not for lack of effort, although it’s tough to compete with NGOs and activist groups whose full-time mission is attacking those engaged in the business of meat production. Nor for any lack of passion on the part of the many dedicated folks fighting to communicate industry’s side of the story on animal welfare.

The reason that the activist gospel of “meat is murder” has gotten such traction over the past two decades is partly the result of a major shift in the landscape of how ideas are communicated and understood by the public. The media are far less interested in exploring complex issues and the public has little or no connection to the business of agriculture. In addition, the organizations and leadership of the animal rights movement have created campaigns that are shrewdly crafted, cleverly applied and relentless pursued.
Plus, they collectively have hundreds of millions of dollars with which to fund their media relations and advertising initiatives.

**THE POWER OF POSITIONING**

Of all the advantages that the anti-industry forces capitalize on, however, by far the most critical is how they are able to position their messaging. Anyone who has visited the website of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), for example, has to admit that they’ve created a powerful pitch for their “just leave the animals alone” mantra, employing celebrities, packaging videos and visuals that detail alleged abuses and making it emotionally easy for their followers to climb onboard what seems to be a noble crusade.

Sadly, industry can do little to change the consumer landscape, nor re-educate the media nor attempt to match the resources and fund-raising of the activist community. Not unless Bill Gates decides his fortune is better spent promoting food production here in North America, instead of Africa.

What those who are engaged in livestock production, or supportive of its contributions to society, can do, however, is to properly position *their* messaging to the relevant audiences: media members, policymakers and the public.

So what is positioning. And why is it so important?

Simply stated, positioning is the creation of an emotional connection that resonates with the intended audience. In a way that’s analogous with political parties, positioning is the platform from which messaging (advertising or other communications) is developed.

Although positioning was originally a marketing concept designed to enhance the leverage marketers needed to more effectively sell their products, it can be applied to communications, as well. And in either case, proper positioning makes a monumental difference in how clearly communications are understood, and more importantly, how much impact they deliver.

**THE FOUR BASIC QUESTIONS**

Basically, before any relevant message can be effectively communicated, the organization or industry must answer the following questions:

- Who are we?
- Who are we for?
- How are we different?
- Why does that matter?
Here’s an example of how those questions might be answered by an industry group of producers.

**Who are we?** We are professional producers who raise livestock by combining the best science and the latest technology with time-honored methods of animal husbandry and humane care to optimize the well-being of our herds.

**Who are we for?** Families who want to purchase safe, affordable, healthy protein foods.

**How are we different?** We engage in a sustainable, economically viable business of raising food animals, focusing on maximum efficiency and minimal depletion of critical resources, such as land, water and energy.

**Why does that matter?** There is a critical global need for a plentiful source of nutritious protein that can be produced sustainably without destroying vital green space and wildlife habitat.

Now obviously, there could be many ways to interpret the concept of positioning, depending on the group, the target audience and the type of communication being developed. In fact, the big consumers, manufacturers and marketers, such as automakers and food manufacturers, have become very sophisticated in tailoring their positioning—and thus their advertising—to various audiences and even sub-segments of their intended audiences.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF RE-FRAMING**

But no matter how it’s phrased, there are some common themes that inform proper positioning as it relates to producers. The positioning must lay the foundation for an emotional appeal to the target audience. The benefits of the group’s activities must be clearly communicated. The values expressed must be broadly shared by a majority of those to whom a message is eventually delivered.

Bottom line, positioning helps industry pursue perhaps the most important tactic in developing strategic communications: Re-framing of the debate.

Simply stated, re-framing means talking about the pros and cons of any issue from a perspective that enhances industry’s position, not the position of the groups opposed to livestock production. Rather than conduct a “debate” over animal welfare, for example, by arguing for or against the value of cages and confinement—an argument industry is guaranteed to lose—it is necessary to redefine the terms and re-frame the perspective within which discussion takes place.
Take animal handling, for example. Activists are very good at staging arguments that begin from the premise that animal welfare is compromised by the use of confinement systems of any sort. Media coverage thus tends to focus on “abuses” and the (alleged) downside of so-called industrial agriculture and such technologies as cloning and selective genetics.

The “frame” within which all such debate takes place is the premise that “nature” is the ideal, and any deviation from nature is a negative.

How do you win that argument? The answer is, you don’t. You re-frame the debate—otherwise, you lose.

So if conventional “wisdom” is that animal welfare is compromised by confinement, then industry must re-position its message toward the idea that modern livestock production systems are combining science and technology with time-tested methods of animal husbandry to develop an optimal environment for farm animals that

- protects animals from disease, predation and suffering from hunger and exposure
- promotes natural behaviors for herding animals
- preserves the efficiencies that mitigate environmental impacts and support food affordability.

Who’s against any of that? No one. And the same re-positioning can be employed with virtually every issue affecting livestock producers, from environmental impact to the use of inputs, to biotechnology, to the “movement” toward vegetarianism as cure for everything from obesity to cruelty to global warming.

As if.

**THREE SIMPLE STEPS**

Finally, there are three critical steps in a sequence that provide the best, most positive results whenever communications are employed to share industry’s message about the value and benefits of raising food animals.

One, acknowledge the validity of the concerns raised by your opponents—but do so by re-framing the debate in broader terms that extend beyond just food animals. That’s a conciliatory position that enhances empathy and “softens” up an audience for harder truths to follow. Think, Barack Obama. His campaign was a masterpiece of using conciliatory gestures as a way to re-structure subsequent debate and help his message resonate with voters.
Two, point out the consequences of the proposed solutions offered by those who demand radical change. If all livestock production were changed to some sort of “natural” system, there would be hugely significant consequences, for example. Everything from the necessity of clearing additional forests to expand arable farmland for food production, to the economic impact on rural communities, to the overall affordability of food in a time of deepening recession would have to be on the table if serious contemplation is given to a massive “makeover” of production agriculture.

Third, and most importantly, outline a better strategy. Here is where education comes into play. It’s neither an easy road nor one with rapid results to be had, but the efforts made to share a vision of how raising livestock contributes positively to everything from good nutrition to energy conservation to wildlife preservation is essential to moving the needle on public opinion about the value and validity of the profession that meat and poultry producers have chosen to pursue.

**THE THREE KEY CONCEPTS**

In any communications designed to advance the educational goals of industry, I suggest three critical concepts that I believe capture strong positioning, engage all relevant constituencies in a broader, more comprehensive dialogue and change significantly the perspective—the framing, if you will—of public discourse related to animal welfare and other related issues. In my mind, these three ideas provide powerful, winning positioning for industry and force its critics to fight the battle on terms favorable to producers, not their critics.

In every position statement, white paper and news release created by industry, I’d like to see these three concepts referenced:

**Sustainability.** This illuminates a fundamental principle of production agriculture: It is symbiotic coexistence with other aspects of farming. Unlike other food-producing methods—fishing, hunting and harvesting of wild resources—that currently sustain two-thirds of the Earth’s population, well-managed, modern livestock production creates less of an environmental impact, consumes less energy and puts far less pressure on basic resources of soil, water and land base.

**Stewardship.** This idea suggests that producers are entrusted with protecting and preserving the soil, watershed and habitat so that future generations can also benefit from them. Stewardship compels wise and prudent use of resources because the larger community—indeed, all of society—is dependent on the continued productivity of its farmland.

**Security.** Perhaps the least-emphasized, yet most important concept, security is well-understood in terms of terrorism. Yet a nation’s security rests most
fundamentally on its ability to provide the essentials of life: Food, energy, communications, transportation, etc. Industry would serve itself well by expanding the idea of “security” to include domestic food security as a vital component, thus positioning livestock producers as essential contributors to the nation’s highest priority.

Again, no one is opposed to any of these concepts. There is widespread, and emotional, connection with the need to conserve resources, protect the environment and enhance national security.

The more industry positions its mission in line with those priorities, the more effectively its message is received and remembered.

- Dan Murphy is a veteran food and meat industry journalist, commentator and author of the recent book, “The Meat of the Matter.” To learn more, log onto www.themeatofthematter.com

THE SEVEN ESSENTIAL TERMS TO INFORM MEAT-RELATED MESSAGING

1. SUSTAINABLE. This is a more meaningful, accurate word than “ecological” or “environmental,” shopworn terms often drained of meaning by overuse and abuse among media and activists.

Sustainable illuminates a fundamental principle of production agriculture: It is symbiotic coexistence with other aspects of farming. Unlike other food-producing methods—fishing, hunting and harvesting of wild resources—that currently sustain two-thirds of the Earth’s population, well-managed, modern livestock production creates less of an environmental impact, consumes less energy and puts far less pressure on basic resources of soil, water and land base.

2. FAMILY. Activists have appropriated this word as the opposite of “factory farming” or “industrial agriculture.” The word family needs to be repossessed by the agricultural community.

Virtually all farming is done by families, and in fact few professions offer better opportunities to engage immediate and extended family members in on-farm enterprises. “Family” needs to be the frame we apply to all discussions of production agriculture.
3. TRUST. Without trust, how can producers or farmers convince both consumers in the marketplace and policymakers in government that their positions are honest, their needs are genuine and their efforts to deliver safe, affordable food safety are conducted with integrity?

The key is to recognize that building trust is a relentless, never-ending process, but one that is undermined with the merest hint of deception. Equally important, trust is a two-way street. To gain trust, it must be given to those constituencies who are asked to trust producers. Thus, when consumers collectively demand certain products and product attributes, producers must acknowledge that those demands are legitimate—and, of course, work to fulfill those demands.

4. RESPONSIBILITY. Being responsible means that producers embrace the idea that they can do well by doing good. It means buying into the idea that the “right choices” not only benefit others, but serve to sustain producers themselves.

Although “responsibility” includes a host of strategies—from investments in renewable energy to improvements in animal welfare to green marketing initiatives—responsibility cannot be explained or spun or “manufactured” with PR-ese or sound-bite communications. It can only be demonstrated through actions, day-to-day and over the long term. And when it’s real, it’s as powerful and positive a concept as any in existence.

5. STEWARDSHIP. This term suggests that producers are entrusted with protecting and preserving the soil, watershed and habitat they so that future generations can also benefit from them. Stewardship compels wise and prudent use of resources because the larger community—indeed, all of society—is dependent on the continued productivity of its farmland.

This concept simply cannot be referenced or discussed often enough in any debate about the long-term merits or environmental impact of production agriculture.

6. HUSBANDRY. Although most consumers probably think husbandry involves guys doing chores around the house on weekends, in fact, this ancient, meaningful word has a deeper meaning for a modern population detached from its agricultural roots.

Husbandry encompasses the professional skills necessary to succeed in production agriculture, and also the ethical template that informs operational and marketing decisions. Animal husbandry is practiced by people who care for and care about animals and people, professionals who want their customers to enjoy good health and outstanding value from the foods they purchase.
7. WELL-BEING. We prefer the use of “well-being” to describe the end-point status of farm animals, as opposed to “welfare.” That’s because welfare not only has negative connotations implying that producers are doing animals some sort of favor to maintain acceptable conditions, but also because welfare implies only the absence of abuse or degrading conditions.

Well-being suggests a positive focus by producers on management that ensures farm animals are healthy, happy and well-cared for during growth and maturity.

THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES
OF HIGHLY EFFECTIVE ACTIVISTS

1. MARGINALIZE YOUR ENEMIES. Question producers’ credibility, motivation and ethical standards.

- The alternative: Disarm your foes by acknowledging their validity. There is always room for differences of opinion, for alternatives to mainstream production and for innovative ideas that advance both production agriculture and animal welfare.

2. LEVERAGE VULNERABLE POLICYMAKERS. Pressure legislators, regulators and policymakers with no economic stake in the fight.

- The alternative: Identify decision makers with ag-related constituencies and make clear the stakes (food security, rural viability, export revenue) when proposed regulations attempt to constrain production.

3. FOCUS ON FEELINGS—FORGET THE FACTS. When people are angry, afraid or emotionally upset, they react irrationally.

- The alternative: Fight fire with fire. Counter rational arguments (such as the environmental impact of livestock production) with sound science; debate emotional controversies (such as alleged animal abuse) with emotional arguments based on consumer self-interest.

4. FALL BACK ON FEAR. When consumers are worried about their well-being, their pocketbooks or vague but frightening phobias, support is maximized for extremist attacks on agriculture.

- The alternative: Use lexicon of consumer-friendly terminology to paint a different picture of the overall activities and environmental impact of production agriculture.
5. RECRUIT ‘A-LISTERS’ FOR ANTI-INDUSTRY CAMPAIGNS. Capitalize on the public’s obsession with celebrities to advance restrictive animal ‘welfare’ measures aimed at crippling production.

• The alternative: Put a human face on farming. Emphasize the fundamental interests of ranchers, producers and farmers to ensure humane treatment of livestock and powerful economic motivation to practice good stewardship of resources and animals.

6. MAGNIFY THE ‘HORRORS’ OF TECHNOLOGY. Make so-called factory farming, biotechnology and the use of production inputs a scary scenario for consumers.

• The alternative: Always connect agricultural science or technology to other spheres—medicine, communications, transportation—where people benefit from advances driven by scientific R&D.

7. DEMONIZE ‘PROFITS’ AS EVIL. Make “corporate greed” the ultimate enemy, which only an alternative production model generated by activists can defeat.

• The alternative: Re-frame farm families and producers as the real heroes practicing stewardship, caring for animals and working to provide safe, affordable food.
Prairie Hog Country is proud to be a continuing sponsor of the Manitoba Swine Seminar

Prairie Hog Country continues to be the producers number one choice for hog news and information in Western Canada.

4650 copies are distributed direct to producers, colonies and industry representatives.

News, Features, New Products, Industry Appointments, Recipes and so so much more.

With the hog producers facing many challenging times six editions a year keeps them informed.

Western Canada’s independently owned hog magazine. Thank you Producers and Businesses for your past, present and future support.

For details and information please contact

Prairie Hog Country
Ph. 780.986.0962  Fax: 780.980.9640
Mailing Address: Box 5536, Leduc, AB T9E 2A1
Courier Address: 4205-41 Street, Leduc, AB T9E 4V5
hogcountry@shaw.ca       www.prairiehogcountry.ca