

PolicyPennings by Daryll E. Ray & Harwood D. Schaffer

Livestock press reports range from concealment to obfuscation to engagement

During the last week we ran across a number of articles that present different approaches by those in the livestock industry to the animal welfare issue: concealment, obfuscation, engagement.

One of the articles concerned an arrest under the ag gag laws that we discussed in our last column. Some of the ag gag laws make it a crime to record images of an agricultural operation without the consent of the owner. The effect of such laws is to conceal any activities that the public might find objectionable.

According to an April 29, 2013 Salt Lake Tribune article by Jim Dalrymple II, “Amy Meyer was horrified by what she saw at a Draper slaughterhouse, but she didn’t plan on becoming the first person charged with violating the state’s ‘ag gag’ law. Amy Meyer, 25, faces a class B misdemeanor for agricultural operation interference.

“Prosecutors filed the charge in Draper’s justice court Feb. 19 after Meyer reportedly used her cell phone to film the Dale T. Smith and Sons Meat Packing Co. 11 days earlier.” Meyer stated that she made the video from a public right-of-way. After the story received widespread attention, the charges against Meyer were dropped, though they could be re-filed at a later date.

In another take on public concern about animal welfare, Linden Olsen, in a commentary on porkNetwork, wrote, “By carefully choosing the words we use when speaking about our farms and our food products, we can slowly change the perception of our industry and our wholesome pork products to our customers. Best of all, it doesn’t cost a cent” (<http://www.porknetwork.com/pork-news/latest/Commentary-by-Linden-Olson-Words-204219211.html>).

Olson’s list of words that need changing: “1) confinement barns: environmentally controlled housing; 2) gestation stalls/crates: individual maternity pens; 3) slaughter: harvest; 4) castration: neutering; 5) manure: fertilizer or plant nutrient resource; and 6) hog farmer: pork production specialist.” He doesn’t mention changing any practices that some find offensive.

The American Meat Institute (AMI) championed a different approach; engage the consumer in gaining an understanding of the processes used in meat production. In a report on a speech given by Janet Riley, AMI’s VP for public affairs and professional development at the Animal Agriculture Stakeholders Summit, Drovers CattleNetwork Managing Editor John Maday

writes, “Animal-rights activists often say if slaughter houses had glass walls, we’d all be vegetarians. AMI decided to test that theory by launching their ‘Glass Walls Project’ in 2012.

“Noting that public trust in large corporations has plummeted in recent years and that consumers increasingly demand more information about food production, Riley says AMI approached Colorado State University professor and animal-handling expert Temple Grandin, PhD, to record videos of the entire livestock-slaughter process” (<http://www.cattlenetwork.com/editorial/john-maday/Glass-walls-at-the-packing-plant-205697131.html>).

The result was an “unscripted video tour of a beef-processing plant, narrated by Dr. Grandin. They left it to Grandin to select a representative plant at which to film. AMI tested the initial video with consumer focus groups, not knowing what to expect in terms of reactions. Most of the test viewers were surprised by the safety measures for workers, efficiency of operation and the humane treatment of animals. There were a few points of confusion, which the producers addressed by expanding the explanations in the video, which they released in August 2012” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VMqYYXswono>).

Given the reception of the Grandin video, AMI plans to release a video of a pork slaughter facility. As Maday writes, “The demand for transparency will continue to intensify, Riley says, adding that packers must show the public how their business works.” At the same time AMI will undoubtedly identify production changes that will resonate well with evolving attitudes towards animal welfare.

In a subsequent article on the Animal Agriculture Stakeholders Summit, Maday reported on a presentation by David Westcott. In his speech, Westcott talked about dialog with consumers and suggested three steps: 1) know who your stakeholders are; 2) ask them what they want; and 3) give it to them.

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