

Crisis Management 101

Today's instantaneous messaging requires producers to be much more adept at dealing with a crisis.

Story by
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Facebook. Twitter. YouTube. We've all heard of these social network tools that are becoming the world's most popular format for communication. And, because of the sheer numbers of people worldwide using these forms of media, news — verified and otherwise — can be transferred in mere seconds.

That ability to send and receive news almost instantaneously renders the beef industry quite vulnerable, says Charlie Powell, a senior public information officer for Washington State University's College of Veterinary Medicine. Thus, he warns that beef producers need to be prepared for how this new media can spread news — and affect markets — in the event that a crisis occurs.

Powell's specialties are crisis and risk communications, as well as media relations and institutional promotion. And, he has some very real-world experience when it comes to crisis management. Powell was on the front lines of managing communication after the cow with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) was identified in Washington state in December 2003.

Social media's scope

To understand just how powerful social media can be, Powell shares a few statistics about its size and scope:

- 96% of the world's developed country population under 30 years old belong to a social network.
- If Facebook were a country, it would be the third largest, behind China and India.
- One-third of the population now prefers to use their cell phone for news access vs. reading a traditional newspaper.
- Women ages 35-62 use social networking most.
- Even traditional journalists turn to the Internet (blogs, YouTube, etc.) for story research.
- The Associated Press announced in September 2010 that it has begun crediting bloggers as news sources.

"And you can likely expect those numbers to grow," Powell says of the staggering statistics showing the broad adoption of these media outlets.

The downside of the scope and speed of instantaneous communication is that the media — official and otherwise — is everywhere, and no system is in place to verify that the news, photos or video being circulated is credible or in context.

For instance, Powell points out that a photo or brief video footage showing hot-iron or freeze-branding a calf, preg-checking a cow, or other common management practices could

easily be misinterpreted by the public. As a real example of this, the public's recent misunderstanding that swine flu was related to pigs and pork ended up costing the pork industry millions of dollars in lost revenue.

Powell wants livestock producers to realize, "There is no media chain anymore ... Anyone with access to electricity and the Internet can potentially affect your business faster than any news organization in history."

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Be proactive

How can animal agriculture combat the social media monster? Powell says job one in crisis management is informing and educating the public before a crisis even occurs. This means producers should find opportunities to share with the public why cattle are ear-tagged, branded, vaccinated, artificially inseminated, pregnancy-tested and subjected to other everyday management practices.

Biosecure ranch tours, blogs and posting educational footage on YouTube are all means of doing this. Powell says taking a proactive approach can help garner understanding among the public, so when they do see something questionable on the Internet or in any media, they are able to put it into context.

Secondly, Powell advocates that employees working in animal agriculture — be it a ranch, feedlot, salebarn or harvest facility — must be trained and monitored so that animals are treated humanely, and the employees have the ability to handle a crisis if it occurs.

Powell suggests video surveillance can be a friend to the industry. Why? He says when employees know they are being watched, it reduces the incidence of inappropriate behavior. Secondly, if an undercover video surfaces showing questionable treatment of livestock, then there is full footage to compare it to and determine in what context the incident occurred.

The third tactic in crisis management is to have a plan in place for your operation should a crisis occur in the industry and start circulating via social networks and media outlets. Powell suggests following these guidelines:

Verify that something is real.

Powell explains: If we get a rumor of disease out there, some people are going to try to move cattle quickly, which could make the situation worse by further spreading the disease or affecting markets. Meanwhile, the rumor could be

the result of misinformation or intentional disinformation, so verification is very important, Powell emphasizes.

Find out where the crisis has occurred as quickly as possible. The scope of the incident will determine some of the effect to the rest of the industry. For instance, Powell explains if it is a USDA-regulated disease [tuberculosis (TB), brucellosis (or Bang's disease), foot-

and-mouth disease (FMD), or animals suspect for BSE] that affects several herds in different locations, there could be nationwide implications. If it's an isolated incident, it may only cause regional or statewide concern.

Find out quickly what caused the crisis to occur. Determine, "Is it plausible that this happened?" Powell says.

Once those questions have been

answered, Powell says decisions can be made as to how the crisis might affect your own operation and what steps should be taken. He adds that addressing an industry crisis has to be a team effort, so be ready to seek out the advice of your local or state veterinarian, state officials and Extension specialists as well.

