

# Filling the Void

*Producers are taking the truth to consumers.*

by **WES ISHMAEL**

Building fence may not teach all the lessons of life, but it provides plenty. For instance, one intuitive rule quickly learned is that any post sitting in a hole with rocks or left too lightly tamped is an invitation to frustration. Voids are a problem, and you'd best make sure they get filled with what's helpful.

Maybe it's such a void, information in this case, that gave anti-livestock and anti-agriculture activists purchase, allowing truth about the industry to sag.

It's not like the industry never responded to activist propaganda. It's just that there were so many activists with so much money to toss around. That and the eruption of information technology magnified activists' efforts to the point that for too long it seemed no matter where you turned, there was another activist group with the podium to themselves.

It can still feel that way, but during the last 18-24 months, arguably, cattle producers, the businesses serving them and the organizations representing them

have harnessed advocacy so broadly and, at times, so cohesively that consumers have had no choice but to at least consider the truth alongside the activist propaganda.

Pick any subject concerning the cattle business, from management practices to marketing, and you can find an activist group out to get to you over one related issue or another. Pick about any subject now, though, and it seems there's at least one formal advocate or advocacy effort in response.

## **Issue-specific advocacy**

There are 75 pro-ag and pro-livestock blogs listed at the website for the Animal Agriculture Alliance ([www.animalagriculturealliance.org](http://www.animalagriculturealliance.org)) alone. The mission for the Animal Agriculture Alliance is "to communicate the importance of modern animal agriculture to consumers and the media. The Alliance educates these audiences about topics ranging from animal welfare to biotechnology using reliable, science-based information."

Those blogs mentioned at the Alliance site don't include the link found there to College Aggies Online (<http://aggiesonline.ning.com/>), which has its own blog. College Aggies Online (CAO) is a joint venture between the Animal Agriculture Alliance and the American National CattleWomen that connects and provides industry advocacy training to college students from across the country.

CAO shouldn't be confused with I Love Farmers ... They Feed My Soul ([www.ilovefarmers.org](http://www.ilovefarmers.org)). It's a group of

young people with a vested interest in agriculture establishing dialogue with people from their own generation about where food comes from and how it's produced.

Then there are producer advocates like Stacy and Troy Hadrick of South Dakota, who established the popular Advocates for Agriculture ([www.advocatesforag.blogspot.com](http://www.advocatesforag.blogspot.com)) after they'd been hoodooed by a journalist writing for a popular consumer press publication that they thought was trying to offer a realistic perspective of cattle production.

If you want to get at meat nutrition and safety, specifically, check out the new website launched by the American Meat Institute (AMI). Called Meat Mythcrushers ([www.meatmythcrushers.com](http://www.meatmythcrushers.com)), the site "was developed in consultation with some of the leading experts in the field of meat and animal science, food safety and nutrition to provide consumers and media with the other side of the story — a side that often

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**Stacy Hadrick**



**Troy Hadrick**

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is overlooked in media reports and on the Internet.”

While there, be sure to download the “Setting the Record Straight” brochure. It’s aimed at consumers, but also provides fingertip facts for those in the industry answering questions about such things as the use of hormones and antibiotics in

beef production, the safety of beef today compared to the past and animal care at packing facilities.

Maybe you need information regarding the truth about environmental issues. Check out The Heartland Institute ([www.heartland.org](http://www.heartland.org)). Whether it’s exploring the myth of global warming or the insanity

of recycling, you can find plenty of perspectives differing from those usually espoused by media talking heads.

Then there are what have become industry standby sources because of their long tenure. Sites like the Hudson Institute ([www.hudson.org](http://www.hudson.org)), which provide scientific facts counter to populist dogma on a range

of issues such as sustainable agriculture practices.

Another organization no less effective for the miles it has traveled is the Center for Consumer Freedom ([www.consumerfreedom.com](http://www.consumerfreedom.com)) and sister sites like Humane Watch ([www.humanewatch.org](http://www.humanewatch.org)) that provide background to the skullduggery of leading activist groups, while also challenging them with their own media campaigns.

All of this is just a smattering of current industry advocacy efforts and doesn’t begin to consider those that either teach producers how to advocate or offer them training and documentation to substantiate what they’re advocating.

**Industry-specific training**

Consider Masters of Beef Advocacy (MBA), “a self-directed online training program designed to equip beef producers and industry allies with the information they need to be everyday advocates for the beef industry.” MBA ([www.beef.org/mba](http://www.beef.org/mba)) candidates are required to complete six courses in beef advocacy, including

- modern beef production,
- animal care,
- beef safety,
- beef nutrition,
- environmental stewardship, and
- the beef checkoff.

By this spring there were more than 2,788 MBA graduates from 47 states, the District of Columbia, Mexico, Western Australia, and one on active duty in Qatar. Graduates range in age from 13 to 80, and represent every farm size and type of operation.

Celeste Settrini serves as a prime example. She’s a partner in her family’s California cow-calf operation; a fresh commodity vegetable broker dealing with retail, foodservice and wholesale business; the state president of California

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**— Celeste Settrini**

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Women in Agriculture; and legislative director for the California Cattlewomen. Settrini is also an MBA graduate.

“I found out about the MBA program and immediately decided that I needed to sign up,” Settrini says. “Why? Because I believe in continuing my education to be as well-rounded as I can possibly be. I

have lived my experiences on the ranch and tell a pretty good story, but the added benefit of all you learn from the MBA program with facts and figures complements what I already know. It is the added boost to give your story the impact that really goes the extra mile. When you can back up experiences with

facts and figures, I believe it makes it complete.”

The MBA program is funded with beef checkoff dollars, as is the National Beef Quality Assurance (BQA) program ([www.bqa.org](http://www.bqa.org)) itself. BQA is “a nationally coordinated, state-implemented program that provides systematic information to

U.S. beef producers and beef consumers of how commonsense husbandry techniques can be coupled with accepted scientific knowledge to raise cattle under optimum management and environmental conditions. BQA guidelines are designed to make certain all beef consumers can take pride in what they purchase — and can trust and have confidence in the entire beef industry.”

The forerunner to BQA — Beef Safety Assurance — began in the 1970s. State BQA programs funded with the checkoff began in the early 1990s.

Most recently, BQA leaders worked with the Beef Cattle Institute (BCI) at Kansas State University (K-State) to develop Animal Care Training (ACT), which provides online training for livestock caregivers. Producers in many states can also become BQA-certified via ACT ([www.animalcaretraining.org](http://www.animalcaretraining.org)).

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**— Dan Thomson**

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For instance, in addition to the kind of BQA training producers are already familiar with, at ACT you’ll find offerings such as the NBQA Guide for Cattle Transporters and the Master Cattle Transport video.

“The Master Cattle Transporter program was developed as guidelines and suggestions for an industry that is full of variables, including how different cattle handle, trailer types and state regulations,” says Ken Real, Real Cattle and Trucking. “But there is one common goal that we all share, and that is striving to achieve good cattle handling practices. We want to create a positive public perception of the industry, and the Master Cattle Transporter program is one way to start communication from ranch to rail and help each other improve our cattle handling and safety.”

“By completing the Master Cattle Transporter online training through the Animal Care Training Program, transporters are educating themselves and ensuring proper cattle handling throughout all segments of the beef industry,” says Dan Thomson,

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veterinarian and Jones professor of production medicine and epidemiology and director of the BCI. “The modules focus on truck and trailer maintenance, handling, loading and unloading, biosecurity and weather. Animals are transported every day, and the safety of those people handling the cattle and the

safety of the cattle is of utmost importance to our industry.”

The online training modules make it possible for producers and their employees to take the training at their convenience. Thomson adds that training employees is essential for worker safety, employee retention and production of wholesome

products. When a training package is complete, a certificate of completion is made available for printing. The training modules are offered in both English and Spanish.

**Facts better merit pride**

Of course, all of the advertising in the

world can't transform the proverbial sow's ear into a silk purse. Likewise, no amount of training or advocacy will counter the black eye inflicted upon the industry by the handful of producers who willfully choose to do things the wrong way.

Consider an undercover video captured by Mercy for Animals. It came to light in April. Footage was from a dairy calf farm in Texas. There's a calf lying there and there is some cretin bludgeoning the calf to death with a pickaxe. It will turn your stomach and make you want to saddle a fast horse and catch that sadistic idiot with a short rope.

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**— Ron DeHaven**

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Yes, undercover videos are less than fair, as is the practice of animal rights activists hiring on to livestock operations for the express purposes of trying to catch someone doing something they shouldn't be. In fact, some states are trying to make such acts illegal. That's understandable, but as long as animal cruelty exists like that depicted in the aforementioned video, such laws are hard to argue for.

“The frequency with which these videos appear prohibits us from considering them as isolated incidents, or accepting the excuse that the producers were unaware that the abuses were taking place,” said Ron DeHaven, CEO of the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) following release of the Texas video. “Undercover videos showing inexcusable abuse of food animals highlight the need for more veterinary oversight on ranches and farms, and at livestock markets and slaughter facilities.

“A variety of organizations, including the AVMA, industry groups, humane organizations, and state and federal regulatory authorities, offer guidance to protect the health and welfare of animals used to produce our food supply,” DeHaven added. “Those guidelines, however, are only as good as their implementation. If those responsible for the good welfare of the animals in their care are unable or unwilling to follow such guidelines, then additional oversight is obviously needed.”