

# MLA's public perception communication strategies

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Australia's livestock industry is under increased focus from the media, lobby groups, activists and Australian and international communities. This focus presents industry with an opportunity to promote its commitment to the environment, animal welfare and the integrity of its production and processing systems to an audience with a growing interest in livestock production and where their food comes from.

The rise of animal activism and the increasing focus on animal welfare means Australia's livestock industry operates in an environment where there is more interest in its conduct than ever before.

Growing consumer concern and interest in food production is leading to changes in consumer behaviour and purchasing. Retailers are aware of these shifts and are implementing policy changes and campaigns to further develop consumer interest in the environment and animal welfare and to take advantage of this growing trend by differentiating product and store offerings.

Recent research has found that integrity and animal welfare are increasing in importance for consumers when making purchasing decisions. MLA research has found 58% of consumers are interested in animal welfare and want to know more about where their food comes from, and when it comes to meat, how the livestock were cared for and reared\*.

At the same time however there is a vast disconnect between the city and the country, a lack of exposure to farms and rural life – there is a growing gap from the farm to the fridge and what happens in between.

Activist groups operating in Australia are diverse and constantly growing, and are increasingly mounting joint community and political campaigns to influence policy. A key element of the activist strategy is generating media coverage of animal welfare related issues and ensuring ongoing attention through social media such as facebook, twitter and online forums. Their significant online army of activists target politicians and influencers through letter writing campaigns, online commentary, tweets and blogs.

Whilst new and challenging, this outlook presents an important opportunity for Australia's livestock industry to share its story with the Australian community – and the people who work in the industry are best placed to start that conversation.

During the recent live cattle export issue the passionate stories, interviews and comments from Australian producers, stockmen, transporters and others involved in the industry resonated strongly with Australian audiences. It was these stories that the media continued to

cover, and it was these stories that were forwarded throughout the industry and community on email, picked up on websites, used on facebook and tweeted. It is critical that the lot feeding industry equips its members with the skills and confidence to tell their stories, talk about their operations and share their commitment to the environment and animal welfare. The best people to talk about the industry are those that live it every day.

The Australian community has traditionally had a strong affinity with farmers, and maintains a healthy respect for Australian farmers today. Recent research found that 93% of Australians believe farmers are ethical and trustworthy and 78% believe Australian farmers are good caretakers of the land.\* It makes sense that Australian farmers and others who work in the livestock and agricultural industries are the most credible messengers of industry information.

The Australian grainfed beef industry recently initiated a community communications program to proactively educate the general public about its operations and commitment to animal welfare through its science, systems and people.

The program aims to positively position the grainfed beef industry with the community and key influencers, as well as to equip industry with the skills and material to promote and defend its operations. The program's key method of sharing facts about the industry is through the personal accounts and stories of people involved in lotfeeding. The program uses traditional communication channels such as print media and events, whilst also taking advantage of the growing interest in new media such as YouTube.

The campaign includes the development of a series of videos profiling the Australian grain fed beef industry and its commitment to the environment and animal welfare, which will be launched on the new ALFA YouTube channel. These videos showcase feedlot operations with commentary and personal insight from industry members, vets and nutritionists highlighting the critical elements of feedlot operations and covers induction, animal health, the role of pen riders, nutrition, shade and the National Feedlot Accreditation Scheme.

Other activities include an education program targeting chefs and food service media to balance coverage of feedlot beef production including stories in *Chef's Special* magazine and *Food Service* magazine; alignment of grainfed beef messages throughout Meat & Livestock Australia's (MLA) marketing and promotional material; a chef feedlot tour program to encourage the support and use of grainfed beef; development of a photo and video library brochures and involvement at events such as the Sydney Royal Agricultural Show.

An industry advocate initiative currently being developed by MLA as part of the Community Communications program will deliver the tools and training to industry members to help them to promote their livelihoods and commitment to the environment and animal welfare.

\*2010 Pollinate survey