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## **Protect your farm from animal activism**

By Starrla Cray

With crops to grow, animals to care for, and a business to manage, farmers might not consider public relations part of their job description.

However, maintaining a positive image can pay off in the long run, according to Midwest Dairy Association (MDA) Director of Communications Sherry Newell.

"The way we tell our story is really important; it's a collective responsibility," she said during the 20th annual Carver County/University of Minnesota Dairy Expo and Trade Show in Norwood Young America Feb. 20.

Newell's presentation, titled "Animal Activism: Protect Your Farm from Being a Target," gave farmers insight into consumer attitudes, and provided ways to counter misconceptions about agriculture.

"While the majority of consumers believe that dairy farmers treat their cows well, nationally about 10 percent feel that the farmer is doing a 'poor' job," Newell noted, referring to a survey conducted by the Innovation Center for US Dairy.

The opinion is more favorable in the Midwest, but 5 percent of surveyed consumers still rated farmers' practices as "poor."

"This is not a current red flag, but it does bear watching," Newell stated, adding that since 28 percent of consumers have not yet formed an opinion, these are the people likely to be most impacted by messages about the dairy industry.

"It can be frustrating being in farming with the misconceptions out there," Newell said. "We know that what we do is important. It's good to show your pride in being a person who helps feed the world."

The dairy checkoff is one way US producers and dairy importers have contributed to a positive image throughout the industry.

Annual total milk consumption has climbed 12 percent since the dairy checkoff began in 1983, according to [www.dairycheckoff.com](http://www.dairycheckoff.com).

The MDA is one part of that, representing more than 9,500 dairy farm families in 10

states.

The association works to ensure that people are feeling good about dairy, which will ultimately impact sales, Newell said.

A key piece of the research is understanding the consumer. The Innovation Center for US Dairy survey, for example, showed that 73 percent of US adults rate cheese at an 8, 9, or 10 (very favorable). Milk showed similar ratings, with 65 percent giving it an 8, 9, or 10.

“We don’t have a crisis in consumer confidence – not by a long shot,” Newell said. “There is almost no other food product that almost everyone has in their fridge every day of the year.”

However, waiting until a crisis arises is not the time to start developing a public relations plan, she added.

“Consumers are looking for reassurance,” she said.

Sometimes, media coverage about unprofessional farms will taint the public’s view of the industry, Newell explained.

“We’ve all seen this one-sided public dialogue,” she said. “You are what they say you are, until you tell them something different.”

Newell gave the example of a TV news story about a Texas ranch where calves were being brutally beaten. Although animal abuse is very rare, and the four employees involved were fired from the large farm, the story paints an unfavorable picture, Newell said.

“It was very sensationalized,” she said. “Imagine the heartbreak of the people who are trying to do the right thing.”

In order to counteract negative messages, Newell recommends a variety of MDA resources, such as farm brochures, training to become a spokesperson for the dairy industry, and a dairy toolkit.

“When someone connects a face with the food that’s produced, it creates trust,” she said.

A simple video and photos of accepted practices on the farm can also be beneficial, she added.

“Have it available – have it ready,” she said. “What a beautiful way to connect with your community.”

Before hiring employees for farm work, Newell suggests checking their references carefully, and typing their names into a Google search. She also recommends developing farm protocols in writing, in case someone were to misrepresent what is practiced on the farm.

Newell stressed that a public relations plan is not designed to cover up bad

practices, and it's essential for farmers to make sure they are doing things right in the first place.

"Every conversation counts," she said.

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