Animal Welfare: perception & reality
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Do you think cows have emotions? Do you think cows feel pain? Do animals exhibit empathy, sympathy and compassion? These were the questions asked to the attendees of the 2018 Dairy Cattle Welfare Symposium. Speakers, farmers and industry representatives from around the globe gathered in Scottsdale, AZ May 31st – June 1st, 2018 to discuss the intersection of Best practices and sustainability as it ties back to dairy cattle welfare.

Currently, Americans care more about animal welfare than children’s education or hunger. Those are the results of the third “Causes Americans Care About” study, conducted by the global communications firm Ketchum. Responses from 1,000 adults found 41% picked animal welfare as their No. 1 cause. Children’s education ranked second with 38% of respondents, followed by hunger with 33% of respondents. Why should we (dairy educators, dairy farmers and industry support) care or worry about this? Because these are our consumers. We need to know what their concerns are, and how to address them. We also need to be honest about the day to day management practices that occur in animal production.

Some of our best management practices might not always be “pretty” visually to a consumer but it is what is best for the animal. An example of this would be hoof trimming. In early July social media was abuzz with a picture of a “cow crusher”. What was happening to this poor cow? Very simple, she was having her feet trimmed in a hoof trimming shoot. A very common and safe practice. She was being restrained and properly taken care of. To anyone with an agricultural background, a picture of a cow in a hoof trimming shoot is just that, to someone in the general public, it is a scary looking picture. We need to take the time to explain what is occurring, in terms the general public understand – the cow is receiving a pedicure, 1800 pound animals don’t fit well into salon chairs, and sometimes they get a little finicky and kick. For the safety of the animal and the person, she is restrained.

More and more consumers only see the dairy industry through pictures online. Mandi McLeod from New Zealand, presented on “lessons learned”. Farmers (regardless of country) are 1. focused on producing food in a continually changing climate in a sustainable manner and 2. At risk of being pulled down by the minority (ie: 1 bad egg, 1 farmer who doesn’t care). Consumers have concerns, as stated above about animal welfare. So, how can we win the war and show consumers that we care, and do the best to take care of our animals? Incremental improvements overtime.

- Seek to understand, and then be understood
  - Listen to the concerns. LISTEN. Don’t list to respond or react. Listen to understand and then address their concern.
- Animal care programs must treat all farmers fairly by taking into account the landscape in which they operate. These programs need to be realistic with minimum standards and unapologetic in accountability and consequences. As an industry we should be raising the bar and raising our compliance rates, not the other way around.

At the end of the day, we, the DAIRY INDUSTRY, are only as good as the weakest link. We all play a role in animal welfare. Yes, we are dealing with market vulnerability and low milk prices, but is this an acceptable excuse for poor animal care? NO.
Dairy farmers are all human, and have different belief systems and different opinions. We need to approach animal welfare and best management practices as a team sport. We cannot continue to defend the indefensible. We need to work together with each other (dairy farmers, cooperatives, EVERYONE) to rethink the problem and challenges around animal welfare, both from a consumer’s view-point and a farmer’s view-point) and continue to develop an evolving approach. We cannot become complacent, but need to be open to new ideas and evolve as new management practices and technologies become available. As an industry, we have a collective responsibility to clearly identify the issue(s) and have a voice in the solution(s).