

"Advocacy"- The New Buzz-Word of the Nation

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East Central FFA – Texas FFA

Senior Prepared Public Speaking

“Advocacy”- The New Buzz-Word of the Nation

“Advocacy”, the new-buzz word of the nation. When faced with depressed economic times, everyone from educational support groups to military contractors are trying to find an advocate to plead its case. So, should the agricultural industry jump on the bandwagon by standing up, uniting, and becoming an advocate for the future of agriculture (Nedergaard, 2008)? And if so, who will stand in this fight? Better yet, what will they say, and how will they say it?

According to the American Farm Bureau, the average American is two or more generations removed from the farm. This fact, coupled with increased pressures from today’s animal rights organizations, threatens not only the junior livestock industry, FFA and 4-H, but also animal agriculture (C. Skaggs, personal communications, November 11, 2012). These non-agricultural organizations, such as PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) and HSUS (Humane Society of the United States), are thriving as their membership increases, and misconceptions about agriculture are reaching an all-time high (PETA, 2012). The shame, however, is that we, as agricultural producers, have not emphasized our story enough to the general public. Therefore, misconceptions about agriculture are passed as reality without much concern. We can no longer allow the mainstream media to convey our message for us because sometimes they simply get it wrong. Take for example, the H1N1, “aka...Swine Flu,” epidemic of 2009 scared the world, plummeted our pork futures, and nearly killed the swine industry due to the way the media portrayed the story (Attavanich, 2011). We, as an industry, need to step up to the plate and become more proactive in delivering our

positive message about agriculture. However, the question still remains...what is the best way to deliver our message?

Last year I was horrified that PETA picketed the show I was attending. They considered me a murderer. The reason, I raise and care for my animals and provide them with the best possible life. No one spoke for me or the other exhibitors at the show that day.

For years farmers, ranchers, and agriculturalists have kept their light concealed from the rest of the non-agricultural world, but now it's time to let our light shine. The Texas FFA, 4-H, Farm Bureau, and many other agricultural stakeholders have joined together to develop a program to teach Texas youth about the power of advocacy. In August 2011, the *Texas Proud of Texas Agriculture Program* was launched at the Texas Vocational Agricultural Teachers Conference in Arlington, Texas. “The mission of the *Texas Proud of Texas Agriculture Program* is to empower Texas youth with science-based information to engage our communities with a positive message of Texas food and fiber production - making Texas a leader and competitive in a global marketplace,” stated Dr. Chris Boleman (personal communications, November 11, 2012), Texas Program Director of 4-H and Youth Development. This program was specifically designed to teach Texas youth how to use their resources to spread the message of the agricultural industry, thus allowing youth to become advocates for agriculture by addressing two familiar core concepts: “What will we say, and how will we say it?”

The true answer to winning this uphill battle against groups like PETA is to speak with the public, which has not heard from the FFA and 4-H members, or, from farmers and ranchers. As FFA members we must present our positive message by talking about

growing up on a farm or ranch, raising and showing livestock, and the love and passion that each one of us has for our animals. However, we cannot win over the public purely with emotions and personal stories alone. We also must be able to support these emotional “feel good ideas” with scientific evidence (Lee, 2011).

Perspective versus reality; emotions versus science. The PETA organization has over two million members and followers on its website, and HSUS has over eleven million followers, making both organizations the top two animal rights groups in the nation. Both PETA and HSUS have an extensive amount of advertising, whether it be through blogs, commercials, websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, or with celebrities. There is no doubt that everyone has seen the sad TV commercials produced by HSUS, which are embedded with puppies missing eyes and the abandoned kittens and abused animals. These commercials truly do touch the inner core of all our emotions. HSUS also encourages the public to donate money to support the care of these animals. Yet, HSUS does not run a single animal shelter, and this organization donates less than one percent of its proceeds to shelters to assist those poor, disadvantaged animals (Bichao, 2011). So why do people continue to donate?

Simply put, it’s difficult for the public to differentiate the emotional from the cold hard facts, so the money continues to pour in. The propaganda from PETA is endless, and their website is filled with videos of cattle, hogs, chickens, and horses being abused and inhumanely slaughtered. What we are not told is that most of these videos were recorded in countries such as Spain, Mexico, and India, which simply lack the strict regulations of the United States (W. Beeler, personal communications, November 11, 2012). Yet, American agriculture continues to be targeted as the perpetrators for all of

these tragedies. The long-term goal for both of these organizations is nothing less than scary. HSUS Vice-President JP Goodwin has stated, "We do not want any of these animals to be raised and killed. Our goal is to get rid of the whole entire industry", (Bichao, 2011).

Our public is thirsting for knowledge about agriculture, and they want to insure that animals are humanely treated (J. Cleere, personal communications, November 11, 2010). Whether our story is delivered by speaking with friends or people in our communities, the use of social media, newspaper articles, or through events such as this one – our message must be heard to ensure our future. We need to:

1. Shine a positive light on the animal agriculture industry
2. Stop the myths and misconceptions put forth by animal rights activists and sometimes the misinformed media.
3. Explain to the public that we are animal “welfarists” and that we care for our animals.

Sarah Hubbart from the Animal Agriculture Alliance state in her blog, “Every day, whether you realize it or not, you act as a representative of the agricultural industry.”

Should I have spoken up at the livestock show where PETA had picketed? Perhaps not, however, we must use the forums that we do have effectively. Our world population by the year 2050 will be over nine billion people. That’s only a one hundred percent increase in the food currently needed to feed our world today. Therefore, we need to promote our industry's true message; member by member, chapter by chapter, state by state, we must take a stand...so are you ready to stand and be an advocate for American Agriculture

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