

# 9 STEPS FOR MANAGING A CRISIS



By Mike Opperman

Crisis events don't happen to every dairy producer, but they could happen to any producer at any given time. These events come in any variety of sizes, with the impact on your business directly related to the interest shown by the general public.

We've seen crisis events in dairy. See any of the undercover videos produced in recent years and, most recently, the events surrounding the death of Mollie Tibbetts by an undocumented dairy employee. Unfortunately farmers are an easy target.

"The argument easily can be made that, given rampant activism and a mainstream news media that has a limited understanding of agriculture, farmers face crises more frequently and to greater severity than other businesses," says Chuck Sanger, a crisis communications expert and president of CS Communications. "From animal treatment to environmental impact, antibiotic usage and nutrition, farmers face challenges today that their predecessors could never have imagined.

According to Sanger, there are a handful of things vital to appropriate communication during a crisis, especially for farmers:

## 1 Have a plan.

"Peacetime planning can equal crisis survival," Sanger says. "A crisis is, at its core, uncomfortable. That makes it critical for farmers to make strategic crisis decisions outside of the throes of a crisis."

Farmers aren't experts at putting together a communications plan, or understanding the intricacies of working with the mainstream media. That's where hiring an outside expert can be beneficial. An outside consultant can build a written crisis plan that includes media/message training and scenario planning.

"Moving through this planning process during peacetime will assure that important decisions are made for strategic reasons and not emotional ones," Sanger says.

## 2 Build a team.

Have a crisis team ready and prepared to manage a crisis event. At minimum, Sanger says a crisis team should include the farm owner, legal counsel, and a communications strategist.

## 3 Don't give the presumption of guilt.

Never respond to a question with "no comment." "Refusal to answer a question or the dreaded 'no comment' answer is a death sentence and a presumption of guilt," Sanger says. Promise to get the reporter the information that is needed, and be sure to respond to the reporter in a timely fashion with a response that fits your predefined media strategy.

## 4 Acknowledge responsibility.

"When a crisis plays out publicly – which is nearly all the time – news and social media channels are not always about finding the truth as much as assigning blame, especially where farmers are concerned," Sanger says. "Take responsibility for that which the farm is responsible and move on to solving the problem. The quicker this happens; the faster efforts begin building a foundation for the farm to emerge from a crisis."

## 5 Show empathy.

When a crisis occurs on a farm it's common for people or animals to be harmed or at risk. "Showing empathy for those experiencing those consequences due to a crisis is the act of an ethical farm run by ethical people," Sanger says.

## 6 A camera is at my door, now what?

In any crisis event there could be a situation where a TV reporter and cameraman show up unannounced to your dairy. "When a farmer is milking cows one minute and fielding intrusive questions the next, that's a stressful situation," Sanger says.

Sanger says it's human nature to be defensive and answer a question quickly without preparing. "Do neither," Sanger says. "It is okay to tell the reporter that, in the interest of accuracy, you'll get back to them with answers." He says most reporters will appreciate your effort, noting that nothing will get a reporter fired faster than fact errors in a story.

## 7 The challenge of a newspaper interview.

While a television interview can be intimidating with a camera and microphone in your face, a newspaper interview can carry greater risk.

A newspaper interview is generally longer and carries greater opportunity for contradictions that could support the reporter's narrative that the farm did something wrong.

"Newspaper interviews should never be done on the spot," Sanger says. "Prepare for them and conduct them over the phone whenever possible, with notes to assist in staying on message."

## 8 Social Media: Jump in with both feet, or don't jump at all.

"We generally discourage farmers from taking the social media leap during a crisis if they aren't already established in the space," Sanger says.

## 9 Leverage the Spotlight

When a crisis happens the attention paid to a farm is much higher than normal. Sanger says this is the time when delivering a predefined set of key messages will define the farm and what it stands for as it emerges from a crisis.

"Without delivering carefully-crafted messages, developed by experts, during a crisis, the farm runs the risk of allowing the crisis to define it, possibly permanently," Sanger says.