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 critical to appropriate communication during a crisis, especially for farmers:

1. Have a plan. “Precautionary planning can equal crisis survival,” Sanger says. “A crisis is, at its core, uncomfortable. That makes it critical for farmers to make strategic 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.

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. “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. “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. “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.”

5. Show empathy. When a crisis occurs on a farm’s time for pennies or animals be harmed or at risk. “Showing empathy for those experiencing the consequences of 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. “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.

8. Social Media: Jump in with both feet, or don’t jump at all. Today’s world media is making it ever easier for farmers to connect with the social media map during a crisis if they aren’t already established in the space. Sanger says.

9. Leverage the Spotlight. In any crisis event, the attention paid to a farm is even higher than that which is usually given when a crisis event is discussed during a daily news cycle. “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.”