


SPECIAL  
REPORT

# BEING MORE TRANSPARENT

A young child with dark hair and large eyes is peering through a clear glass bowl. Inside the bowl, two brown eggs are visible. The child's face is partially obscured by the bowl's rim and the eggs. The background shows a kitchen with light-colored cabinets and a countertop.

Should the poultry industry invest more time educating media and consumers about antibiotics and other production topics? Communications experts and dramatic results of a consumer survey suggest it could yield high returns.



## SILENCE: IT'S NO LONGER GOLDEN



We now have a 24/7 news cycle, and there's dialogue that goes around every news story, every claim, every advertisement.

It's a brave new world for poultry and livestock producers and the food industry — one that demands a whole new level of transparency.

FRANK SINGLETON

### Media experts urge poultry producers to tell their side of the antibiotic story

For decades the old axiom — “Silence is the hardest argument to refute” — was a safe communications strategy for businesses doing anything that was mildly controversial, even if the practice was perfectly safe and legal.

In the poultry industry, for instance, if questions surfaced in the media about the use of antibiotics in poultry, most producers found it best to avoid the subject, keep their heads down and go about their business. As long as they complied with all the government's regulations and standards, there was no need to engage their critics or defend their position. Besides, they reasoned, the story would fade from the spotlight in another day or two.

That's all changed, however. Between fast and easy Internet access, hundreds of cable channels, the explosion of social media, the rise of “citizen journalism” and the emergence of new digital news hubs and blogs, keeping quiet on controversial issues is no longer a wise option. Because today, if poultry producers don't tell their story, someone else will tell it for them — and not always with great accuracy.

#### FILLING THE VACUUM

“The old phrase, ‘Nature abhors a vacuum’ is accurate,” says Bryan Reber, PhD, a professor of public relations at the University of Georgia who specializes in message framing and crisis communications.

“When a vacuum exists, it will be filled by something. And when there is a lack of information on a certain topic, someone is going to provide that information. If you don't provide it, if you don't help frame the story, then you're letting someone else frame it for you.”

But telling a story isn't as simple as it used to be, according to Frank Singleton, an independent public relations strategist based in Atlanta with more than 20 years' experience in the poultry industry.



**If you don't help frame the story, then you're letting someone else frame it for you.**



**BRYAN REBER, PHD**

"There was a time where, if an issue came up, you could make a certain pronouncement or claim and, if you made it often enough and passionately enough, you would find an audience and gain some traction," he says. "But today, there aren't any audiences; there are only participants."

He explains that people today go online, do research, vet information, ask questions and then share what they find with family, friends, colleagues or even perfect strangers with similar interests and views. Consumers have, therefore, become more conscientious, diligent and informed — to the extent they can find accurate, balanced information online. They've also become more vocal.

**A DIALOGUE FOR EVERY STORY**

"Consumers are not just gathering news and information; they're participating in the conversation," Singleton says. "We now have a 24/7 news cycle, and there's dialogue that goes around every news story, every claim, every advertisement. It's a brave new world for poultry and livestock producers and the food industry — one that demands a whole new level of transparency."

While that prospect might seem daunting at first — especially to a highly integrated and competitive industry like poultry, which has long placed a premium on confidentiality — the need for transparency actually creates opportunities for producers.

"Now you can engage customers and have a conversation in a deeper, more meaningful way," Singleton adds. "You can create fans and believers around your product."

Social media requires an ongoing commitment to sustain one's point of view, however. "You can't come and go," the strategist cautions. "You have to stay if you want to have credibility and relevance."

*continued on page 27*



**If you have good information — data-driven, scientific facts, for example — that's very persuasive and useful to people who need to make decisions.**



**BRYAN REBER, PHD**  
University of Georgia





## TIPS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA



Media experts offer these tips for talking with foodservice customers and consumers about antibiotics in poultry:

### BE PROACTIVE.

If you're convinced antibiotics are essential for maintaining the health, welfare, efficiency and affordability of chicken, don't back down. Be confident in your position and share your knowledge, perspectives and experiences with the press, customers and consumers.

### FRAME YOUR STORY.

Identify your key points and back them with industry statistics, scientific data and your own experience raising safe and healthy poultry. Show passion for what you do and believe, but stick to the facts and give specific examples.

### SHOW RESPECT.

While you might strongly disagree with people or groups with opposing views, acknowledge they exist without criticism, and explain – in a calm, level-headed, professional manner – why you believe their perceptions are off base.

### PUT IT IN WRITING.

Develop fact sheets, Q&As, position papers and other documents or links that articulate your company's position. You can also tap the power of social media and refer people to credible, objective articles and reports.

### HELP PEOPLE UNDERSTAND.

Most people tend to put all animal-health products under the same umbrella, whether they're antibiotics, anticoccidials, dewormers or vaccines. Explain your reasons for using antibiotics – treatment, control, prevention, gut health, welfare – and emphasize they are all used under veterinary supervision and in compliance with FDA guidelines and to meet USDA safety standards.

### DRAW ON IN-HOUSE EXPERTISE.

Studies show that veterinarians wield tremendous credibility with consumers (see page 30). Get your veterinarian more involved in talking with your customers' procurement and food-safety personnel.

### NEVER GO ROGUE.

Before approaching the media or customers with your views, solicit input from your colleagues and, of course, honor your company's communications guidelines to ensure a consistent message.





**There are many opportunities to fail at social media...but to not engage is certainly to fail.**



**FRANK SINGLETON**

*continued from page 25*

### FRAME YOUR STORY

But first things first. Before producers join or even start a conversation about antibiotics or any topic in the headlines, they need to determine what to say and, more importantly, how to say it.

According to Reber, research shows that most people are moved by statistics. “If you have good information — data-driven, scientific facts, for example — that’s very persuasive and useful to people who need to make decisions,” he continues. “You need to be proactive and help people understand. Only then can you begin to mold public opinion. Credibility, consistency and understanding how you’re going to frame the story are important.”

Ideally, Reber says, poultry companies should always want to be “out in front of the story instead of trying to catch it.” But what if the story has already sprouted legs and opposing views are already making headlines and influencing opinion?

“If you can set the frame, acknowledge what the critics have to say and then refute it, that’s going to be persuasive and credible,” Reber says.

“Simply putting your perspective out there without acknowledging that there’s another side — especially when the other side has already been told — is problematic.”

### PUT IT IN BLACK AND WHITE

Developing quick-read fact sheets, Q&As, white papers and other handouts for customers, the press, consumer groups and its own website also can go a long way toward articulating a company’s side of the story, Reber adds.

The professor also reminds poultry companies to keep a cool head. “It’s human nature, when you feel like you’re being attacked, to attack in return,” he says. “But that’s precisely what you don’t want to do.”

Tone and tenor are also critical. When talking about antibiotics in poultry production, for instance, keep the conversation positive, informative and professional — never offensive or condescending. “It’s not particularly useful to vilify the other side,” Reber adds. “A rational, fact-based argument will win the day.”

Well, maybe not every day.

He concedes there will always be people on the fringe that will hold their ground no matter what they’re shown or told. “There’s that 5% that you will never win over,” he says. “You can say, ‘Here are the reasons that those concerns are unjustified,’ but you shouldn’t be dismissive. Acknowledge them and try to assuage that concern.”

### JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Singleton notes that online conversations about antibiotic usage in poultry and other topics will continue with or without the industry’s participation. “And to ignore them or to dislike them and then disengage will do your brand or product a great disservice,” he adds. “Because then the only commentary is one-sided.

“There are many opportunities to fail at social media,” he continues, “but to not engage is certainly to fail. People are much smarter when they’ve been presented with some facts and a candid, sustained look at the industry.”

When talking about antibiotics, he recommends telling foodservice customers and consumers about how they are used — how long, for what purpose, the health and economic benefits they bring. Tell them about the day-to-day involvement of veterinarians. Let them know about FDA regulations and USDA inspections. “I think it’s incumbent on the poultry industry, up and down the supply chain, to partner on that,” he adds.



## HELPING THEM UNDERSTAND

At a recent seminar, the US Farmers & Ranchers Alliance (USFRA) emphasized the importance of using everyday language and examples to talk to the public about on-farm antibiotic use. To tell your story more effectively, the trade group suggests building on these clear, simple messages:

**HEALTHY ANIMALS ARE THE FOUNDATION** of a healthy, humane and safe food system.

**ANIMALS GET SICK, JUST LIKE PEOPLE.**

Without antibiotic treatment, many of these animals would suffer needlessly and die.

**PRODUCERS WORK CLOSELY WITH VETERINARIANS** to develop a comprehensive herd health program, which includes many tools such as vaccination, nutrition, proper housing, hygiene and antibiotics.

**UNLIKE PEOPLE, ANIMALS CAN'T STAY HOME** and isolate themselves when they're sick. So, to keep disease from spreading, veterinarians tend to treat the whole herd or flock, rather than just the individual animal. (For similar reasons, doctors may prescribe antibiotics for a patient before surgery to prevent infection or for students in a college dorm to control the spread of contagious diseases.)

**PRODUCERS USE ANTIBIOTICS UNDER VETERINARY SUPERVISION** — only when needed and in compliance with FDA-approved label instructions. Animals that need treatment are identified and monitored carefully until they recover.

For more ideas from USFRA, visit [fooddialogues.com](http://fooddialogues.com).

# ‘Do something about it’

Don't blame consumers if they seem to have little understanding of modern poultry and livestock production.

“It's not their fault and it is not intentional. It is just the way society has evolved,” insists Scott Hurd, DVM, PhD, an associate professor and director of Iowa State University's food-risk modeling and policy lab.

## LOST ON CONSUMERS

For that reason, he adds, a farm's everyday inputs like land, water, fuel and labor are lost on discriminating consumers peering into the meat case. To them, antibiotics or any technologies that promote efficiency

are perceived as producer “greed” — not something that keeps their food safe, wholesome and affordable.

Hurd's down-home advice for reversing this perception: “Do something about it!”

## ‘PROFOUND IMPACT’

For starters, he urges producers to engage local reporters. “The media [have] a profound impact on people's opinions. If you can help them understand, in the smallest way...the care that goes into making the final product they buy in the grocery store, then you will have helped us all,” Hurd advises in his weekly blog at [hurdhealth.com](http://hurdhealth.com).

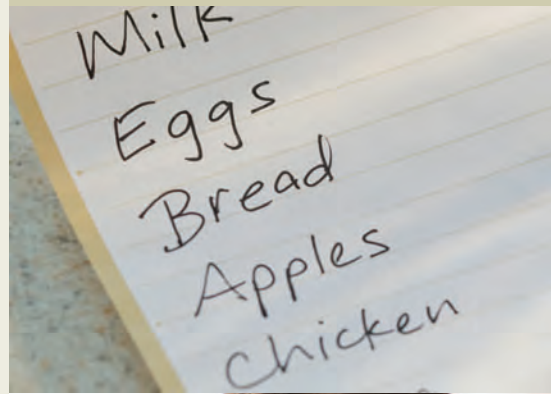
“If reporters experience the reality of farming and food production, they will be less critical,” he adds. “If they see and feel the human lives working to feed their own families as well as others, then food will not seem so strange.”

Food-industry strategist Frank Singleton agrees. “One of the things we fail to tell people is that our families eat poultry products, too. Poultry is produced in partnership with a lot of players up and down the supply chain, but everybody's a consumer at the end of the day,” he says. “If you can make that point, and make it in a human way, you can make a measurable difference in public opinion.”



IF REPORTERS EXPERIENCE THE REALITY OF FARMING AND FOOD PRODUCTION, THEY WILL BE LESS CRITICAL.

SCOTT HURD, DVM, PHD



ONE OF THE THINGS WE FAIL TO TELL PEOPLE IS THAT OUR FAMILIES EAT POULTRY PRODUCTS, TOO.

FRANK SINGLETON



A little education goes a long way toward changing consumer attitudes about antibiotics

# DOING A 180

**W**hat a difference a few paragraphs can make.

Back in 2008, Pfizer Animal Health (now Zoetis Inc.) conducted market research to get a better handle on consumer opinions about the use of antibiotics and other medicines for the treatment of sick farm animals.

Although the study was done more than 5 years ago and was specific to beef, dairy and pork, the results still demonstrate how a small dose of education can have a big — and positive — impact on consumer perceptions.

The survey involved more than 2,100 people in the US, ages 21 to 65. All participants were “non-vegans”; 73% of them were women; and all shopped for groceries at least once a week and had purchased dairy, beef or pork products in the last month. To maintain objectivity, researchers did not identify Pfizer as the study sponsor.

## BASELINE KNOWLEDGE

All participants were initially asked a few baseline questions about livestock production, particularly about the management of sick and at-risk animals. About 40% of respondents rated their knowledge of production as very low — 0 to 3 on a scale of 10 — or said they were “unsure,” depending on the animal in question.

The participants’ baseline confidence in safety, wholesomeness and quality was moderate. Less than 30% gave these characteristics a 9 or 10, and in some cases, the percentage receiving that ranking was as low as 16%.

Based on their recent purchases, participants were split into beef, dairy and pork sub-groups and were then handed a one-page summary — about 250 words — that described current regulatory and production practices related to animal-health medicines used in that particular species (see accompanying sample).

Key messages in the handout:

- Veterinarians are involved in animal care.
- FDA approves medicines used if animals get sick.
- Animals that receive antibiotics are not allowed to enter the food supply until a withholding period has elapsed to ensure the medicine has sufficiently cleared the animal’s system.
- Government agencies require the testing of milk and meat to ensure the absence of violative residues.

## BIG ATTITUDE SHIFT

That’s when consumers started to change their tune.

After reading the simple narrative for dairy, the percentage of participants giving dairy wholesomeness a score of 9 or 10 on a 10-point scale increased by 46%. Similar rankings for beef wholesomeness and safety increased by 59% and 48%, respectively, while for pork, the same ratings each increased by 63%.



“Clear, simple information moves perceptions  
in a positive direction.” ROBBIE MOODY

Other notable changes in consumer perceptions:

- **At baseline, more than 40% felt that animals receiving antibiotics should not be allowed into the food supply. After reading the narrative, 70% to 75% of participants agreed that “sick animals should be treated with antibiotics if all the practices mentioned in the description are followed.”**
- **At the beginning of the study, about half of the participants expressed concern that antibiotics given to farm animals might end up in their food. After reading the four-point narrative, more than two-thirds agreed, “the practices described seemed adequate in ensuring animal products are safe for me and my family.”**

#### ‘REALLY? THEY USE VETERINARIANS?’

The study's results also showed that only a small percentage of consumers were aware that farm animals were raised under the care or oversight of a veterinarian. In this study, 40% to 50% either were “unsure” or did not believe the statement. After the narrative, two-thirds of respondents said this fact improved their confidence.

The study also showed low consumer awareness of the government's effort to regulate antibiotics or monitor meat and milk for unsafe levels of antibiotics — both of which were rated highly as safety confidence-builders for these products.

*continued on page 34*

## SAMPLE NARRATIVE GIVEN TO CONSUMERS

Below is a sample narrative Zoetis used in its market research to educate consumers about food-animal production practices. Though specific to cows, the text may be helpful when telling your story to poultry customers and consumers.

Cows are raised by a team of people committed to the animals' health and creating wholesome, high-quality food for consumers. From the beginning of cows' lives, veterinarians have a very important role in overseeing their health. As a part of their care, vaccines are oftentimes administered to cows to protect them from various illnesses.

As with any animal or human, cows can sometimes get sick over the course of their lives. In these situations, FDA-approved medicines, like antibiotics, are used to treat sick dairy cows under the supervision of licensed veterinarians.

If an antibiotic is administered to help a sick cow, then that cow's milk is not allowed to enter the food supply until the antibiotic has sufficiently cleared the animal's system. During this “withholding period,” the cow's milk is discarded. The withholding period, which is established by the FDA for each approved antibiotic, ensures that the antibiotic does not end up in the milk and dairy products found in grocery stores and markets where you make milk and dairy purchases.

There is also an extensive testing system in place to ensure that no traces of antibiotics are in milk and dairy products. For instance, every load of milk sold by a dairy producer is tested multiple times for traces of antibiotics as established and overseen by state and government agencies. If their dairy products, including milk, test positive for any traces of antibiotics, these products are destroyed and the offending dairy producers are faced with steep fines.



## DOING A 180

*continued from page 31*

Interestingly, the statements in the narrative also resonated with consumers who purchased organic and “antibiotic-free” milk and meat.

More than one-third of this subset, for example, felt strongly that organic farms should use antibiotics if the practices in the narrative were followed. About one-quarter of the same subset said they would not bother purchasing more expensive organic and “antibiotic-free” meat and milk if they were “certain that all of the practices mentioned in the description were followed.”

### ‘TRUSTED SOURCES’

Consumers also liked the idea of having third-party auditors or verification systems to ensure that the practices described in the narrative are followed. Nearly half said that having such systems — which are already in place — would make them much “more comfortable.”

“This study showed that consumers are receptive to the facts,” says Robbie Moody, regional marketing director for poultry for Zoetis. “Clear, simple information moves perceptions in a positive direction.”

The study also showed that consumers look to credible third parties for information about animal-health practices and food safety. “Veterinarian and dietetic associations as well as universities received the highest marks as trusted sources of accurate information,” Moody adds.

Zoetis plans to do a follow-up study in the near future — this time including poultry. Watch for results in a future edition of *Poultry Health Today* and at [poultryhealthtoday.com](http://poultryhealthtoday.com).

