

Protecting our social license to operate – consumers, social media, and modern agriculture

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Abstract

As members of the food animal community, we are given a “social license to operate” from our consumers, a license that can easily be taken away if they feel we have not lived up to our obligations. Agriculture’s social license is rooted in the beliefs, perceptions, and opinions held by consumers. Our consumers are the ones granting our social license, which is often intangible, and our status can change quickly as new information is learned. In a world that wants to know how its food is being produced, we must embrace transparency and understand how to communicate effectively with our consumers. Veterinarians are a valuable resource to help farms establish care-focused cultures and proactive, auditable protocols in order to keep our “social licenses to operate”.

Key words: social media, protocols, consumers

Résumé

En tant que membres de la communauté travaillant avec des animaux de consommation, les consommateurs nous donnent un ‘droit social d’opérer’, un droit qui peut être facilement retiré si les consommateurs sentent que nous ne respectons pas nos obligations. Le droit social en agriculture est issu des convictions, des perceptions et des opinions que forment les consommateurs. Nos consommateurs sont ceux qui nous octroient un droit social souvent intangible et notre statut peut changer rapidement avec l’acquisition de nouvelles informations. Dans un monde qui exige de savoir comment la nourriture est produite, nous devons être disposés à l’ouverture et savoir comment communiquer efficacement avec nos consommateurs. Les vétérinaires sont une ressource précieuse pour aider les fermes à établir une culture centrée sur les soins et sur des protocoles proactifs et vérifiables dans le but de sauvegarder nos ‘droits sociaux d’opérer’.

Introduction

Protecting our ability to operate in the future will involve 3 key areas: building consumer trust, care-focused farm cultures, and effective protocol development. Agriculture’s “social license” is rooted in the beliefs, perceptions and opinions held by consumers. This is given and taken away by consumers based on the information they receive.⁷

To keep our social license, we must focus on building consumer trust, which is a 2-way street. Trust building

starts with understanding who our consumers are and what drives their purchasing decisions, but also involves agriculture openly sharing its story and exhibiting transparency.⁵ Social media is an important tool to achieve transparency because the Millennial, Z, and Alpha consumers are getting most of their food information online.⁴ We have to meet our consumers where they are at and on the platforms they demand, ie, 88% of Millennials are on the Facebook platform. Furthermore, 95% of this generation find friends as the most creditable source of information and 62% say that when a brand engages them on social networks they are more likely to be a loyal customer. Generation Z, the largest population in US history, believe that having an online presence reflects a brand’s value and not being social media makes a brand irrelevant and outdated.⁴ Knowing who and what our consumers trust also helps us build communication strategies that will be meaningful. For example, 66% of consumers polled said they don’t trust the government to look out for consumer interests.⁶ This helps us understand that communicating about stringent regulations might not be as impactful as talking about what we do on-farm to keep our products safe. A study by McKinsey and Co. looked at the top 5 views and behaviors consumers have towards dairy and they found:

1. Health considerations are increasingly more important.
2. Transparency is expected.
3. Openness to trying new brands and products is expanding.
4. Plant-based dairy alternatives continue to grow.
5. Channel and value preferences vary by age.¹

We have an opportunity to engage consumers on social media to discuss many of these key concerns and drive purchasing decisions, as well as bolster our social license.

Developing and maintaining a positive farm culture is critical for keeping a social license to operate, as our farms are only as good as our worst employee. Our consumers are assuming that we are showing compassion towards our animals while providing them with the best care. If they believe we are not living up to that obligation, they quickly lose trust in that specific product or brand. Care-focused farm culture starts at the top and you must have buy-in from all key decision makers. By developing a strong culture that puts the care of employees and animals first, we can mitigate the risk of unwanted exposure. We must learn to develop a “culture of care” over a “culture of production”. The first step is making sure every farm has an “Animal Care Commitment” that explicitly defines what the farm’s policy is on animal care

and steps they take to uphold it.¹² This should be signed by every employee and posted throughout the farm, especially in areas of human-cow interactions. We ultimately rely upon our employees, aka “animal care technicians”, and we should be investing in them. Through continued education we have a huge opportunity to help instill animal ethics and attitudes towards animals into our workers. The investment into trained labor will continue to be a huge necessity as farms consolidate. From 2003 to 2016 we have increased hired labor in agriculture by almost 16%.¹⁰ We need to help make our farm employees less of a liability and more of an insurance policy for our farms. This can be accomplished through prolonged employee acclimation, clearly defined roles, and investment into continuing education.¹⁰

Veterinarians have always been instrumental in the development of farm protocols, but now more than ever protocols are necessary to help protect farmers—think insurance policy.

Protocols should be farm-specific, bilingual, and auditable. Our farm protocols are living documents, therefore should be updated and revisited frequently. When developing protocols for our farms, we should always start with “discovery”. Discovery involves assessing the unique needs and gaps in care on the farm. Farm protocols must cover some of the most critical and sensitive areas of food animal production—non-ambulatory animals, transportation, painful procedures, cow-calf separation, deadstock, hiring, and crisis plans.² Once discovery is complete, protocols can be written that involve detailed procedures, measurement tools, goals, and reasons. After the protocols are written, employees must be fully-trained and mentored. This is critical because our goal is to have auditable protocols, but you can’t audit what you don’t train. Our industry is moving more towards second- and third-party audits in order to help consumers and brands feel comfortable with what is happening within the supply chain. Second party audits are a great opportunity for veterinarians or veterinary technicians to bring a value-added service to our farms.

Conclusion

Our farms are becoming increasingly aware of how consumer pressure can impact how we manage our farms. Helping our farmers adopt policies and cultures that embrace sound animal husbandry, exceptional animal welfare and sustainable farming practices, balanced with consumer demands, will help us to keep our social license to operate.

Acknowledgement

I have a financial interest, agreement or affiliation with Fairlife, LLC.

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