

Managing Disruptions

Many special interest groups advocate direct actions such as civil disobedience and demonstrations to attract publicity. The rationale behind these actions includes: raising consciousness of the issues, promoting consumer boycotts of animal products and increasing membership and support for their respective organizations. Livestock shows and auctions that attract large numbers of people and media representatives are prime targets. To date, there have been few protests at events in Ontario. Events in rural areas have been contacted by animal rights groups for display space.

Designate at least one individual on the organizing committee as a media spokesperson and a crisis management organizer. Ensure that this person is well known to exhibitors and volunteers in the event that difficulties arise.

Four general rules of thumb to follow for disruptive situations:

1. **Prepare for the worst.** Secure your physical environment and train appropriate volunteers in crisis management.
2. **Familiarize yourself with appropriate security and law enforcement authorities.** Keep them informed of events that might attract disruptions.
3. **Avoid confrontation.** Your goal is to limit demonstrators' media exposure and prevent them from reaching a large audience with their messages.
4. **Stay positive.** Do not be tempted to debate on the animal rightists' terms. Focus on your messages.

** Adapted from "Meeting the Animal Rights Challenge". American Farm Bureau Federation. Illinois. 1991.*



Other tips:

- The primary goal is to minimize publicity.
- Ask anyone who disagrees with animal care or agricultural practices in general to state their concerns in writing to the organizing committee or to Farm & Food Care Ontario.
- If demonstrators are trespassing, work with security to remove them unobtrusively. "Manhandling" demonstrators guarantees media coverage for the wrong cause.
- Consider pre-empting media coverage with a special event such as a charity benefit or contest. Turn the disruption into a positive action where possible. An example would be the k.d. lang 'Meat stinks' campaign. One radio station gave out free steaks to the first listener who called in after a k.d. lang song played.
- Train youth and other exhibitors in how to react. (See the "I Care" program.) Ask them not to respond to demonstrators and to refer reporters to the designated spokesperson. It is important that these situations are dealt with promptly and professionally.
- If an activist becomes disruptive and you cannot have them legally removed, take a break rather than give them a forum to continue.
- If an animal rights group sets up an exhibit at your event, the best tactic is to situate them in an obscure area and ignore them. Do a great job of pointing people towards the agriculture exhibits.
- After the event, meet with everyone involved to deal with concerns and evaluate the experience.

Sample media statements:

"We respect the right of these groups to voice their opinions. That is part of Canadian culture. However, this event is also part of Canada's agricultural tradition, and we strongly disagree with these misguided attempts to disrupt and discredit the efforts of our farmers."

"It's a shame that some people who disagree with a valuable program like 4-H are attempting to disrupt them and manipulate the public for their own political agenda."



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