

# HOW TO BE AN AMBASSADOR FOR

# AGRICULTURE



# AGRICULTURAL AMBASSADOR BASICS

## How to be a Good Ambassador

The most effective and memorable exhibits include enthusiastic and informative volunteers. Agriculture has a lot of good stories to share with the public. Events like local fairs and farm tours provide a great opportunity to do that. It is important to correct misinformation by taking a positive, proactive and professional approach. Tell your story with pride.

If we don't tell the story of modern agriculture to the public, who will? This section will provide you with some approaches for being an effective ambassador for agriculture.

- Learn all you can about your sector of the industry and the criticisms against it. Keeping up with issues affecting your interests and other sectors of the industry is an ongoing process.
- Think critically, and encourage critical thinking in all those you speak to. The key concept is to provide factual information to allow the individual to form their own opinions. Encourage questions such as: What is the source of your information? Is it a credible source of information on that topic? What is the agenda/goals of the source?
- By asking the right questions, you can get the visitor thinking critically about things they have seen or "read somewhere". This approach is far more effective than lecturing a person on the importance of agriculture. The learning process shows that allowing someone to reach their own conclusions is always the most effective.
- Everyone is entitled to their own opinion. Be open minded and objective when encountering ideas that differ from yours. Try to remain positive and provide that individual with the facts about your industry. Your objective as an Agricultural Ambassador is to build understanding and appreciation. You are not a salesperson.
- Remember, you cannot change a belief, and you cannot reach everyone. Don't preach to the converted. Learn to recognize people with preformed ideas and don't waste your time trying to change their mind when it is open to new information.



# IMPORTANT MESSAGES

There is a saying that farmers do a great job of producing food, but a lousy job of telling people about it. Below are some hints of where to start.

- Identify your audience, and then get to know them. Casual conversations help to identify areas of public interest or concern. Don't devote time or resources to information the public doesn't want to receive. Find ways to tie them into the things they are interested in.
- Choose your messages carefully. Be consistent and repeat key ideas.
- Keep it simple. Make it relevant and understandable. Use examples to help get your point across.

## The Most Effective Activities Are Those That Reinforce the Following Ideas:

- Farmers are hard working, honest, friendly people who believe in the humane and responsible care of animals.
- Canadian farmers provide abundant, wholesome, safe, affordable food.
- Agriculture is a responsible and professional industry.
- Family farms are the backbone of Canadian agriculture.

## Specific Areas of Interest:

- High standards of inspection for animal and crop products.
- Stewards of the land and environment; Environmental Farm Plans are examples of proactive, responsible environmental action.
- Excellent levels of animal care; continuous research in animal welfare to help us determine the best methods available; Recommended Codes of Practice for the Care and Handling of Farm Animals.



# LIVE ANIMAL DISPLAY GUIDELINES

Farm animals or pets? It's very important to convey the message that farm animals should not be considered pets. It's often difficult for people who are not from farm backgrounds to understand how livestock farmers can care for farm animals and then ultimately use them for food.

Many visitors will relate to pets, and will compare the farm animals on display to pets or even people. If you take a minute to think of normal production practices such as separating dairy calves from cows, castration, weaning and marketing ages, and tail docking you will see how it might disturb someone who thinks of the animal in human or pet terms.

“How would you like to live like that?” and “You would be charged with cruelty if you kept your dog like that” are two examples that illustrate those attitudes.

This leaves you with a dilemma of educating the public about agriculture and entertaining them at the same time. A good compromise is to set up a separate area with animals that are chosen for their gentle temperament.

- Goats and sheep work well. Geese, rabbits, and chickens are generally not suitable.
- Do not allow visitors in with the animals if an attendant is not available. Only allow a limited number of visitors in with supervision. Insurance, health, and safety issues all need to be weighed against the benefits of allowing people in with the animals.
- **The ideal set up is a fenced in area where people can reach in to pet the animals that want the attention. Put a ‘barn’ or a straw wall up in the middle where the animals can get away from the crowds.**
- The maximum length of time an animal should be on display is 8 hours or less, depending on factors such as crowds and temperatures. Any animals showing signs of stress or illness should be removed immediately.
- Rotate animals out of the area on a regular basis.
- Pens and animals should be kept very clean.
- Do not allow people to pick up the animals.
- Make sure a regular feeding program is in place, above and beyond the ‘kids feeding pellets in a cone’ idea. **This is critical to ensure that larger animals that aren’t as ‘cute’ get enough feed.**



# EDUCATIONAL LIVE ANIMAL DISPLAYS

Animals naturally attract people to the exhibit area and promote discussion. These forums can help clarify misinformation and address concerns, so it is important to provide an accurate portrayal of modern animal agriculture to the public.

## Make it Real

Display farm animals in their regular housing. Do not foster or generate misconceptions by using inappropriate settings. People see negative and/or inaccurate images of farming in the media all the time. The industry should be open about our practices and the rationale behind them. This is agriculture's chance to show how things are really done, but do not forget to include an explanation why. Misconceptions often emerge from fact, so farmers have to take every opportunity to explain the rationale behind modern practices to help bridge the gap between farm and fork.

## Signage is Important

Label everything, including the age and breed of the animals. Do not assume that your audience will know a cow is a cow, and not a pony. Be as specific as you can without being confusing. Do not oversimplify by simply stating "COW" -- Is it a dairy cow or a beef cow, a male or female, and what is the approximate age? Explain the role of the animal: meat or milk; and what it eats, production methods, and equipment. If you include specific terms, be sure to define them.

## Farm Animals are not pets or people

Avoid giving human-like characteristics to your animals. This is critical when trying to explain issues such as separating calves from cows and at what age they reach market weight. Use pedigree names if appropriate. If the animal on display does not have a name, do not give it one; instead explain it has a number and what the number represents. Replace signs which say "Hello, my name is Suzy and I eat hay." with "This young female cow is a beef breed called 'Charolais', due to have a calf in 2 months."



The following is a list of suggestions for animal presentations. Although the animals are there for public education, their wellbeing should not be jeopardized. Human and animal safety are top priorities. Your job is to minimize stress, injuries, and animal aggression.

- **People:** Keep in mind who your visitors will be. Assume they have little or no experience with farm animals. People will walk up directly behind animals or put their fingers in pens and cages to pet or feed them. Even the quietest animal can only tolerate this for so long before they start to bite, kick, or peck in defence. Prepare for this by planning where you want people to walk and to have access to the animals. Use ropes, barriers, and double penning to control access to the animals.
- **Access to the animals:** Signs and volunteers should discourage visitors from feeding, petting, or picking up the animals. Young animals, like piglets and chicks, seem to be the most inviting.

### Examples

- “In the interest of animal health and safety, please do not feed the animals.”
  - “Be careful ~ this animal may bite”.
- **Quiet animals:** Use animals that are accustomed to human interaction. Animals should be kept as calm and unstressed as possible. Show animals and 4-H projects are often used in these exhibits. Keep in mind these animals should be representative of what you would see on a working farm.
  - **Delivery:** Animals should arrive at the location ahead of the event's opening. This will allow the animals time to acclimatize to new surroundings.
  - **Animal health:** A sick animal reflects badly on the exhibit, the home farm, and on agriculture in general. If any animals begin to show signs of illness or stress, they should be removed immediately and/or returned home for care. Have a plan in place in case an animal gets sick or dies, including a pen or cage out of public view, an emergency list of phone numbers with a veterinarian and a transporter who could come on short notice. You should always have someone “on-duty” around animals. It does not take long for something to go wrong and someone should be nearby to deal with any problems that could arise.
  - **Code of Practice:** Pen size, stocking density, and food and water requirements should meet the guidelines set out in the Recommended Code of Practice for each animal. There are now Recommended Codes of Practice for the Care and Handling of the following animals: poultry, dairy, beef, horses, sheep, pigs, veal, deer, fur, bison, goats, and more. These do not necessarily need to be on hand, but should be used as a reference. Copies of the Recommended Code of Practice can be accessed online at [www.nfacc.ca](http://www.nfacc.ca).



- **Pens:** Keep animals in appropriate pens. Use strong penning with no sharp edges that will keep animals in and humans out. Separate different types of animals and provide plenty of space. The Ole' McDonald's farm atmosphere is created if a number of different animals are close to each other or all in the same pen which does not reflect a modern farm. There is a reason animals are segregated and the public should be aware of them.
  - **Feed and Water:** Always have a constant supply of water available whenever possible. If pails are used, they should be secured to avoid spillage. Visitor complaints about animals on display are most frequently about the animals having no feed or water. Set up displays of what each animal eats, how often, and in what quantity each day.
  - **Bedding:** Use similar bedding methods to those on the farm. If conditions require no bedding, explain why. Keep pens clean and dry by removing urine soaked bedding and manure frequently each day.



# MANAGING DISRUPTIONS AT EVENTS

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 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

- Your goal is to limit demonstrators' media exposure and prevent them from reaching a large audience with their messages.





## 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."



# DEALING WITH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

## Possible Situations:

- Individuals who attend (prior and during the show) to gather incriminating evidence.
  - Vulnerable areas include: loading ramps, animal holding pens, animal handling facilities (such as fitting areas), display pens, show ring staging areas, controversial displays.
- Individuals (alone or in groups) who ask sensitive or difficult questions of exhibitors, staff, volunteers or spokespeople.
- Leafleting: includes placing disparaging stickers, flyers, literature on or at displays and in public areas such as washrooms, entrance doors, etc.
- Verbal confrontations: loud accusations or arguments directed at exhibitors or staff designed to draw public attention.
- Demonstrations: may be orderly or disruptive (civil disobedience); may be quiet or vocal. Usually involve signs, banners and/or costumes/props. Media may be in attendance.
- Criminal damage: vandalism, threats of harm to persons or property, animal release.

## Be Prepared:

- Minimize your risk. Keep your house in order: ensure exhibitors abide by your standards.
- Respond to visitor complaints. Take appropriate steps to resolve problem situations quickly and inform the complainant of your actions.
- Be prepared. Prepare public information materials; designate a crisis management team with assigned roles and responsibilities; follow crisis action plans in the event of protests.
- Have spokespeople prepared to deal with the media.
- Ensure staff, volunteers and exhibitors know what steps to take in the event of problems.



## Dealing with Difficult People:

- Remember who your audience is: don't provide the public attention and platform they desire.
- Avoid arguments or confrontations. Stay calm, polite and courteous.
- Diffuse the situation: divert their attention, involve them in discussion, or end the discussion.
- Politely but firmly ask them to leave. Call security or appropriate supervisor if necessary.
- Specific suggestions: "Do you have a specific question?" or "Perhaps Mr. X could help you" or "I'm sorry you feel that way" or "I'm afraid I can't share your opinion". Then turn your attention to someone or something else or remove yourself.



# COMMUNICATION WITH THE PUBLIC

## How Do I Communicate Effectively?

- Be a good listener.
- Be positive.
- Be yourself.
- Be understandable.
- Keep it short and simple.
- Make it relevant.
- Make it interesting.
- Be sincere and honest when answering.



## Why Should I Communicate with the Public?

The average Canadian is more than your customer; as citizens they can affect how you do business. The average Canadian is also more than one generation removed from farming and food production. Most people give little thought to where our food comes from and even fewer people have an accurate understanding of our modern food production system.

Recent polls show that Canadians generally view farmers very positively as an important part of Canadian life. However, those same polls show that their concerns about food safety, agriculture's impact on the environment, and animal care are all rising. This erosion in the public's image of farmers and food producers is most pronounced in young people — our future.

## What Can I Expect?

Most of the people you will talk to will be genuinely surprised and curious about farming and food production. In a recent poll by the Canadian Centre for Food Integrity, 94% of non farming Canadians admitted they knew little or nothing about agriculture. When asked if they wanted to know more about food and farming, more than two thirds of respondents said yes.

Some Canadians may have inaccurate perceptions of farmers and farming. Most people have genuine questions or concerns



## How Should I Communicate with the Public?

**Speak Urban.** Most people you will meet, whether media or politicians, consumers attending your local fair or children in the classroom, will have little or no knowledge of agriculture and will not understand industry jargon. **It is important to always talk in their language** not ours. This may mean substituting words they'll understand (ie. birthing instead of farrowing). You will have to make a conscious effort to use words and phrases which are familiar and understandable to non-farmers.

**Bring It Home.** Many people cannot relate very well to farming animals, so it helps to make things personal. Show people what it means for them, in terms of their food, or jobs, or our environment. Use "every day" comparisons that non-farmers can relate to and are familiar with.

**Catch Their Interest.** Because people limit their attention to what is interesting or important, packaging and presentation are crucial. Make it fun with trivia games or "hands-on" activities; make it interesting with props (i.e. animals, feed samples, byproducts displays or farm tools) or interesting facts and figures; make it important with catchy slogans or eye appealing graphics and photos.

**Keep it Short and Simple.** Avoid technical detailed explanations. Keep your presentations/explanations short and simple. People who want to know more will keep the questions coming.

**Be Specific.** It is important to point out every farm or business may do things a little different. Not better or worse, just different. Talk about what YOU do on YOUR farm or business. Whenever possible, leave generalized "industry" statements to industry groups and governments. When making general statements, never talk absolutes and always quote your source. (i.e. "According to xxx, most Canadian farms. . .")

**Be Yourself.** Talk about what you know and stick to the subject matter that you are comfortable with. If someone asks a question you're unsure or uncomfortable about answering, refer them to someone qualified to answer, or offer to find the answer for them. It's always better to admit that you don't have an answer than to give the wrong information. Be sure that you do follow up on questions you cannot answer.

**Stick to the Facts:** Agricultural awareness begins at home, so do your homework and stay on top of changing trends in your industry. We all have personal opinions, but it's best to leave yours at home so others can make their opinions based on facts.

**Be Prepared:** Keep a record of common and not so common questions. Spend time researching and refining your answers.



**Resist Pointing Fingers:** Avoid deflecting criticism or criticizing someone else to make you or your sector look good. A negative approach only reflects badly on you and hurts everyone in the industry.

**Broaden Understanding:** Always explain **WHY** things are done (or not done), not just **HOW**. Explain what would/could happen if things were done differently, or not done at all.

**Put Things Into Perspective:** Comparing past and present, alternative methods, costs and benefits (trade-offs), or drawing parallels to everyday life all help people see a more complete picture.

**Tap Into Youngsters:** Children can provide great access to adults. Since children are naturally less inhibited than adults, encourage youngsters to ask questions. Be prepared, children can also ask tougher questions. Provide answers that both they and the adults can understand. Mentioning your own children or grandchildren is a great opener with parents and is an easy way to introduce the family farm concept. In classrooms, develop messages for parents in materials or assignments that children can take home. Since youngsters are more willing to listen to their peers, let young farmers deliver the message for you. There are many willing spokespeople in 4-H and Junior Farmers, or even within your own family.

## How Do I Deal with Sensitive Issues?

Food, from the way we produce it to the way we prepare it is coming under increasing public scrutiny. Issues surrounding food safety, environmental quality, biotechnology and animal "rights" are being debated in classrooms, legislatures and newspapers across the country. Only by addressing these issues with the public can we in agriculture be part of the debate.

**Be a Good Listener:** Comparing past and present, alternative methods, costs and benefits (trade-offs), or drawing parallels to everyday life all help people see a more complete picture.

**Ask Questions First.** Use questions of your own to find out what a person knows and understands about their issue or concern. Use critical questions to get people to think about other aspects of the issue, implications of their solution, or to analyze their own information.

**Respect Others' Opinion.** Avoid preaching at people or showing a lack of respect for their opinions even if they differ greatly from yours. We are all entitled to our views.

**Encourage Informed Decisions.** Resist the urge to "convert" people to your way of thinking. The goal isn't to "sell" your product or way of life, but rather the information needed for people to make their own decisions.

**Be Understanding.** Respect people's level of knowledge, even when it seems far less than what you think it should be. We want to increase people's level of understanding, not insult it.



**Correct False Assumptions.** All too often, people's concerns are based around a false premise or assumption. It is more important to correct the premise than the details. For example, debating the amount of water used to produce a pound of beef misses the point. Go to the heart of the matter – which is water isn't "used up" at all, rather it is recycled.

**Show You Share the Same Concerns.** Find the common ground and work from there. For example, if someone thinks a certain practice is "cruel", begin by explaining that you care about animals too, then go on to explain why that practice is in the best interest of the animal (and ultimately the consumer too). If someone is concerned about food safety, begin by explaining you eat the same food they do and you care about the well-being of your family just as much as they care about theirs, then go on to explain the rules and regulations that you follow.

**Be Positive.** Always explain the benefits first; to the consumer, to the animals, to the environment, to the economy/society and finally to the farmer. Talk about how the agriculture and food industry has changed and look to the future for more positive changes for the industry.

**Be Proud.** Canadian farmers and food producers should be proud of what they do. Although no industry is perfect, the agriculture and food sector has little to apologize for. Always remember to point out that change is a part of life and like other industries the agriculture industry is always looking for better ways to do things.

**Stay Calm, Cool and Collected.** Avoid arguments. Allow people to express their opinions first. Then respond calmly and positively. Correct misinformation with facts. Point out contradictions or inconsistencies. Help them to see the bigger picture by pointing out things they may not have considered. Always be prepared to agree to disagree.

**Beware of Traps.** Recognize special interest crusaders for what they are: a vocal minority often with extreme or rigid beliefs. While they don't represent the average Canadian, the publicity they generate can and will have an impact on other's views. If confronted by activists, protesters or a hostile individual, don't waste time trying to communicate with them. Politely answer their question then ignore them or move on to someone else. Never give them the attention and credibility they crave by confronting or debating them.



## Three Simple Messages to Communicate to Everyone:

1. The proper care and treatment of animals is important to me. I have an obligation to make sure that the animals on my farm are well cared for.
2. Canadians have a food supply that is safe, abundant and affordable thanks to advanced technologies and responsible practices used in today's food system.
3. As farmers with a way of life that is very close to the land, we understand the importance of healthy soil, water and air. We live on our farms with our families and depend on the environment to create a healthy place to live and provide the right conditions to grow crops and raise livestock.

## Be an Agricultural Ambassador:

For many people, this may be the first time they have met a farmer or food producer. Remember you are representing the entire agri-food industry. The impression you leave will be a lasting one.

*If you would like more information on communicating with the public, please contact us.*

