

Swine Farmer Perceptions and Recommendations of Animal Welfare Communication

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Introduction

The growing population of our society is widening the knowledge gap between producers and consumers, pushing the understanding of modern animal welfare practices to be uncommon information (Croney, 2014). In a study by Kallas et al. (2013), participants reported little to no knowledge of animal welfare practices and procedures. At the same time, Alonso et al. (2020) concluded that consumers want to see an increase in awareness about animal welfare. The evolution of social media has made consumers more reliant on seeking out information through these channels, and these platforms are essential for organizations to market their brand (White et al., 2014). Currently, national swine organizations utilize social media platforms to share messages about animal welfare with their audience. This study aims to determine how swine producers view welfare communication and where future communication should be directed. The following research objectives guide this study:

RO1: Identify how swine producers perceive current animal welfare communication.

RO2: Determine what swine producers think future animal welfare communication should discuss.

Theoretical Framework

The Social Exchange Theory (SET) guided this study. The SET describes how individuals interact with each other based on a cost-benefit basis (Liang et al., 2008). A motivational factor regarding SET is knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing allows individuals with different perspectives and opinions to build relationships by sharing knowledge with the expectation of receiving a future return (Liang et al., 2008). The SET is a goal-orientated human behavior that relies on several factors and rewards. The SET recognizes rewards between individuals, such as “material (economic) and symbolic (attention, advice, and status)” (Liang et al., 2008, p. 7). Agricultural communicators have the knowledge and skillset to facilitate deliberation among consumers and producers, and with the application of SET and knowledge sharing, facilitating a conversation to overcome these barriers is a benefit. If information is presented positively, consumers are more likely to be influenced to change how they respond (Vigors, 2019).

Methodology

In April and May 2023, six qualitative, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom and Microsoft Teams. Prior research on current welfare communication was conducted before constructing an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of 17 questions covering their perceptions of swine welfare communication and where future communication should be directed. Additionally, participants were shown an Instagram Reel from an industry organization and asked questions regarding this type of communication. To ensure trustworthiness, all interviews were recorded and transcribed with Otter.ai. Transcripts were then analyzed in Microsoft Word for emergent themes through open and axial coding. Inductive coding allows researchers to find themes among frequent and common statements from raw data without the restraints of previously grounded methodologies (Thomas, 2006). An audit trail was used throughout data analysis to aid in theme formation. After completing the data analysis, the audit trail was reviewed by researchers to determine the consistency and confirmability of research findings (Cutcliffe & McKenna, 2004). To ensure confirmability, the findings were reviewed by peers to ensure no discrepancies within the results (Anney, 2014).

Findings/Results

To address the first research objective, producers were shown an Instagram Reel and were asked to share their opinions about this type of communication. Purposeful communication was a prominent topic of discussion, leading it to become an overarching theme of this study. Two sub-themes emerged: innovative sharing techniques and structured and strategic communication with consumers. Regarding innovative sharing techniques, Elizabeth said, "I think it was great for a pork board to kind of branch out and do something different. I loved hearing from a communication standpoint about agriculture that was different, aggressive, and targeted..." On a similar note, Cara said, "Being able to pivot and have that communication be more connected to something you can actually relate to, I think that just took it to the next level...Videos are a good tool to have that conversation with consumers when sharing about a topic so heavy as swine welfare." In the second emergent sub-theme, structured and strategic communications, participants mentioned that continual communication is needed when discussing swine welfare. However, they noted that since this kind of information is dense, it needs to be strategically planned so consumers can comprehend and relate to the shared message. Elizabeth said, "I'd say, number one, connect on a different level. Not everybody raises pigs. So, how do you connect on a different level? They're there to listen. Because if nobody is listening, why does it matter?"

Producers were then asked a series of questions to determine how they thought this kind of communication should be structured in the future. The themes that emerged from these questions were sharing factual information about animal welfare and bridging the knowledge gap. Participants shared that topics related to biosecurity, nutrition, transportation, manure management, clean water, and pollution are essential to communicate with consumers. Regarding bridging animal welfare, all participants noted a lack of understanding of swine welfare practices. Jared said, "When you end up in a situation where only 2% of the people are farming, and 98% of people don't. Rules, laws, and legislation happen by popular vote. The communication of how things are being done is crucial." Sharing information that will motivate consumers to learn more about swine welfare will build a more agriculturally literate society and allow deliberation to continue.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Agricultural communicators are the bridge to closing the knowledge gap between producers and consumers. With the application of SET and considering the benefits of an agriculturally literate society, agricultural communicators can start building back the bridge of knowledge that is absent. Animal agriculture organizations should consider facilitating more deliberation among consumers and policymakers before sharing more complex information. In addition, participants mentioned how important public relations is to the swine industry. Two participants said bringing consumers to farms and showing them what modern swine production looks like will allow for a continued conversation between producers and consumers. For research, this topic can be applied to other animal industries, like the beef or dairy industry, to identify similarities and differences in welfare communication. Another study could focus on the effectiveness of welfare message frames within a specific animal industry and how they are perceived. All participants noted that short-clip videos are an effective tool when sharing complex information. Participants of this study could be shown similar videos with different message frames and then determine the effectiveness of each to see where the direction for this kind of communication should be led.

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