



## November 2019 Enhance Webinar: Building Your Team For Activist Defense, presented by Dr. Marissa Hake

This webinar was full to the gills with useful information regarding easy-to-digest tips and strategies for defense against activists. Dr. Hake shared her own experiences, the experiences of others, statistics and marketing strategy to bolster her comprehensive list of defenses and good practices to implement.

Dr. Hake is a graduate of Michigan State University, holding a bachelor's degree in Animal Science, a doctorate in Veterinary Medicine, and a master's in Public Health. She resides in Northwest Ohio with her husband and young son on a cash crop farm that also raises wean-finish pigs, replacement heifers and beef cattle. She is responsible for the health and welfare of 30,000 veal calves across Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan as the veterinarian for Midwest Veal. Dr. Hake can be found on Facebook under the page entitled Dr. Hake – Calf Vet, Instagram as @vealvet and YouTube.

Dr. Hake stated her original “why” for getting on social media and building these pages was to answer questions after some on farm interviews, however, she didn't want to answer from a personal page. She then found with these pages she could build trust in an easy mode of communication as a member of the millennial generation. Furthermore, Dr. Hake made a call to action to listeners to connect *outside* of agriculture, to avoid the “preaching to the choir” complex. This could mean connecting with other crafters, bakers, equestrians, runners, or anything else in which you find your passions or hobbies.

Moreover, she also spoke about the Gen-Z group, explaining that they are very diverse and slated to be the largest generation. They are the “social justice warriors”, mostly of which are vegan, and don't consider technology to be tools to achieve tasks, rather, it has been ingrained in their daily routines all their life. Therefore, this must be a group that is targeted to educate about agriculture and would be a powerful ally given their presence on social media.

In continuing the subject of social media, Dr. Hake presented an interesting tidbit from Forbes list of social media marketing strategy, that ascertained that reviews, comments and word of mouth have forced brands to be more candid on social platforms and consumers give them *more weight than any other paid advertisement*.

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Dr. Hake bolstered her points on social media with a few poignant statistics, among which 95% of millennials believe their friends are the *most credible* source of product info and, according to Consumer Reports, 66% of Americans surveyed said they don't trust the government to look out for consumer interests. Dr. Hake took the opportunity to make a call to action that since the general population will not trust government-regulated agencies that regulate our products and procedures, we should instead appeal to them by taking a different approach and showing or explaining how, what, and why farmers do what they do.

Dr. Hake applauded Fair Oaks' response to their activist video release debacle and their continued efforts through their website designed specifically to show the continued progress on animal health and welfare on their farms. As an intro to the implementable suggestions portion of the presentation, Dr. Hake gave a broad overview of activists and their role in society and general mentality. Namely, knowing the most common anti-agriculture activist groups and that they will never really be satisfied, even though there have been efforts throughout the industry for marked improvement on animal health and welfare.

Furthermore, activists have gone from picketing in public, to transitioning to targeting individual farms, to influencing policy, and currently, influencing retailers. Thus, the issue with this latest version of attack, is that when people are buying that gallon of milk, they don't see the family farm behind it – farms are not consumer-facing. There are also no boundaries on social media – Dr. Hake herself has had personal pictures of her family and herself taken and altered by activist groups.

In addition, the laws will seemingly not protect us – for one, once the media is released, the damage is done to our reputation and to the trust of our consumers in our industry. Moreover, given the influence these groups have been able to have over policy, legislation such as Prop 12 in California have been passed. Prop 12 denotes that pen sizes for veal calves have to be 43 square foot. With the current traditional design of calf pen housing, even with the divider out, it is **42** square foot. Thus, calling for the need of a complete re-design and scrapping of the current pen system for veal calf producers in California.

In her own company's experience with activists, Dr. Hake shared some takeaways. Firstly, it is important to get in front of stakeholders, partners, media, and customers as soon as possible after an activist attack to explain next steps and a plan of action. This could include discovery of where there are big risks such as in transportation and the hiring process; standardizing protocols and flushing out animal care commitments; and doing regular internal AND third-

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party audits.

At the end, Dr. Hake put together a comprehensive action plan as a takeaway. At the top was defining risk areas. Common ones, aside from those few mentioned previously, include down cows, painful procedures, the dead pile, and calf ranches. Secondly, stakeholders should be involved – including owners, office staff, experts, and herdsman. Next, it should be decided who communicates with the media. Veterinarians are regarded as one of the most trustworthy professions, thus it might be a good idea to have your veterinarian amongst your media relations team.

Moreover, defining what needs to be included on protocols (and having them in the first place) is a must. Protocols should be written for new hire training, consequences of animal abuse, management of dead piles, and down cow and euthanasia directives.

If there is any suspected activity on the farm, it is important to get a license plate number, video tape the encounter, remain calm and polite, contact local authorities, and let other area farms know of the occurrence. To aid in defense, it is also a good idea to formalize the hiring process – this would entail background checks, social media checks, asking for references, and formal training. It is also beneficial to know of red flags that include a candidate or new hire being too good to be true, working for free or reduced pay, and if they are found in areas outside of their job duties.

For current employees, setting the culture is important as well. Protocols that have been trial run so that everyone knows what acceptable, and gentle reminders, such as posted signs that say “Be gentle, they are babies” can go a long way. For the general public, posting no trespassing signs and signs to direct visitors to a standardized place can cut down on wayward traffic. And, lastly, of course, managing social media is an important tool in your toolkit. You can place country restrictions and page moderations that limit certain word usage as well as blocking people/banning users, and in the instance of Instagram, make your page a private account.

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