

knockknock

By Kim Fisher

Animal activists have been circling our industry for years.

When they show up at our doorstep, will we be ready?



You're an animal person, right?

You care about their well-being, their health, their performance. You wouldn't be in this business if you didn't, after all.

But there are people – and you might be one of them – who do more for animals than feed and water them. They fight for them, protect their welfare, raise money, improve living conditions, propose policy changes and other such things. These *animal welfare activists* are primarily concerned with ensuring humane treatment for all animals used in sports or entertainment. They spread positive information about retired animals to promote adoption, cooperate with industries to help address health and safety issues, and use donated funds to benefit animals directly. These groups, which encompass the majority of animal activists in Canada and the United States, have no problem using animals or keeping them as pets; they simply stand up against any unfair treatment or abuse.

Animal rights activists, though, (PETA, for example), feel that any sort of animal use or captivity is equivalent to abuse. Animals, they say, should run free and wild, with the same rights as humans.

In the past, a variety of industries have faced groups of both types and the challenges they present. Be it thoroughbred or greyhound racing, carriage driving, rodeos, or any other industry involving animals, sports and events seem to be a source of controversy for these groups more than ever.

But why now? Humans and animals have worked together for thousands of years. What is it about the modern condition that has shifted that balance?

In short, over the last few decades, the world has changed.

The mass exodus from rural communities to urban centers and suburban fringes has been a major marker of our new society. There's now a serious disconnect between those who raised animals for work and for food

(and still do) and those who have little or no interaction with them.

“The public in general is so far removed from livestock and animals,” says Cindy Schonholtz, Animal Welfare specialist, Professional Rodeo Cowboys Association. “We all live in cities! But when everyone lived on a farm or at least their grandparents lived on a farm and raised their own food, it was harder for animal rights groups to get a foothold. Now that people don’t know where their food comes from, now that our society is so urbanized, now that fewer people have horses or cows or have even touched one – it’s a lot easier for them to get misinformation out and for people to believe it.”

It’s a significant point.
But what does it mean?



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It means that industries involved with animals are susceptible to coming under fire now more than ever. It means that though harness racing hasn’t been attacked as of yet, it likely will face these groups in the future. And it means now is the time to figure out how these groups work, what impact they can have on animal industries, and how we can prepare ourselves for an onslaught of criticism (deserved or otherwise).

The Method

Animal activist groups are very skilled at making use of the media machine, suggests Jamie Rogers, Administrator of Rodeo Affairs at the Cloverdale Rodeo and Exhibition in Vancouver, BC.

“These groups have a good media mandate as far as infiltrating your corporate sponsorship community,” he says. “They do a very well-organized campaign, with emails, letter writing, and presentations before local councils.”

And with the ease of posting information online – credible or otherwise – campaigns can spread exponentially with minimal funding.

“With the Internet,” Schonholtz points out, “people believe everything they read!” In regards to PETA, she adds, there absolutely are things on their website that are not true – about any sport, and any type of animal industry. “But your only option is to sue them, and that’s what they want, because then they get another outlet in the media to get their points across.”

There are, of course, certain topics that seem to re-surface over and over, says Alex Waldrop, CEO of the National Thoroughbred Racing Association. “We find that typically their primary focus is on the ban on the slaughter of horses for human consumption,” he explains, “and they’re very vigilant on following our industry.”

But vigilance isn’t necessarily a bad thing – having a third party observer who’s able to see the big picture can be a valuable asset to industries so caught up in daily activities that they can hardly see the forest for all the trees.

“I would say that these groups – to the extent that they are focused on humane treatment of horses, to the extent that they are focused on opposition to the slaughter of horses for human consumption – serve a healthy function and we welcome the input,” says Waldrop. “They certainly are entitled to those opinions.”

But what about the groups who go too far? The groups who would seek to shutter industries and free all animals to the wild? The radical groups?

The Madness

To an animal rights activist, using an animal in any way is equivalent to abusing the animal. Use = abuse (you’ll see it plastered all over the Internet if you go looking). In short, if you have a dog, cat, fish, gerbil, hamster, ferret, lizard or whatever as a pet – that’s cruel. If you have a horse to ride, a calf to rope or a cow to milk – that’s cruel. If you eat chicken, shave sheep or collect eggs – that’s cruel.

And it means industries that involve animals – to ride, drive, chase, race or rope – face a whole bounty of challenges from these sorts of groups, regardless of how well their athletes are treated.

Essentially, says Schonholtz, “you can’t make your decisions based on making your sport palatable for animal rights groups, because by definition they don’t believe that we have the right to use those animals. So nothing you do, aside from quitting what you’re doing, is going to make them happy.”

“You can make improvements and try to appease them,” adds Gary Guccione, Executive Director of the National Greyhound Association, “but you’re not likely to ever please an animal rights group because their agenda is so

defensive is going to put you in a bad position.

“I think some groups may have a valid point,” she admits, “but the way some of the more radical ones get it across – I don’t think there is ever any excuse for



extreme. They basically want animals to be free and treated like humans, and even if you’re doing things responsibly and with animal welfare in mind, they’ll object to it. And they’ll use any type of tactics to reach their end, including lying and exaggerating.”

Rodeos, with all their steer wrestling, calf roping, and bull riding, have had more than their fair share of interactions with radical activists, and few have been pleasant. “We’ve seen every kind of campaign against our sport,” says Schonholtz, “from release of livestock to videos on the Internet to picketing and bomb threats. They’ve even come to my house.”

But at all costs, she stresses, you must not stoop to their level. “It’s so important that when you deal with these types of issues, you don’t deal with them emotionally – that you frame the situation, look at what it really is, provide for the safety of the livestock as well as the people working with the livestock and then move forward with your positive programs. Being

violence or personalizing the argument.”

Thoroughbred racing has been attacked by a variety of groups on a variety of levels – but as Waldrop points out, it’s nearly impossible (and not even desirable) to have a response to everything. Some points, some groups, and some accusations – you just have to let go. Others, however, require rebuttle.

“We are vigilant to make sure that people are not misrepresenting,” he says. “People are entitled to their own opinions, we just don’t think they’re entitled to their own set of facts. When someone comes out and makes outlandish statements about how the industry is uncaring or there’s no reform efforts or there are no change, that the industry is filled with drugs and cheaters, things that make good headlines but can’t be substantiated by facts, we respond.”

So what happens when they do? How have these industries adjusted or been effected by their interactions with animal activist groups?

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The Result

“Once the battle starts,” says Guccione, “it doesn’t end. It just keeps going, because ultimately their agenda is to shut you down.” He’s seen first-hand the effect animal rights or even animal welfare campaigns can have on sport. Just last fall, a referendum banned greyhound racing in Massachusetts after an explosive activist propaganda campaign, a ban which paves the way for other states to follow suit.

“We’ve learned that they will just never go away. They get sighted on it and focused on it and just keep at it. It’s just going to be that way. You can never expect them to leave it alone.”

But though Guccione, Schonholtz, Waldrop and others are fed up with the tiresome battle, they’re willing to admit that in the end, their industries have taken some value from the encounters.

“I guess the animal rights movement has brought up the discussion about how we do care for animals,” agrees Schonholtz. “What needs to happen now is that the industry needs to take that subject back. We’re the ones who care for the animals and we need to make sure that we are doing that, that we take any ammunition away from these groups and keep moving forward with what we are doing.”

The NTRA has made a point of that – taking the criticisms to heart and putting reforms in place to counter valid accusa-

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tions. “There are some in our industry who agree at least in part with the sympathies of some of these groups,” Waldrop points out. “I think, for instance, there are many who think we ought to be doing more for our horses once they retire from racing – that we need to be more consciously involved with the effort to retrain and re-home these horses. The NTRA happens to be very much in agreement with that view, and that’s the reason we formed the NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance. One of the five primary focuses of that alliance is aftercare, making sure that the industry as a whole

is taking care of our equine athletes and finding them suitable homes and second careers – keeping them out of the so-called slaughter pipeline.”

So there can be benefits to these interactions, he happily admits.

“There’s no question that we’re a better industry because of it. And I think everytime criticism arises you have to take a look at yourself and determine whether the criticism is well-founded. And not all criticism – just because it comes from animal rights activists – is wrong. There may be some important corrective actions you need to take.”

The Preparation

To get the most out of facing off with animal activists, preparation is key.

The NTRA, for example, encountered a number of these groups in the wake of two prominent racing accidents (Barbaro and Eight Belles). “I can’t imagine a worse scenario for horse racing,” admits Waldrop. “You have a lot of negative press coming out of elite media, like the *New York Times*, and they are focusing a bright light on the industry, bringing out what they believe to be many of its shortcomings. That’s not a pleasant experience, and probably left a bad taste in many people’s mouths.

“I think it’s important to remember that in the heat of a crisis it’s very difficult to establish credibility,” he adds. “But if you’ve done the good work, taken the good actions that you need to prior to the crisis, you’ve established credibility. Then, perhaps, you can survive it less scathed.

“The problem we had in the thoroughbred industry was that we did not have the credibility to survive the challenges, and when the heat was put on us after Eight Belles, we withered. We did not respond well because the public was not believing anything we said. It didn’t matter what good work we did, they just



didn't want to hear it. So you have to establish that credibility. You do that through solid programs and actions and expressing strong views of care and concern.

"Now there are some that will never be satisfied. Those groups that want to close down horse racing, those groups you will never satisfy. And you're always going to be vulnerable to them. But those I believe are the minority – the significant minority. The vast majority of animal rights groups are more concerned with slaughter and those kinds of health and safety issues. And in that regards, a good healthy reform campaign can inoculate you against a lot of the negative press that could come."

Schonholtz agrees. And she's convinced that it's not just this reform, but the everyday actions of industries that must be monitored. We have to be self-reflective, she argues.

"Start to think about, for instance: what would the public think of our train-

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 “What would the public think of our training practices? **What would the public think about everything we do?** What if it showed up in a news documentary? Are we okay with it?”

ing practices? What would the public think about everything we do? What if it showed up in a news documentary? Are we okay with it? I always tell the members of our organization: if you don't want it on the front page, don't do it.

"Some people feel that if they change something or try to improve something they're admitting that what they're doing now isn't satisfactory," she adds. "But I don't think we can be looking at it that way. I think we always have to be looking for ways to improve our welfare programs, our rules, our enforcement procedures – any number of things."

"The best way to prepare is with actions, with reforms, with changes," says

Waldrop. "The NTRA Safety and Integrity Alliance has had some conversations with the harness industry about joining the alliance. Because ultimately, if you approach this as a PR matter, you may be disappointed. And you're going to get a lot of people in the industry who say: well, get a good spokesman, get a good PR firm and we can talk our way out of this problem. Our experience has been that you can't talk your way out of these problems. It's not just an issue where you can convince the public that you care enough. You have to act your way out of the problem. You have to demonstrate through real reforms, through real change, that you are taking a different approach to the treatment of your animals.

"It's a different sensibility out there today than there once was," he continues. "It's a different world. You have a different group of people, who are going to approach this a lot differently than they did years ago."

Where do we fit in?

Harness racing, up until now, has had minimal experience with these groups (in comparison to other industries), though there's no doubt they'll be approaching us in the future. But Ted Smith,

Chief Executive Officer of Standardbred Canada, isn't worried about this type of encounter. "I would take it as a positive," he says, "because I think we have so many positives to explain about how we look after the standardbred horse that most people don't understand."

"If you follow a standardbred horse for a particular week," adds Smith, "they're fed the best feed, they get the best vitamins, the best supplements; they have controlled exercise on a regular basis, they're bathed, they're hosed, they're blanketed, their legs are rubbed, they get massages, they get acupuncture, see chiropractors — I mean, I wish I

could have a lot of the things these horses do! So I would say during their racing career or the lead-up to their racing career, they're treated better than humans on average basis."

But Smith does realize the implications that these interactions can have,

and is quick to point out that the SC Board of Directors has turned it's attention to some of the key animal issues our industry faces.

"We have to be ready to prepare for them," he says, "and I think that's one of the reasons why we have developed a

horse welfare statement and are committed to it. They'll be some that will want to draw us through the mud for certain reasons or certain tactics, but I think, quite confidently, that we will come up more on the positive side." **I**

PETA as I see it

Their list of accomplishments is lengthy and undeniably impressive. Founded in 1980, PETA is dedicated to establishing and defending the rights of all animals, their website claims. "PETA operates under the simple principle that animals are not ours to eat, wear, experiment on, or use for entertainment," it reads. "PETA educates policy-makers and the public about animal abuse and promotes kind treatment of animals."

An honourable mission, no doubt.

But as their reach extends, and as more celebrities, government officials and policy-makers climb on board, PETA's well-funded media campaigns, catchy billboards and provocative commercials have set their sights on anything and everything; horse-drawn carriages in New York City and elsewhere are a recent example. "Horses are meant to be in pastures, with their family members and herd," wrote Desiree Acholla, an animal and entertainment specialist at PETA's headquarters in Norfolk, Va., in a letter to the mayor of Salem. "They're not meant to be toiling in front of carriages."

So the question that should be at the tip of your tongue is one we should have been asking for years.

How long until the largest animal rights group in the world (boasting over two million members) comes for us?

I don't think this is an 'if' question -- as in, 'will they bring us to task?' It's definitely a 'when.' Harness racing has more than enough meat (no pun intended) for an animal lobbyist to latch onto with writhing intensity. We've got whipping and drug violations, not to mention the whole premise of racing itself -- there's a logical extension, I think, from carriages to jog-carts and sulkies.

Online, PETA has posted a detailed fact-sheet about thoroughbred racing which scorns the industry and its practices for the fragility of horses, insurance scandals, drug administration and overwork. "Help phase out this exploitative sport," the sheet reads. "Refuse to patronize existing tracks, work to ensure that racing regulations are

reformed and enforced, lobby against the construction of new tracks, and educate your friends and family members about the tragic lives that racehorses lead."

It's only a matter of time before this shunning of thoroughbred racing gravitates to trotters and pacers. And if we know the accusations will soon be shooting our way -- sharp barbs piercing our already tenuous public perception -- will we be ready?

Are you ready?

I can hear the questions now (mostly because I've heard them before).

Doesn't the horse get bored running in circles? How do you know he likes his job? How could he? Did you just make that baby horse pull three people? Are you giving him drugs? Isn't it bad if he can't feel that pain? Won't he just make it worse? Why does he have to pull you around? What about the accidents? Do they ever get injured? Why are you whipping him? What happens to the horses if they aren't fast enough to race? Are horses still sold for meat? And so on and so forth.

Do you have the right answers?

As horsemen we know the truth, don't we? We know our horses like their jobs because we can just tell. We know carrying a whip is a safety measure and breaking yearlings with a few people on the cart is more helpful than hurtful. Most of the time, our industry has the best interest of our horses at heart and we know they're loved and pampered to the end of reason. But truthfully, there are irresponsible and loathsome people in every sport and every industry, and ours is no different.

So do we eliminate those bad apples? Or do we let a group like PETA appear on the scene and make the generalizations that will convince the public we should be eliminated all together?

It's our choice as an industry. We all have a role to play.

~ Kim Fisher