

Managing Your Public Image

Don Hoover¹, Clint Rempel² and Keith Wilson³

¹Serecon Consulting Group, Suite 600, 10665 Jasper Ave., Edmonton, AB T5J 3S9; ²APPDC, R.R. #1; Grande Prairie, AB T8V 2Z8; ³Wilson & Hurlburt, Suite 1100, 10665 Jasper Ave., Edmonton, AB T5J 3S9;

▪ The Importance Of Your Public Image

We all have an idea on the need to have a good public image, and the need for public consultation – but what are some of the factors/issues/concerns to be aware of. To address this important topic, let's review a study recently completed.

▪ Socio-Economic Impact of Hog Operations in Alberta

During the winter/spring of 1998, Serecon completed a study for Alberta Pork Producers Development Corporation (APPDC) and Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD), entitled "*The Socio-Economic Impact of Hog Operations in Alberta*".

We found that there needs to be a balanced response to the environmental challenges facing Alberta's agri-food industry through the development of:

- ▶ education/technology transfer,
- ▶ research, regulation, and
- ▶ monitoring.

We developed a methodology and determined the social and economic impacts of hog operations in Alberta. Our study included analyzing 42 hog farmers of various size and type across Alberta to determine economic impacts and environmental and community relationship questions.

We also completed five case studies to look at investments, economic impacts, neighbourhood issues and concerns, quality of life factors, and environmental issues. A neighbourhood survey of 73 individuals in the immediate and surrounding vicinity of the five case studies was also undertaken. Last but not least, we held five focus groups in the same area as the case studies, with 8 to

12 community representatives, educators, bankers, veterinarians, health workers, municipal and town councillors, church representatives, retailers, and environmental representatives, in attendance at each focus group.

Our Study Findings

- ▶ Our average herd size for the 42 farms was 316 sow equivalents.
- ▶ Both the employee and operator spend greater than 80% of their budget within a 50 kilometre radius of their place of employment.
- ▶ The average number of full-time equivalents (FTE's) for paid labour from the surveyed sample was estimated to be 2.44. This included all paid labour for operator, full-time employees, part-time employees and any paid family labour.
- ▶ The amount for feed spent within the 50 km radius ranged from 56 to 99%, depending on the region and size of operation.
- ▶ Fixed expenses included miscellaneous barn expenses, banking, depreciation, property taxes and insurance, office and administration and other. For the sample, 93% of the average fixed costs was spent regionally.
- ▶ The average replacement value of the surveyed sample was estimated to be approximately \$1,554,000, not including breeding stock.
- ▶ Local wage multipliers ranged from 1.08 to 2.87, depending on the service center. Provincial employment multiplier values for the six sample Census Divisions averaged 1.56.
- ▶ The income multipliers ranged from a high of 2.39 in the >550 sow equivalent category, to a low of 2.08 in the 250-550 sow equivalent category. The provincial income multiplier averaged 2.8.

Producers provided their perspective of the level of importance and degree of concern to their business for four factors. The greatest concern was placed on degree to which provincial/municipal regulations impact production/expansion plans, followed by degree of community support for their business endeavours. They had the least amount of concern that their operation would have difficulty conforming to the standard Code of Practice.

Other factors considered important to success and identified as **good stewardship practices** were farm appearance, proper dead animal disposal, rodent and fly control, and responsible use/disposal of pesticides.

Community Relations:

Respondents rated the presence of existing services in the community that can provide viable support for their family needs as the most important community relations factor to the success of their business.

Many respondents emphasized the importance of developing a relationship between themselves and their neighbours with approaches including:

- ▶ meeting with all of the neighbours to let them know about any changes or future plans;
- ▶ inviting neighbours to tour the farm to see the buildings, to observe first hand the day to day operations of a livestock production facility, and to interact with the residents; and,
- ▶ presenting information about the hog operation to the community.

Economic Impact – On-going Operations:

An economic base model was developed and applied to a 316-sow equivalent, and a 1,000-sow equivalent on-going operation. The magnitude of regional impact of hog production activities for the 316 sow, average size of the survey sample is expected to range from \$1.3 million to \$1.5 million and the total provincial impact was between \$1.6 and \$1.8 million per year. As a result of production expenditures, the impact to the local economy of operations with an average of 1,000 sow equivalents, is estimated between \$3.5 million to \$3.8 million each year, and the total provincial economic impact is estimated to be between \$3.9 million and \$4.4 million.

Issues Facing the Developer:

Issues faced by the new or expanding hog operations included:

- ▶ development approval processes;
- ▶ prohibitive water license costs;
- ▶ uncertainty relative to community receptiveness;
- ▶ heightened environmental concern and prevalence of media controversy; and,
- ▶ Code of Practice implications.

Measures to Alleviate Concerns:

Case study participants were proactively taking measures to alleviate anticipated concerns relative to their expansion or investment projects. Some of these measures included:

- ▶ enhanced manure storage;
- ▶ investment in manure application technology;
- ▶ improved neighbour and community relations;
- ▶ soil and water testing processes established;
- ▶ site selection and design considerations;
- ▶ early application for water licensing; and,
- ▶ securing adjacent property.

In the process of conducting five community focus groups, common themes emerged relative to the perceived importance of agriculture to the community and general receptiveness to intensive livestock projects, including:

- ▶ agriculture plays an important role in the economic and social base of the community;
- ▶ there has been significant changes in agriculture in the previous five years (size, number, focus of farms);
- ▶ taxes and revenue demands are influencing the selection and support of development projects;
- ▶ intensive livestock operators and families are spending locally; and,
- ▶ intensive hog production is perceived to be the worst environmental offender of intensive livestock operations.

Community members provided the following suggestions for incorporation into developers' plans:

- ▶ focus on neighbour/community relations;
- ▶ increase public awareness; and,
- ▶ design and demonstrate an environmental management plan.

▪ **Some Approaches and Strategies**

Based on our study, some basic concepts on how best to develop a good public image and to be able to maintain this over time have been developed. They include:

Develop Your Plan

Before you have any meetings (public or private), or present information to the approving authorities, or provide information – interviews with the media, prepare an overall public consultation/awareness plan. It should include what

you are going to do, what you are going to prepare for the awareness and the approval process, who you will be meeting with, and what you are doing this all for. Be prepared, be flexible, be informed, listen carefully, be proactive, and be prepared for setbacks.

Prepare Visual Material

To increase awareness, include what is being planned (i.e., a 1,000 sow farrow to finish or farrow to wean operation, etc.), the location, reasons for selecting the site, all environmental issues and how they are being dealt with, and an outline of the economic impact the operation will have on the area – 50 km radius.

Determine Who is Your Key Spokesperson

When you are planning a major project, there will be a number of people involved. Often they will all want to be involved in the public consultation process. We strongly feel this should be handled by one or two key people with good people/communication skills. Not to say the rest should not be present at meetings, they should, but the main message should be consistent and therefore given by one or two individuals.

Plan for a Public Presentation

Hold an open house to explain verbally your plans, who is involved, and to go through all the above information in detail. Have displays showing graphically what you are doing, pictures, aerials, engineering plans and drainage, economic impact, etc. Be readily available to answer all questions – or make sure if you do not have an answer you will commit to finding the answer, and getting it back to the person asking the question.

Meeting with Neighbours

Complete a One-to-One Meeting with each neighbour, which in your view (or in your consultant's opinion) will be in an area of potential concern. Discuss in detail the project, and all the precautions you are taking regarding odour, disease, dust, traffic, water quality, etc. (along with the engineering plans for same), the compliance or over-compensating factors for manure storage, including type (lagoon, tank, etc., and capacity), water requirements and sources, along with hydrology studies completed, etc.

Timing the Process

Timing is important as is the proper sequence of public disclosure. We suggest the following: prepare all material, determine who is your key spokesperson, have your public meeting, and then meet with individuals on a one-to-one basis, then present your information to the local and regional media. Be

proactive, get the material/information out before it leaks out, with some negative vibrations.

▪ **Dealing with the Media**

There are considerable differences in newspaper, radio, and television news coverage. In general, newspaper reporters require more detail for their articles so they will ask questions concerning the background, history, context, and overall relevance of your message.

Pointers for newspaper interviews

- ▶ Never speak off the record; assume that everything you say will be reported, whether it is before, during, or after an interview.
- ▶ Make sure what you tell the reporter is what you want to see in print.
- ▶ A newspaper reporter will rarely allow you to review the article before it is printed, but you can ask.

Pointers for interviews on radio or television

- ▶ Treat your host and audience as you would your friends. Be friendly, spontaneous, and responsive.
- ▶ Know the length of your interview before you begin.
- ▶ Think in terms of outline rather than exposition.
- ▶ Before the interview begins, try to learn something about your host's likes, interests, and prejudices.
- ▶ Do not think of your host as an adversary.
- ▶ Most interview programs will have the host or someone from the production staff "pre-interview" you before you go on, if only for a minute.
- ▶ It is perfectly all right to consult notes during the course of a radio interview.
- ▶ Avoid the use of too many statistics.
- ▶ On television, look your interviewer in the eye and use his or her first name.
- ▶ Defensive body language like wringing hands, folding arms across the chest, clenching fists or narrowing eyes should be avoided.

When You Encounter a Hostile Interviewer

- ▶ When barraged with questions, simply sift out the one or two questions you feel most comfortable with and ignore the others.
- ▶ If constantly interrupted, either ignore the interruption and continue, or politely say, "I will come back to that later".
- ▶ If you are being maligned or unfairly characterized, take exception.
- ▶ If the interviewer is not responsive because he or she has not done enough homework or is not interested in the topic, you can subtly assume the role of both interviewer and guest by feeding yourself dialogue.

If You Feel You Have Been Misquoted

First, read the article very carefully to make sure you have been misquoted. In cases where you have been misquoted, the easiest course of action is simply to telephone the reporter who misquoted you to explain your position and to find out how the reporter came up with the erroneous information.

Summary

- ▶ Keep your message short and simple. Use layman's terms.
- ▶ Be honest in your replies. Do not answer questions when you are not absolutely sure of your facts. Do not be afraid to say you do not know or can not provide an answer at this time.
- ▶ Be considerate of the reporter's needs. Reporters often need information at unusual times such as in the evenings or on weekends in order to meet deadlines.
- ▶ Keep in mind that the reporter wants to use you as an authority on your subject. The purpose of the interview is so he or she can quote you and use the information you provide in order to produce an interesting, newsworthy article.

■ Improving the Image of Existing Operations

How can you manage your image when you have an existing operation? Following are some suggestions for consideration.

Visual Aspects

- ▶ Outside appearance of well maintained buildings, properly landscaped yard.
- ▶ Plant year round shelterbelts.

- ▶ Have carcass disposal bin properly placed. This includes getting rid of carcasses before they decompose, and thus eliminating odor and unsightly carcasses.
- ▶ Place a sign indicating name of farm and telephone numbers for manager and/or owner.
- ▶ First impression of personnel and overall appearance of farm is important. Portray a positive community contribution.
- ▶ Use a sign that indicates need for bio-security, but be positive - don't indicate it is a hazard.

Community/Neighbor Relations

- ▶ Open and honest communications with neighbours will minimize the negative responses.
- ▶ Take the initiative to educate the public or community about your operation i.e. grain consumption, jobs and other spin-offs.
- ▶ Have an open house for a new facility.
- ▶ Media exposure is also a positive aspect of informing the community or general public. Be informed and prepared for the interview.

Environmental Issues

- ▶ Consider nearby community events, for example, neighbours hosting a barbecue. They appreciate "fresh" country air.
- ▶ Utilize the best available method for manure application, thereby minimizing odour. Manure injection eliminates almost all odour, and also utilizes more of the nutrient content of the manure.

