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Zoom Out

by Shelli Manning

scan-dal /'skandl/ noun: an action or event regarded as morally or legally wrong and causing general public outrage.

A gorilla in a zoo was shot and killed, a quarterback won't stand for the National Anthem, more gun violence, that presidential candidate said WHAT?

Turn on the TV, go online or read a newspaper and you'll find a scandal without even trying. As a society, we seem to gravitate from one scandal to the next, only ceasing to talk about the first when we're provided another, by a media who's all too happy to oblige. One after another after another, as long as it's scandalous, it's got our attention.

Lately, if it's not politics, it's police brutality. Stories of inappropriate behavior and secret recordings, corrupt cops and the use of excessive force – or at least what looks to be excessive force – spill out of every media and social media outlet. Details are misconstrued to maximize the scandal and the community suffers as a whole. Of course, we know this appetite for outrage hasn't been limited to law enforcement and politicians; for those in production agriculture, it's been a cost of doing business for years.

From chain-restaurant marketers touting ideas about what makes cows 'happy', to a public; misinformed about antibiotic use on farms, to organizations who claim their sole purpose is to facilitate animal welfare (when in fact their only true goal is profit) – any passer-by armed with a cell phone can snap a picture that looks unseemly, or even abusive, when taken out of context.

It's no wonder consumer confidence can feel like an uphill battle for producers.

Oftentimes the scandals we're fed are based in truth. After all, it is people we're talking about; human beings who are subject to make mistakes and sometimes bad decisions. If you're looking to create a scandal – take one of those mistakes, zoom in close enough, manipulate it to support whatever idea you want and send it out into the world. By skewing undeniable snippets of reality, the story becomes irrefutable in a practical sense. Would-be slander turns into 'Yes, that's true, but...' and no one ever hears the rest.

Sadly, potential for scandal in production agriculture is abundant thanks to the false ideology of mistreatment and antibiotic use; driven by greed. Opinions are particularly strong in the case of the

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nation's largest operations; both beef and dairy. While they provide job opportunities and boost local economies, increase efficiency of food production and decrease time to market; both of which in turn drive down the cost of food to the consumer, these farms are reviled by many. Despite the benefits they bring, they're labeled 'factory farms' and carry connotations of overcrowding and contamination, leaving the general population little else to do but jump to the worst conclusions. Ultimately this prejudice has farmers contributing largely to the food supply for a public that is quick to denounce them.

When assessing these scandals it's important to understand there are people who approach farms under a very convincing guise of seeking employment; when in reality their only goal is to capture evidence of animal abuse, by any means necessary – in essence, to create scandal. That includes orchestrating scenarios designed to provide footage and compiling 'evidence' in a way that's melodramatic and skewed harshly, specifically highlighting employee failings and misconstruing practices common and necessary on dairy farms.

What does a scandal in production agriculture look like? In theory, someone makes an accusation; most often involving animal wellbeing. Maybe there's some type of evidence, maybe there's not... The amount of attention the story garners determines the reaction. In any case, there are two parts; the scandal and reality.

The Scandal: Shock and outrage, possible media attention, accusations, calls for the farm to be shut down, scrambling by industry professionals associated with the farm to shield themselves from backlash. Even death threats are not uncommon in animal welfare situations. Anyone with a computer and internet connection can anonymously weigh in on a story, amplifying the hatred, despite only knowing the details the media fed them. At any rate, it's a whirlwind of negativity impossible for producers to be prepared for.

The Reality: First of all, animals need to be cared for. They need to be fed, dairy cows needed to be milked. It is very painful for high-producing cows to be milked even a few hours late. If milking is delayed too long, the cow can even develop mastitis, an infection of the udder. So regardless of the drama blowing up outside, inside the barns, it has to be business as usual. Keeping an operation running often means retaining key employees; a task easier said than done in an industry when the next job opportunity can typically be found a few miles down the road, which translates to a lot of options for nervous employees who are tempted to jump ship.

Then, as any business owner would expect, there are meetings to be had, continuity plans to enact and statements to be made. Perhaps nothing is more important though, than the internal investigation. While the world may be blowing up outside, the focus has to remain inside, on the animals, on the operation and not only on what actually happened, but also on what needs to happen in the future.

From there, the road to recovery for a farm who's experienced scandal can be a long one, but with strong leadership and committed industry partners, it's possible not only to break through the challenges caused by scandal, but to ultimately come out a better operation as a whole.

Once the root cause of the scandal is identified and resolved, implementing quality standard operating procedures (SOPs), which provide clear, precise instructions and expectations to employees is key. SOPs leave less room for confusion or errors as well as make training new employees more consistent and enable management to identify issues sooner. Working closely with trusted professionals such as ANIMART's Professional Services team – with veterinarians, veterinary technicians, a licensed pharmacist and a milk quality specialist all on staff – can help with developing SOPs and filling in training gaps, ultimately staving off issues before they escalate to the kind of events which can lead to scandal. In the event the unthinkable does happen, having a committed industry partner with the knowledge, experience and backbone to support your success – both in good times and in not-so-good times – can make all the difference in a farm's recovery.

Like law enforcement, a career in production agriculture is not for the faint of heart; it can be difficult and thankless, yet an absolute necessity for our society to function. Despite the utmost importance of these professionals, they are often judged quickly and harshly by a public who spends no time considering a society without them.

So the next time you pick up the paper and read all about the latest scandal – be it about police or producers or anyone in between – bear in mind how the media sews together the worst parts of humanity and serves it to a voracious public. It's easy to paint an entire community with the wrongdoings of a corrupt few, but if you take a moment to zoom out and see the whole picture, it might not be so scandalous after all.

About the Author:

ANIMART's staff writer, Shelli Manning, works to share the human interest side of individuals in production agriculture and communicate their passions which contribute to our unique American Story. She is the published author of *Little Fish*, as well as a motivational speaker on women's issues and an advocate for the reduction of domestic violence.

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Editor Notes:

1. To receive a high-resolution photo, Editors can contact Katie Holewinski of ANIMART at katieh@animart.com.