

Reality provides incentives

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The conclusions of a study conducted earlier this year by the National Pork Board indicated animal welfare was not a consumer priority. One problem with this survey is that only pork consumers were questioned, while data about non-pork eaters was excluded.

Also, the wording of the questions asked of consumers was too general for a topic as sensitive as animal welfare. The questions used were very general about "welfare" or "cruelty." No specific questions were asked about issues such as sow gestation stalls, transporting animals or slaughtering. I have observed that people become much more responsive when asked to address specific issues. A TV show that shows animal cruelty generates a lot more concern than vague abstractions about animal welfare. Consumers' top concern is food safety, but even this issue was on the back burner until E. coli O157: H7 incidents made headlines in the early 90s.

I witnessed an abstraction become reality while working with McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's as they began conducting animal welfare audits of their suppliers' meat plants. In the beginning the welfare issue was an abstract concept. When the executives visited the meat plants, however, the welfare issue became real.

It was amazing how abruptly the welfare issue stopped being abstract. I remember the day when one executive saw a half-dead, emaciated dairy cow. He was disgusted and became more motivated to improve welfare immediately.

During the past five years I have trained the auditors that do meat plant audits. Most restaurants use their food safety auditors to do the welfare audits. In the beginning, some food safety auditors had little interest in welfare because the issue was abstract. However, most became motivated after they started doing the audits and saw the improvements that occurred. The plants are scored using an objective scoring system and most of the improvements in welfare also helped to improve meat quality.

The welfare issue is not going away. I wanted to find out how the general public would react to a survey that was more specific about the issue. I showed pictures of sow gestation stalls and pigs in groups on an indoor, slatted floor to some fellow airline passengers during some of my many flights. When I talked to each person I was careful not to ask questions that would bias their responses. I simply told them I was working on standards for proper pig housing. After making that statement, I would put the photos on the tray-table and encourage the person to talk about the pictures while I said as little as possible.

The sow stall pictures were the most attractive I could find. In one picture a nice man was petting a sow in a stall. All the pigs were clean and the facilities allowed sunlight in through white curtains.

People I talked to were bothered by the fact that the sows could not turn around in the stalls. One-third of the people disliked sow stalls, while another third was uneasy about them and still another one-third had no opinion. Women were much more concerned than men. A typical statement from the uneasy group was, "It just does not seem right." Almost all of the people liked the pen with the slatted floor. Many commented on how clean the pigs were.

There are other indicators that the animal welfare is here to stay. Florida legislators recently passed legislation to ban sow gestation stalls. In other parts of the country, pets are gaining legal status. In Boulder, Colo., dog owners are now called dog guardians. Many law schools teach students classes in animal rights law. Divorce proceedings now often include custody battles over pets, similar to child-custody suits.

Advances in science will also motivate interest in animal welfare. The genome projects are showing that people and animals share many genes. Papers published in Science and Nature are showing that animals can actually think and even solve problems. Throughout the industry people say that we must be science based. Science is showing that animals can think while also feeling pain and fear.

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