



Golden ARC de Excellence Award Winner! World Health Organization Reviews Red Meat and Cancer Risk By Rebecca Colnar

(Editor's Note: Following is a summary question and answer segment on the 2016 Golden ARC de Excellence Award winner -- National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a contractor to the Beef Checkoff, and Ketchum Public Relations "World Health Organization Reviews Red Meat and Cancer Risk". Entrants included Daren Williams, Season Solorio, Shalene McNeill, Shawn Darcy, Elizabeth Elegant Public Relations. Campaign – Issues Management.)



On October 26, 2015, the World Health Organization's (WHO) International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) released its review of the science on the carcinogenicity of red and processed meat, ranking processed meats in highest hazard category (Group 1, carcinogenic to humans) and red meat in the second highest category (Group 2A, probably carcinogenic to humans). The resulting media coverage and social media conversation made it the biggest news day for red meat in recorded history. However, in spite of sensational headlines comparing the cancer risk of eating meat to smoking, consumer perceptions about the role of red meat in a healthy diet remained unchanged. As Paul Harvey would say, this is "the rest of the story."

What was your strategy?

In early 2015, approximately six months prior to the anticipated release, the Beef Checkoff nutrition research and issue management teams at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), a contractor to the Beef Checkoff, collaborated in developing the "Strategic Framework for Planning," with two primary measurable objectives:

- 1) No appreciable change in consumer and nutrition influencer confidence related to beef's role in human health, specifically relationship to cancer risk, as measured by the Consumer Beef Index.
- 2) No significant action is taken to reduce consumption of beef due to cancer risk (e.g., Dietary Guidelines recommendation to reduce red meat consumption).

The plan also outlined three strategic pillars:

- Clarify and elevate the science on diet's relationship to cancer, as well as individual components related to risk (e.g., dietary patterns, obesity).
- Encourage awareness and adoption of gold standard methodology to inform the evaluation and classification of dietary exposures and cancer risk.
- Engage stakeholders in advocating for beef in a healthful diet and lifestyle.

Specific to communications, the key strategy was to balance the tone of news coverage and social media conversation while not prolonging or inflaming the news cycle.

What influenced your approach?

The evidence base for diet and cancer relies on observational data – a type of research that reports observed associations between exposures (e.g. eating red meat) and outcomes (e.g. colorectal cancer)

but cannot establish cause and effect relationships. Understanding whether or not red meat intake is independently associated with cancer is further complicated by imprecise definitions of red and processed meat in research studies and confounded by the overall dietary pattern in which red meat is consumed. Over the past 10 years, the Beef Checkoff nutrition research team at the NCBA has extensively reviewed the research on red meat and cancer, and the independent scientists who conducted this [research](#) have concluded “the totality of the available scientific evidence is not supportive of an independent association between red meat or processed meat and cancer.” Building on the nutrition research the Beef Checkoff market research team at NCBA conducted both qualitative and quantitative studies to determine consumer attitudes regarding diet and cancer risk prior to the release of the report. When asked, “What contributes to cancer?” more than half of the respondents identified smoking (63%), genetics (54%), toxic chemical exposure (51%), and sunlight/UV rays (47%). Perceptions regarding consumption of foods like processed meats (18%) and beef (10%) ranked much lower. Even fruit and vegetable consumption ranked higher than meat at 20 percent. The market research team also tested a variety of hypothetical scenarios, messages and potential spokespeople to determine the most effective communications strategy. This research indicated consumers would be most receptive to messages that put diet and cancer risk into perspective (no single food has even been found to cause cancer) and were delivered by a health professional (doctor or dietitian).

Name three aspects that you thought made this successful.

The response to the IARC classification was successful because we delivered a relevant message that resonated with consumers, across all of our communication channels including traditional and social media and online properties, with credible and capable spokespeople.

Several months prior to the release of the WHO/IARC review of red meat and cancer risk, the issues management team began developing communication materials including content for the [FactsAboutBeef.com](#) website, core messages, a tough Q&A and a press release quoting internal and third party subject matter experts on diet and cancer. In the weeks prior to the release the team conducted media training for national spokespeople and a special workshop for State Beef Council staff to ensure a coordinated state/national response. The week prior to the release of the report the media relations team contacted key reporters at several national media outlets including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and Reuters to brief them on checkoff-funded research on red meat and cancer.

As expected, IARC published their review on Monday, October 26, at 7:00 a.m. Eastern. The Beef Checkoff issued a [release](#) simultaneously with the report to establish Shalene McNeill, PhD, RD, executive director of human nutrition at NCBA, as an expert spokesperson. In the first twelve hours following the release, Dr. McNeill conducted interviews with 15 major print and broadcast outlets, including interviews at the Washington, D.C., studios of CNN, FOX, CBS, NBC, and Al Jazeera, as well as interviews with Associated Press, *Reuters*, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Fortune*, *Mother Jones*, *Huffington Post* and more. The [CNN interview](#) captures the tone and content of the majority of interviews.

While most of the initial traditional and social media coverage early on Monday consisted of major news outlets sharing their stories through their social platforms, consumers and influencers began to weigh in much more heavily late Monday and on Tuesday, October 27, expressing skepticism at headlines comparing red meat to smoking, expressing sentiments such as, “everything causes cancer,” and “give me bacon or give me death.”

According to an independent media analysis conducted by [Thomson Reuters](#), negative tweets critical of IARC outnumbered positive tweets from people who believed IARC by 7 to 1 on Monday and 6.5 to 1 on Tuesday. By Wednesday, October 28, social conversation had significantly declined (Fig. 1) and news satire organizations, including [The Onion](#), started to pick-up on the story. Even Stephen Colbert suggested that he wasn't afraid of meat while [loading a pipe full of bacon and smoking it](#).



Figure 1: A graph of social media mentions shows the conversation tapering off significantly in the week following the release of the WHO/IARC report on red meat and cancer

By the end of the week, the World Health Organization issued a [clarification](#) saying that "the latest IARC review does not ask people to stop eating processed meats." Further, in an interview with the *Irish Times*, World Health Organization spokesperson Gregory Härtl said it was a "shortcoming" of IARC's classification process that led to tobacco and processed meats being put in the same risk classification. "We do not want to compare tobacco and meat because we know that no level of tobacco is safe," he said. "We are not saying stop eating processed meats altogether. Do not cut out meat completely as it has nutrients."

The Beef Checkoff response to the WHO/IARC report on red meat and cancer met both of the objectives outlined in the strategic plan.

1) No appreciable change in consumer and nutrition influencer confidence related to beef's role in human health.

According to market research surveys conducted before and after the release of the WHO/IARC report, cancer news awareness spiked significantly in the days following the report but consumer perception that eating red or processed meat saw no statistically significant increase.¹

2) No significant action is taken to reduce consumption of beef due to cancer risk.

To date there have been no regulatory actions taken to reduce red meat consumption. In fact, the 2015 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, issued in January, affirmed the role of red meat in a healthy diet. In

¹ See attached "Cancer Awareness and Belief Pre and Post"

addition, according to a recent report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, [red meat consumption is expected to increase](#) by almost half a pound per person in 2016, the first increase since 2006.

Who was involved in the process of developing this “campaign?”

The Beef Checkoff Issues Management, Nutrition Research and Market Research teams at NCBA led the campaign with support from FUSE, an integrated agency team of consultants from Ketchum Public Relations and FoodMinds.

What made you decide to use this entry for the ARC awards?

This campaign had the research, planning, execution and especially the results that are essential for a winning Golden ARC Awards entry. The PRSA chapters who judge the Golden ARC Awards are instructed to award up to 20 points for research (which is often lacking in entries), 25 each for planning and execution, and up to 30 for results.

Why should PR professionals enter the ARC awards?

The Golden ARC Awards is the only awards program dedicated solely to excellence in public relations in agriculture. If you want your work in agricultural public relations to be recognized by your peers the industry, the Golden ARC Awards are the contest to enter.