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*"If we are together nothing is impossible. If we are divided all will fail." Winston Churchill*

It isn't difficult to see why we can be divided as an industry. We ride, we drive, we race, we jump, we slide, we compete, we recreate, and all of this using a diverse variety of equipment on a wide range of sizes, shapes and breeds of horses. On top of this diversity, we care for our equine friends in vastly different ways depending on circumstances and philosophies.

Compare this to, for instance, hockey. Everyone needs a pair of skates, a stick, a puck and some protective equipment. The various leagues tell you where to play, and how seriously, the rules are largely the same for each league and team and a hockey stick is, for the most part, a hockey stick. And, although they may have an opinion, most players probably don't care how often their teammates sharpen their skates or who does it for them.

The key difference is that the "sport of horses" is really many different activities with one common ingredient – the equine. On the plus side, this wide range of activities means there is

literally something for everyone, no matter your age, athletic ability, time constraints or competitiveness. There are many opportunities to attract people to our industry whether they are inclined to recreation, competition, a lifetime of learning or just a warm, fuzzy muzzle.

While

diversity is variety, fragmentation is a breaking apart. When diversity becomes fragmentation, there is room for judgment, animosity and negativity among the various fragments of the larger group.

Some would describe the state of the horse industry as just such.

In 1974 Doug Milligan was appointed head of Alberta's then newly formed Horse Industry Branch (the first of its kind in Canada) and continued with Alberta Agriculture until his retirement in 2007. The root of the fragmentation problem according to Milligan is simply, "What is important to one group isn't necessarily important to another." Milligan believes this attitude results in a lack of focus on major issues that are critical to our industry as a whole.

Through his career in government, Milligan saw how, "the divided state of the horse industry impacted support from society and led to limited recognition from government at all levels." This lack of support manifests in many ways, including a lack of government funding. Says Milligan, "For example, little research is performed on feeds for horses due to a lack of funding and support for the industry."

Marnie Somers is the President of the Canadian Quarter Horse Association, and has acted as a director for the American Quarter Horse Association, the Manitoba Quarter Horse Association and Equine Canada. Somers has seen an increase in specialization over her many years in the Quarter Horse industry. At one time everyone who owned a Quarter Horse and wanted to compete had only the option of an AQHA breed show. Now Quarter Horse enthusiasts have many options, with associations for specific disciplines, like cutting or reining, holding their own competitions. The Quarter Horse breeding industry has followed suit with horses being

developed for individual disciplines as opposed to the versatility champions of the past. Somers feels this specialization has both its pros and cons.

“Specialization enables people to focus on the needs of their particular sport and forces the exhibitor to increase their skill level to meet the competition,” states Somers. “The advantage for trainers and breeders is that they can identify horses best suited to each discipline, and horses can better do their jobs and have longer careers.” On the other hand, specialization in the Quarter Horse industry means that “the versatility of individuals is not what it once was,” according to Somers.

Globally speaking, Somers feels that these smaller, more specialized groups of like-minded individuals are in danger of developing tunnel vision, and can have a lack of awareness of issues affecting the horse industry as a whole. “We’re in danger of not seeing the enemy on the horizon because we’re busy with our day-to-day activities. There are many threats to the horse industry on a variety of levels and we need to present a common, united front.”

Ken Zelt is the past President of the Alberta Equestrian Federation, a member of the Alberta Trail Riding Association and the man responsible for the creation and implementation of the Alberta Equestrian Trail Supporter Program. Zelt says, “With continually increasing demands on our public land base, and more need for government involvement in maintenance of recreational areas, usage by the horse community could be impacted in the future. Broad communication to the industry is a challenge, so it’s difficult to get the word out on potential areas of concern. A strong network is required to keep the industry informed and involve participants at the regional level.”

Les Burwash, the Manager of Horse Programs with Alberta Agriculture, feels there is an issue with fragmentation in the horse industry and it puts us at a distinct disadvantage. “Individual groups lose sight of the industry as a whole when all they see is their own corner of it. They think what happens elsewhere in the industry doesn’t affect them.” But what is

happening and how does it affect us?

The processing of horses for human consumption is under attack by people largely outside our industry. Burwash believes the demise of this aspect of the horse industry would impact the value of horses, remove the availability of a widely used form of euthanasia and result in neglect and suffering of unwanted horses. This issue has become very divisive inside and outside the horse industry. What used to be a private choice made by the individual owner has become a public issue and a threat to the industry as we know it.

In addition, Burwash comments that, "Equine businesses are not as likely to be consulted by government as other agricultural groups, are disadvantaged in the tax structure and are heavily burdened by insurance costs." Who speaks to these issues for the horse industry when the majority of voices are small and serving only a fragment of the population?

Part of the solution, according to Doug Milligan, is to avoid becoming wrapped up in issues that are narrowly focused and put more attention on the big picture. For example, all industries rely on public support and a stream of new participants to keep things moving forward. The sport and recreation of horses is no different but has some public relations issues in the areas of safety and cost. Without restrictions or regulations on businesses and individuals offering services in the industry, we limit entrance of new people due to the lack of consumer protection. We live in a guarantee-heavy, safety-conscious society that is often not comfortable with the horse industry's wide open approach to business.

Marnie Somers believes that improved communication and strategic alliances among the horse industry's various groups are key to combating the forces that are bending against the livestock industry. "A national organization puts a face on the horse industry for legislators and for those who would like to tell us how to keep our animals. We need to identify common goals, filter this information down to the individual horse owners and be proactive in preserving the lifestyle we enjoy with our horses."

The solution to fragmentation according to Les Burwash, "We need to agree on *minimum standards*

for the industry, buy in and protect them. We need to be cognizant and supportive of what others are doing but, at the same time, be critical of the things that we and others in our industry are doing that are not acceptable and will ultimately reflect on all of us." How does this get accomplished? Through "an effective national umbrella group that works for all and is perceived by all as being important."

