



Outback beef farmers build resilience with mental health programs

13 October 2020

Global supply chains are under stress and Australia's beef exporters are fighting hard to keep export markets open. Australian organic beef company, OBE Organic is also fighting hard to help farmers stay resilient, with a mental health and social media program that's inspiring loyal customers from around the world.

OBE Organic is a beef-marketing company formed by a group of pastoral families in Australia's outback 'Channel Country'. The region gets its name from hundred of channels and rivers that transport northern floodwaters into the Lake Eyre Basin. It is as near to pristine as farming gets in Australia, and the company's family farmers are proud custodians of the land.

Founded in 2004, OBE Organic was Australia's first 100 per cent-certified organic beef exporter. The company's first shipments headed for Japan almost fifteen years ago. According to Managing Director Dalene Wray, OBE Organic has been introducing global consumers to Australian organic beef ever since.

'With so much genetically modified corn in animal feed in the US, American consumers welcome the opportunity to purchase certified organic grass-fed beef from Australia,' says Wray. 'We are cultivating global interest in our unique environment and that's why pristine production is so important to us.'

Staying resilient in the age of Covid

To keep going in tough times, OBE Organic has to maintain strong connections with suppliers, farmers and financial stakeholders. The last 12 months have been hard. Just as farms were recovering from drought conditions, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. Within weeks, global supply chains started to seize up. The pressure on farmers was immense.

'All sorts of relationships that were previously solid have been tested,' says Wray. 'In farming we deal with people who are often isolated and under immense pressure. Everything is changing – from the supply chain to insurance and credit, and old assumptions are being challenged.'

Fortunately, OBE Organic was in a unique position to cope. Eighteen months earlier, the company began accreditation as a mentally healthy workplace, through Mental Health First Aid Australia. The core objective: to build resilience. By encouraging everyone to be upfront about their stresses, Wray wanted to help farmers, suppliers and stakeholders to withstand misfortune when it came – which it duly did.

'When COVID-19 hit, the training we had – especially the soft skills – helped us to be good colleagues,' says Wray. 'Right now, there are plenty of difficult conversations to be had. Crazy stuff has happened – things you couldn't make up.'

'With mental health training, we are all better at approaching these conversations with kindness and understanding. We encourage each other to open up before stress gets overwhelming.'

Opening up on social media

One way to build resilience has been through tailored messaging on social media. According to OBE Organic's Marketing and Administration Assistant, Hilary Hastings, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter were already a vital link in consumers' desire for food traceability. Now, Hastings has begun to use social media to talk about resilience in adversity.

'Through trial and error on social media, we discovered that our audience wants an authentic view of what we all do,' says Hastings. 'The tricky part was trying to convince outback farmers that there's value in their stories and that a photo from the farm can communicate a lot to our consumers.'

Hastings says that farmers didn't always see the point of posing for a quick photo, but the authentic outback experience conveys a strong sense of who they are.

'Now we've gone one step further and started to discuss our mental health program and the response from around the world has been terrific,' she says. 'We created an [interactive report](#) to explain our journey to becoming a mentally healthy organisation. We talk about our challenges and celebrate our achievements on social media and our customers find it inspiring.'

Austrade support

Austrade has also lent a hand. As global markets seized up, OBE Organic had to pivot quickly to domestic markets. Even so, the company's long-standing relationship with Austrade has helped keep overseas markets open through difficult times.

For example, Austrade diplomats in Saudi Arabia recently negotiated an extension to beef shelf-life regulations from 70 to 120 days. This opened up sea freight options and allowed OBE Organic to continue shipping to Saudi Arabia.

'We have used Austrade all our export life and I can't express enough the importance of government relations in some markets,' says Wray. 'As an unescorted woman visiting Saudi Arabia, Austrade helped me land that export business in the first place.'

In addition, OBE Organic makes use of the [international freight assistance mechanism](#) (IFAM) to fly chilled beef into Hong Kong on several days each month. Wray says that Austrade helps her keep track of various opportunities and the company has maintained export success in Thailand and Saudi Arabia over 2020.

'We are currently working with Austrade to support our four-year international strategy, which aims to diversify markets and channels,' says Wray. 'Our Austrade relationship is managed by a single liaison officer who deals with Austrade international offices on our behalf. It's worked really well for us.'

'It's vital to have someone who understands our business, and who can get access to the right people on our behalf.'

Building strength and coping with uncertainty

The biggest challenge of the pandemic is not knowing when it will end, or how quickly trade will recover. Until it does, Wray says that the company's mental health program and social media engagement is helping everyone to build resilience.

'You have to nourish to flourish – and that's what our customers want to see us do,' she says. 'I would encourage other businesses to focus on mental wellness as a way to build business resilience.'

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