Two ways Marius Cuming is right:

1.         Companies and industries shouldn’t usually aim to win fights against their critics.  They should aim to settle fights, calm fights, negotiate peace, and avoid recruiting new critics.  While I don’t much like mother-in-law analogies, I accept Cuming’s point that when people are criticizing an industry, there is no such thing as “victory” – so in most cases a company or industry that sets out to defeat its critics will only make things worse.

2.         The most extreme critics of a company or industry – those who want it out of business entirely – are usually doomed to fail if what the company/industry does meets a real need.  It is both fair and effective to say so.  When you’re under attack by an animal rights group that believes (for example) that sheep can’t give informed consent so all shearing is a kind of tyranny and oppression, it’s useful to distinguish such groups from animal welfare groups, which believes only that humans have a moral obligation to do what they can to minimize animals’ pain.  In that sense, it’s helpful to point out to customers that their choice is stark: If they like woolens and intend to keep buying/using woolens, they have to be okay with not waiting till the sheep give their informed consent.

But Cuming is way, way wrong when he suggests that there’s no reason for the sheep/wool industry to address issues like mulesing – which is an animal welfare issue, not an animal rights issue.

When animal rights groups raise animal welfare issues (or, generically, when extremist groups raise issues with moderate appeal), it’s fair game to note that the groups are reaching out beyond their core constituency, trying to seduce people into becoming animal rights supporters by raising legitimate animal welfare concerns.  “If mulesing were entirely abandoned by the Australian wool industry, animal rights activists would not slacken in their commitment to put a stop to sheep-raising, whether for food or fiber.”

But you can only make this point if you’re visibly taking animal welfare concerns to heart.

The core question here is whether and where you dichotomize.  Animal rights activists want to dichotomize in a way that isolates the sheep industry: sheep industry people who abuse animals versus the rest of us who are humane.  Cuming wants to dichotomize in a way that isolates the critics: extremists who think animals have the same rights as people versus the rest of us who are sane.  Settling the controversy requires a *tri*chotomy:

1. Animal rights extremists who think animals have the same rights as people.
2. The rest of us who believe in animal welfare but not animal rights (which includes some but not all of the sheep industry).
3. Sheep industry people who abuse animals.

The industry should therefore have two goals vis-à-vis the mulesing controversy and others like it:

* To convince (or coerce) more and more of the sheep industry to move from Group 3 to Group 2 – that is, to institute strong animal welfare policies throughout the industry.
* To convince the interested public that the industry takes the first goal – improving industry practices – seriously and is making good progress.

What about the *un*interested public?  When Cuming says that industry spokespeople shouldn’t talk about mulesing, he presumably has in mind an audience that isn’t paying attention to mulesing already.  Addressing the issue genuinely does have two downsides: (a) clueing in the previously unaware portion of the public; and (b) reminding those who have heard about the controversy but put it out of their minds.

Addressing the issue also has two upsides: (a) Ameliorating the concern of the portion of the public that is already aware of mulesing and would like to think the industry is trying to minimize animal pain; and (b) “inoculating” the portion of the public that isn’t yet aware, so that when critics raise the issue they have a pre-existing sense that the industry is responding responsibly.

If the critics are impotent or incompetent and few if any Australians will ever hear about mulesing, the downsides of addressing the issue exceed its upsides, and Cuming is right to focus on selling wool rather than responding to critics.  On the other hand, if the critics are already reaching a lot of Australians and are quite capable of mounting an effective campaign, then addressing the issue is wiser than avoiding it.

Generically, there are only four ways to respond to criticism:

1. Keep a low profile – ignore the criticism and hope it won’t catch fire with too many people.
2. Defend – rebut the criticism, making a case that your critics are wrong about you.
3. Counterattack – criticize the critics, making a case that people should focus on their misdeeds, not yours.
4. Acknowledge and improve – concede that at least some of what the critics are saying is true, and explain what you’re doing about it.

Much of what Cuming says suggests that he thinks the critics of mulesing have a good deal of power and impact.  That’s why he has ruled out “defend” and “counterattack” – he thinks (rightly, I believe) that the industry can’t win a fight with its critics.  Then he seems to conclude that the “low profile” option is the only one left.  I don’t see why he is ruling out the “acknowledge and improve” option – the option most clearly supported by the facts as he describes them.

This response is mostly to the early paragraphs of the story you sent me, in which Cuming seems to be making a case that the way to sustain the wool industry’s social license to operate is shrug off animal welfare controversies and sell lots of wool.  I think this is wrongheaded.  For most purposes, people don’t “need” wool; they like it but can live without it.  The market for woollen garments is sufficiently discretionary that sales could go down markedly if large segments of the public came to see the industry as indifferent to serious public concerns.  (By contrast, the market for petroleum is comparatively immune to the commercial impact of public disapproval.)  So ignoring controversies – at least controversies with journalistic “legs” – is far riskier than addressing them.

But toward the end of your article, Cuming sounds a different note.  He advocates research on issues like mulesing pain relief and asserts that every farmer in Australia should be an animal welfare activist.  This is exactly right.

Dr Peter Sandman

May 19, 2017.