

The Power of Communication

I'm writing this as a member of a couple of different equestrian groups. For background, I am the current president of the St. Croix Horse and Carriage Society and vice president of the Back Country Horsemen of Minnesota. I ride and drive a 17hh 14 year old Clydesdale mare.

In October, our carriage club had our annual fall drive. We gather every fall at one of the prominent equestrian campgrounds in our State Park system here in Minnesota. Because the proximity is important for this story, the trail center at the park is directly adjacent to the equestrian campground and multi use trails are accessed directly adjacent to both.

A couple of weeks before our event, we learned that a very large hiking event was going to be occurring on the same Saturday that we would be having our group drive. The event would be hosting over 900 hikers that would be hitting the trails in waves. Four to six hikers would be starting a 20-mile hike every 20-30 seconds starting at 7:00 am. Much, but not all, of the 20-mile route would be on shared equestrian/hiker trails. Just imagine the trails being absolutely covered with hikers, most of which have no idea how to act around horses! What should we do?!

I began communicating right away with the State Park who, in turn, put me in touch with event coordinators for the large hiking event. I also started communicating early with our carriage club membership to make sure they were aware and knew what to expect. A few of our members made adjustments to their plans and opted to leave younger horse home in exchange for more seasoned horses.

The hiking event folks were a dream to work with and eager to know how they could make adjustments to accommodate the equestrian interest. The route ended up focusing on the equestrian shared trails early in the morning before our organized drive was to go out and late in the afternoon when carriage drivers could choose to be finished. The route was communicated to the carriage club drivers at the driver's meeting so that everyone was aware. And to top things off, the hiking event coordinators, were helpful in communicating to their participants.

The challenge, of course, was how to communicate with more than 900 participants. Event coordinators sat down with me and we crafted a short narrative on how to behave when meeting horses on the trail. It turns out, they had a Master of Ceremonies at the start that welcomed participants and talked to them at the starting line. A valuable 20-30 seconds when participants were captive for messaging right before they started their hike. Our message was to educate hikers to act normal, continue talking, and let horses know you're there. Clear. Simple.

The amount of feedback that we received from well meaning folks that didn't realize they shouldn't duck into the vegetation off of the side of the trail in an effort to yield was enormous. So many hikers that didn't know better learned that day

that as well meaning as they are in yielding to horses on the trail, they had no idea that they were actually stressing horses when they were “hidden” in the brush. The day went off without a hitch. No conflicts occurred on the trail. And I like to think we educated a whole bunch of people who now know what to do the next time they meet an equestrian enthusiast on the trail. Communication is the key. Happy trails!