

Social License to Operate

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You are a member of one of the most important equestrian groups in the nation, if not the world. When we represent Back Country Horsemen, we stand for everyone who trail rides. We bump into other trail-using groups or individuals as they are biking, hiking, or running on the trails. It's critical for us to interact with our best foot forward. We want to maintain our "Social License to Operate."

If you haven't already heard this buzz-phrase, social license to operate is the perception of others that an industry operates in a legitimate way. In other words, to be able to continue to have and ride horses, we need to be seen as socially acceptable. We must continue to be perceived as stewards and caretakers rather than users and abusers.

There are four ways we can affect how others view us, and therefore how they view horse people in general. Firstly, our rhetoric regarding how we talk to and about our horses is important. Our words become our actions!

Next, our habits and our actions at home should be respectful. Every interaction with our horses is a moment where we can build trust and comfort for our equine partners. The relationship we create at home will be the same one we entrust our life with on tricky trails outside.

Our relationship is also visible to everyone once we leave home. The third layer of how public perception sees us is how they see us treat horses. Being aware of public opinion is a form of self-preservation, and a way to keep our lifestyle viable and thriving. Less than 2% of Americans are lucky enough to work in the horse industry. Equestrians need to be aware of our impact, because we stand out everywhere we go.

Fourth and finally, how we treat other people affects how they feel about us personally, and by extension horse people in general. The biggest thing is just being nice. Don't look down on people that don't know. Be willing to teach them.

We need to realize that we are in the public view, and that public opinion matters. It's possible the hiker you just interacted with is on vacation in Montana and has never even seen a horse up close. Be kind, you may inspire them! What they perceive and believe about us is important -- that's how social license and acceptability is maintained.

There are numerous ways we can impact non-horse owners, and keep them interested in horses. When we are at a restaurant with our barn friends, tired from a day of riding and dressed in boots, we want to demonstrate that we are polite, kind, and fun people. When we park at a trailhead, we want to clean up after our horses - schlep that poo home in your trailer and add it to your manure pile!

When we encounter children and parents, we can show kindness to a kiddo and let them pet our horse safely. It might be the highlight of their vacation! When we pull our horse trailer through a gas station, we can't flip the bird to the guy who didn't give us enough room. There's a very high likelihood he has no idea what it's like to drive precious cargo in a big vehicle. If we are seen as rude, it doesn't make people want to be around us or our horses.

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Trail riding is the most notable area where the equestrian space overlaps directly with other users. For trail riders, sharing with hikers, trail runners, dogs, and sometimes ATVs and bikes is common. All the other activities outnumber horse riders. In the U.S. there are more than 51 million bikers compared to just two million horse owners. The U.S. Forest Service advocates that “respected access is open access” and has information about how to be respectful to all parties on multi-use trails.

United States Forest Service Common Use Guidelines

For everyone:

- Respect all trail restrictions and use only trails open to your mode of transportation.
- Be considerate of others on the road or trail.
- When traveling on shared-use trails, continually watch for other types of recreationists.

For equestrians:

- Be sure you can control your horse and it has been exposed to other trail recreational uses before riding on shared-use trails
- Be alert and aware of the presence of other trail enthusiasts.
- At trailheads or staging areas, park vehicles and secure horses in a manner that provides a safe distance between the horses and passing traffic.
- Be prepared to let other trail enthusiasts know what needs to be done to keep you, your horse, and other trail enthusiasts safe when you meet on the trail.

As you are out and about, actively enjoying your horse ask yourself: Do you inspire our next generation to want a horse? Do you give their parents confidence that they want a horse person’s influence in their child’s life? Did your horse bring joy to others today? Did you leave a stranger smiling? Are you an ambassador for the larger equestrian community that will keep our social license active? Someone you meet might decide to take riding lessons, buy a horse, and volunteer with us!



Source:

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/191204/participants-in-bicycling-in-the-us-since-2006/#:~:text=Bicycling%20participation%20in%20the%20U.S.%202010%2D2021&text=In%202021%2C%20the%20number%20reached,least%20once%20in%20that%20year.>