



## Andrew Venables considers the state of sporting rifle shooting in the lead up to the general election, and finds himself cautiously optimistic

A delay in the work to shorten the barrel on my .308 Blaser has turned my thoughts from the small picture of how to create a fast, handy rifle to the larger picture of the political state of shooting. By the time you read this we will be right on the cusp of a general election.

The past couple of years have been a positive time for reason and growth in terms of firearms ownership, shooting and the public perception of what we do and why we do it. At WMS Firearms Training we see a steady stream of people who have never shot and want to have a go. Sometimes this is to tick a box in the 'bucket list' of things they want to try once. Increasingly it is because individuals and families see shooting in a more positive light and want to take it up.

When clients enjoy a day with us and leave buzzing, happy and filled with ideas of applying for certificates, finding shooting, joining clubs and taking up the sport, it makes the job worthwhile. Money pays the bills; working to ensure our grandchildren have the opportunity to hunt and shoot is what really floats my boat.

Every time someone who shoots successfully explains what we do and why and introduces another person to shooting, they make a real difference. The rumour, gossip, lies and innuendo often placed

in the media by the antis are just a veil – a web of deceit easily broken by solid facts and sincerity. Last year's joint report on the true economic impact of shooting made it much harder for fools to prosper when it comes to spreading malicious gossip about shooting in the media. Simply put, it made the antis look stupid.

I don't intend to get too party-political here, but suffice to say I won't vote for any parties who have negative intentions in terms of lawful shooting, hunting and countryside activities. Ironically, this means the Green Party won't get my vote. Political ambition means parties tend to pander to the majority and to take cheap, vote-winning shots at vulnerable minority activities, which might unite the rabble behind a party's rant. Shooting might have been susceptible to this not long ago, but today it is much less



Your role in promoting shooting goes beyond which box you tick at the polling station

vulnerable, owing to solid economic and scientific facts. Hating what we do is no longer sufficient reason to ban our activities.

Understanding does a lot to dispel hatred, which in truth is the simple child of ignorance. Ignorance feeds on sensational images, misunderstood video clips and the misrepresentation of facts. Shooting and hunting are much easier to defend and support when people don't hand the enemy bucket-loads of ammunition, in the form of endless carnage shots of shattered wildlife, macho statements on killing and ridiculous comments on social media. The shooting community can truly be self-policing here. Show no mercy, censure and 'unfriend' idiots, trolls and those who debase our field sports and natural harvest.

If you have a hunting story to tell, tell it. Mention the birds singing, the silence of a misty dawn, the thrill of the hunt, the one that got away. Balance the occasional picture of harvested quarry with how you got to that point. An endless treadmill of grinning hunters kneeling by recently shot, bleeding animals does little to promote what we do to any outsiders who may be watching. We constantly tell people, "It's not about the kill, it's more about the harmony with nature." More of this on social media would do much to engage the non-hunting browsers. We all have friends and family who may not hunt, and in turn they are connected to others who don't hunt.

If the past few years have been a stable time and we have prospered, what can we look forward to after the election? To a degree, we will reap what we sow. The main parties may promise to support shooting, or recognise our contribution to maintaining habitats and managing wildlife such as deer for the public good, but history suggests we are prone to suffer in the face of misguided public opinion. However right our cause, there are perhaps a couple of million people in the UK who shoot one way or another and some 60 million who don't.

Overall, my nature is to be optimistic but cautious in the face of politics and the media, over whom I exercise no control. Or do I? If I work at providing positive experiences to the steady stream of people who come to us to see what shooting is all about, I can affect the way they think and feel about what we do. If I work to ensure some of those people are in politics and the media, I can spread the word where it needs to be. The best thing I can possibly do is make shooting look safe, sustainable, marketable, commercially available and – dare I say it – sexy.

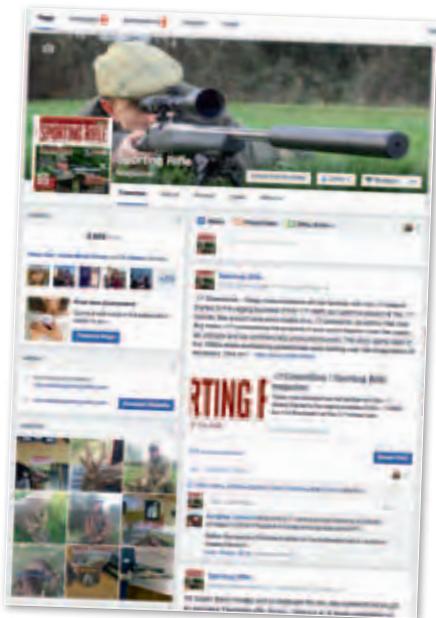
The three pillars of sales and marketing are fear, greed and sex; apparently that's it. Greed we can help with – in the face of the gastro revolution and venison pavé all over Masterchef, we have that covered. Fear? Well, the knowledge that we could feed ourselves if push came to shove, and the non-shooters in the queue at the supermarket could not, may

reduce fear. As for the third, when I take a hard look at the media images of shooting, we may be friendly but we are not really sexy, are we? I represent the majority middle-ground of shooting and I am a 55-year-old granddad. In marketing, image and brand association is what sells, and we need to sell shooting.

Fear not – I have no intention of dressing like David Beckham or, worse, Kim Kardashian. But it's a shame they don't hunt, shoot and write about it, isn't it? Positive images and words about shooting would be everywhere. We do have notable public figures who shoot and take the rough with the smooth in the media; thank you folks, you know who you are. We can help them by moderating our output. We could help David Cameron and Prince William make more of their association with deer stalking by focusing ourselves on positive images and hunting tales.

I mentioned being an optimist, which is prerequisite if you want to earn a living in the shooting industry. I am looking forward to the summer, post-election, hazy days in the hills, watching clients smile when they make the shot and hear the clang. When I see the pictures they send of their next hunt or their first rifle, I will know I made a tiny difference to the outcome of this election and the next one. How about you? ■

*For more information about WMS Firearms Training, contact Andrew Venables on 01974 831869 or visit [www.wmsfirearmstraining.com](http://www.wmsfirearmstraining.com)*



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