

AGRICULTURE FINDS ITS SOCIAL MEDIA LEGS

By Michelle Cook

The technology revolution affects almost all areas of our lives and almost every business imaginable. Agriculture is no exception. The pace of change has increased competition and the marketing cycle has shortened from weeks or days to hours.

In addition to these changes, social media has also changed how cattlemen and women engage with the customers who purchase their cattle. Online auctions on Facebook sell cattle daily, seedstock cattlemen promote their bulls for sale on Instagram, and commercial cattlemen can instantly search for market prices to sell calves on Twitter.

The use of social media in agriculture allows the agriculture community a unique connection to the 98% of people who do not reside on a farm or ranch. Rural communities have declined and consumers are generally two or more generations removed from having meaningful ties with the people and places where their food is raised. Without those ties to agriculture, consumers don't know about modern food production and may have misguided ideas and sometimes share erroneous information, pictures and video about the treatment of food animals. The telling of ranching stories are among the most believable resources available which means having a strong voice for agriculture.

Print and broadcast maintain their places as important information sources. But there can be no doubt that social media is growing. It is safe to say that a vibrant social media presence is now table stakes. Wondering if Facebook is worth the effort has been replaced by wondering how many social media properties a brand can successfully manage. As content strategy matures, social media will be woven into the larger issue of reaching and retaining your audience digitally.

National Association of Farm Broadcasting (NAFB) 2011 research indicates that 33.5 percent of farmers and ranchers access company or product social media sites such as Facebook or LinkedIn. While producers do not consider themselves to be participating in social media, they do visit the social media sites of brands.

A younger generation of decision-makers wants to receive information differently than the older generation. This person grew up in the ear of instant gratification and wants to participate in a social media conversation. They want a two-way conversation with businesses they buy from. A 2011 study by the American Farm Bureau Federation revealed that of the 98% of farmers and ranchers ages 18 to 49 years old who have internet access, 76% of them use social media. This generation of ranchers are very comfortable with social media.

Darla Worth, a 32 year old cattle rancher nearly Ely, Nevada, spends nearly two hours a day online. While she says digital messages are the best way to reach her, she knows that agribusinesses need to market differently to her parents, who might click on a pertinent e-newsletter but are far more likely to read a magazine or a catalog.

The media coverage of "pink slime" has made clear the growing focus on the farm-to-table movement, giving those in agribusiness yet another reason to turn to social media. Worth said that she believes social media is an effective counter to the mixed marketing messages targeted by consumers about what's healthy and how food is made. "I want to take things into my own hands because there's so much misinformation out there about ranching and what ranchers do."

Agricultural producers across the country are taking the reins firmly in hand and creating meaningful connections, share information and have constructive dialogue. It provides them more immediate access to advocacy information and professional data from many of the farm organizations and agribusinesses that serve them. Social media also helps agriculturists learn from each other, build a sense of community and share best practices (farm, advocacy, or otherwise). These relationships help agriculture more effectively connect with people in and out of our business.

"A growing number of U.S. farmers are signing up for social media sites as a way to promote the agriculture industry by directly reaching the public," said Dino Giacomazzi, a fourth-generation dairy farmer in central California who travels around the country training farmers on social media use. He also has a popular blog, Facebook page and Twitter account with thousands of farmer followers.

Giacomazzi said thousands of farmers have since joined Twitter, Facebook or started a blog to show people what kind of work they are doing.

But this type of openness to sharing daily activities is a new concept to most farmers and ranchers. That's why he spends his time guiding them on what to do. Giacomazzi added, "It's about selling the industry; it's about saving the lifestyle of farmers and ranchers. And we'll do that at whatever cost to us."

The agribusiness social media movement is, in part, due to the efforts of groups like the AgChat Foundation, which serves as an educational resource designed to equip farmers and ranchers with the necessary skill set to engage with businesses and consumers via social channels. The foundation's website is full of useful tips and information that can benefit anyone from Twitter newcomers to blogging veterans looking for new ways to interact with fellow farmers and consumers. The goal, the foundation said in an e-mail, "is to encourage more people to interact with farmers and ranchers and get their questions answered about farming directly from the source."

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