

**Social Media Bridges Consumer-Producer Gap**

*By Angela Hoffman*

Billions of people turn to the Internet daily searching for access to instant information. On Google alone there are 31 billion searches every month. We live in exponential times. With radio, it took 38 years to reach a market audience of 50 million; with Facebook it took a mere two years.

Social media is sweeping the nation as well as the agricultural community. According to a recent American Farm Bureau Federation survey of young farmers and ranchers, among the 92 percent of young (aged 18-35) farmers and ranchers who use computers, 46 percent regularly plug in to some form of social media.

The growing discovery of Web-based tools such as Facebook and Twitter is not only changing the way we communicate with one another, but also is shaping the way people form opinions, ultimately driving consumer preferences. Likewise, a growing number of farmers and ranchers are using social media to build bridges of understanding with consumers.

While a number of agriculturists are using social media to connect with like-minded individuals, many are engaging in conversations with others who hold different opinions, but who hunger for information from “real” farmers. This presence is vital as activist groups also use social media to plant seeds of doubt about modern agricultural practices.

Food safety is one topic fostering all types of conversations in social media circles. There are numerous forums, blogs, Twitter messages, and Facebook pages in the cyber world about food and how it is produced. All too often, these platforms are one-sided and negative. But therein rests an opportunity for positive engagement.

Engaging and interacting with critics and consumers can be challenging and uncomfortable, but in our convenience-driven society if the farmer’s side of the story goes untold in social media circles, the doubters are not going to take the time to dig for the facts. And that is one big reason why using social media to join the conversation has become more of a business responsibility than a social luxury.

By embracing today’s communication tools and conveying authentic, thoughtful messages about all the values-based activities that go into modern food production, farmers and ranchers are making a difference.

A rancher can send out a simple message like “It’s a hot one today! Headed out to check the animals.” The value of that kind of Twitter or Facebook message cannot be quantified, but it’s the type of reassurance, accountability and responsiveness consumers are seeking and that they expect.

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