

Farmers Must Use all Tools to Tell their Stories

By Cyndie Sirekis

As an increasing number of farmers and ranchers recognize the value of forging connections with their non-farming customers, many are changing the way they communicate. With millions of Americans using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other social media platforms as their primary source of information about the food they eat and how it's produced, farmers are proving wise to dive in and join them.

But social media is just one of many tools farmers use to connect with consumers. With more than 2,800 county Farm Bureaus across the nation, it's likely most of us have the opportunity to learn about agriculture in a more tactile way.

Farm tours, school field trips, mobile agricultural science labs and virtual combines that simulate harvesting crops remain popular, according to Farm Bureau members.

What type of Farm Bureau members are involved in promoting and educating about agriculture in their local communities? They are young and not-so-young, men and women, with a shared commitment to ensuring America's farmers and ranchers are able to continue producing food and fiber for our nation. About 60 of them from across the country gathered recently at a Farm Bureau Promotion & Education conference in Minneapolis to learn from each other and exchange ideas about engaging with consumers.

Kevin Paap, president of the Minnesota Farm Bureau, welcomed attendees and encouraged them to step up their efforts to engage with the non-farming public. "We have to use all the tools in our tool box," he said, to respond to questions they may have about food production.

Paap uses Facebook to connect with people from all walks of life while advocating for agriculture. When heavy rains flooded several of his fields recently, he posted photos, along with images of the basement in his house, which also was under several inches of water. Not everyone can relate to acres of submerged corn or soybeans and all that entails, but the monumental hassle of one's home being deluged with water—whether due to flood, burst pipes or something else—is something most people have experience with at some point in their lives, unfortunately.

Finding that type of common ground is what makes the difference when farmers and ranchers attempt to tell their stories in a way that helps them connect with consumers.

Newspaper columnist John Grogan, in his memoir *Marley & Me*, deployed a similar strategy. Grogan never intended to write a "dog book" although that's how some perceive it.

The story he set out to write was of a couple's growth from young single people into a family. As it turned out, their dog Marley was a catalyst in every step of their lives. Marley's hilarious antics and firm position as part of the family struck a chord with pet owners who loved the book and subsequent movie.

Grogan also is well known for making his points with humor in newspaper columns. "I see humor as a way to sugar-coat medicine—to get a serious message across in a way that people can find amusing and entertaining, as opposed to just preaching and scolding," is the way he puts it.

Farmers endeavoring to connect with consumers would no doubt agree, whether they do so using a farm tour, field trip or Facebook.