



Serious About SOCIAL MEDIA

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram help farmers and ranchers interact with customers.

BY DEBORAH R. HUSO

PHOTO: EDDIE SEAL

At 48 years old, Brian Jones might not look the part of an avid Facebook user. He is a fourth-generation farmer from near McAllen, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, where he grows cotton, sorghum, seed corn and soybeans. But he has more than 1,000 Facebook friends—a lengthy list that rivals that of any teenager’s.

Jones posts regularly on his page, at least every other day, sharing everything from pictures of his combine to pictures of his now-grown children. And it was his kids who got him into social media in the first place. “Seven or eight years ago, my children wanted to get on Facebook,” he recalls. “I would only let them if I created an account for myself, too, so I could supervise their use.”

REACHING OUT. It took Jones a few years to see that Facebook has value in the world of agriculture. “In the last three to four years, I’ve started using it as an education tool,” he says. “As more people become disconnected from the farm, it’s become a way to talk to them about food production.”

Gene Hall, director of public relations at the Texas Farm Bureau, agrees. “We’re a nation now where many people are three or four generations away from the farm,” he says. “But even people removed from the farm are curious about it and want to experience what goes on on the farm.”



The Texas Farm Bureau is a big user of social media as a means to move its message out to its membership and beyond. The Farm Bureau deploys in its communications efforts Twitter, YouTube and Pinterest. It maintains a couple of blogs, “Texas Table Top” and “Texas Agriculture Talks,” in addition to Facebook. And the Farm Bureau has been encouraging its county offices, as well as individual producers, to get “socially” active, as well. “It makes sense for farmers and ranchers to speak out,” Hall says.

There are not a lot of good, published numbers showing how farmers and ranchers use social media. One survey was produced two years ago by Truffle Media Networks, out of Indianapolis, Ind. ▶

The survey was sent to those claiming to be either full- or part-time farmers. It had a return rate of only 3.8%, or 260 out of nearly 6,900 surveys sent. More than a third of the surveys returned were by those who said they were 50 to 64 years old. With those caveats in mind, the results were interesting, if not completely telling.

EMAIL IN A TUMBLR WORLD. When asked about their level of expertise with different social media tools, a third claimed high expertise with their smartphones. About 19% said they had a high confidence level using Facebook. Another 13% were comfortable with Twitter. But the levels of expertise tumbled when asked about LinkedIn, blogging, creating videos and accessing Tumblr, which allows users to post multimedia content to a short-form blog. No one surveyed claimed a high level of expertise using Tumblr. About 75% had no experience at all with the service.

When asked about their most valued communications tool, two-thirds of those who answered the survey said they preferred email.

In an era with 300 million people using Twitter, where videos on animal rights and environmentalism increase 30% monthly, and where The Humane Society of the United States has seen a more than hundredfold increase in its own Twitter followers since January 2009, social media guru Michele Payn-Knoper says agriculture should be paying better attention.

Payn-Knoper is a professional speaker and founder of **CauseMatters.com**. She says social media is an excellent way for producers to educate the public about growing food, and it also gives them an opportunity to talk to the public—before someone else does.

“Most people don’t care about issues until they’re told to care,” she says. “Remind people that humans are raising food, that farmers are our friends, family and neighbors.” Payn-Knoper earned degrees in agricultural communications and animal science from Michigan State University. She resides on a small farm in Indiana.

With regular eruptions of controversy about agricultural production, from the safety of GMOs to calls for immigration reform, social media gives farmers and ranchers a voice and influence.

Hall points to a bill introduced in the Texas legislature in 2013. HB 2748 was related to the controversial Keystone XL pipeline that would deliver crude oil from Canada to refineries on the Texas Gulf Coast. The bill would have made it easier for the pipeline industry to condemn private land. But it never made it to the legislative floor for a vote. That was, in part, due to the Texas Farm Bureau’s use of Facebook and Twitter to spread word of its opposition to the bill, Hall says.

AG ADVOCACY. Jones is often a big part of that activity. He not only posts and comments on his own page, but is one of the Texas Farm Bureau’s biggest social media



Brian Jones posts regularly to his Facebook page. He uses it to educate people about agriculture.

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commentators. When the Farm Bureau posted last July in favor of GMOs, Jones was right there when “the anti-GMO folks jumped on it,” he says. “We had a full afternoon of debate on GMOs on Facebook.”

Jones says he follows the pages of interest groups that oppose GMOs or post negative commentary about agricultural producers. He says friends have often asked him why he follows pages like Occupy Monsanto. “It allows me to see what the ‘other side’ is saying to be prepared when people mention things on Facebook,” he explains. “Through Facebook, I can get the facts out there.”

IDENTIFY TRENDS. Payn-Knoper applauds farmers like Jones. “If you take the time to listen,” she says, “social media will enable you to see food trends coming at you like a train wreck.”

She understands producers may be intimidated by social media advocacy. Privacy and the time it takes to manage it are two oft-cited reasons for farmer hesitation. For newbies, she recommends trying Instagram, in part because it’s easy to use. “As farmers, we have beautiful imagery,” she says. “What we do every day is a novelty to most people. Show pictures of pulling a calf or a barn in the snow.” Instagram is a photo-sharing app.

Jones’ Facebook postings aren’t always designed to stir or stem controversy. He frequently posts pictures of life on the farm and says he gets lots of “likes” on those posts, because most of his Facebook friends are not farmers and ▶