

THE MANAGER

GENERATION NEXT

By Beth Meyer

If you can run a milking parlor or a corn planter, you can manage the technology of social media



BETH MEYER

Telling dairy's story in the Facebook age

If decisions are made by those who show up, it holds true that opinions are formed by those willing to champion them.

When I do media training for farmers, I often start by saying, "I know many of you wonder why you have to be the person to tell dairy's stories."

"You don't," I say. "There are lots of people willing to tell your story for you."

Who are they? Representatives of groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM), Mercy for Animals (MFA), the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) and dozens more. The fact is, the only way to have your story told is to tell it yourself.

The good news? It's easier than ever for you to spread the news about the work you do every day to

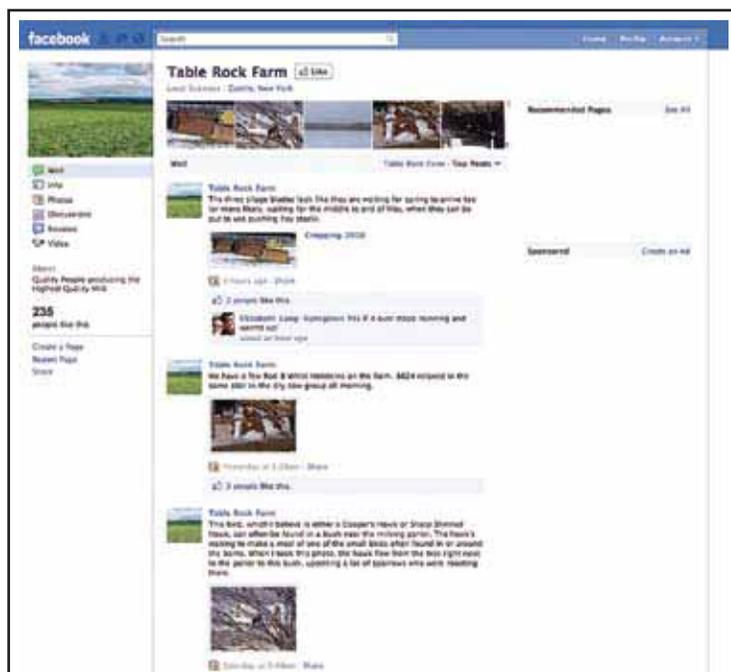
produce safe, wholesome milk. Social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs allow you to connect not only with friends and family but with a public that has more questions – and opinions – on food production than ever before.

Where to start

Dairy checkoff has created myDairy, an online community to help navigate social media. The myDairy program offers a network of social media-savvy advocates who use peer-to-peer communication to tell the dairy industry's story, reinforce and build its positive image, and counter inaccurate or uninformed online commentary about modern dairy farming practices.

The program has developed an online toolkit of social media and dairy resources to help the more than 1,300 advocates who have signed on. The password-protected myDairy toolkit includes:

- Tips on how to use social media to share positive dairy experiences online.
- How to set up and maintain a blog and other social media.
- Consumer-tested dairy messages to use as you chat with the general public.



The Table Rock Farm, Castile, N.Y., has 230 people who "like" the site and each post receives 400 to 600 views, or impressions. Daily postings keep the page current and interesting.

FYI

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- Enter Table Rock Farm at www.facebook.com to find the dairy's Facebook page.

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- Information about emerging online services and trends.
- Links to current dairy blogs and mainstream sites to monitor.
- Tools to respond to online discussions.

Social media options

From Facebook to FourSquare, there's an ever-growing list of social media options. Consider any of the following as an opportunity to share your dairy story online:

- Facebook: Establish a circle of friends and connect with others about dairy.
- LinkedIn: Network with other dairy professionals.
- Blogs: Maintain an online journal of your dairy experiences.
- Twitter: Share updates through mini-blog posts known as tweets.
- YouTube and Flickr: Post and share dairy videos and photos.
- Podcasts: Create and share audio broadcasts on dairy topics.

Don't let the options overwhelm you, and don't feel you have to be blogging, tweeting and flickring simultaneously to make a difference. Pick a social media format that seems most accessible and try it. Facebook is often the place where most people start. That's true for Meghan Hauser, a partner in Table Rock Farm in Castile, N.Y.

Friending Table Rock

Hauser's community outreach includes four projects with her Facebook page being the newest endeavor. Her other efforts include press releases, generally about employees, a neighbor letter hand-delivered each spring and a recruitment brochure.

"Each one of these targets a different audience," says Hauser, who manages the 1,050-cow dairy with her parents, Willard and Maureen DeGolyer, and her great uncle Calvin DeGolyer.

"It's important for the farm to have a Web presence, and Facebook serves as a very accessible, interactive version of a website," Hauser says. Best of all, a Facebook page is free.

She spends a few minutes Monday through Saturday, usually before 5 a.m., posting on the dairy's Facebook page. She also takes photos or videos throughout the week to include with each posting. She may take a series of photos, such as of the milking process, and have the shots available for posting over time.

In addition to milking, Hauser has pictured and written about corn from planting to harvest, cow cooling and comfort, new and long-term employees, and farm history. A photographic time line on the life of calf number 9782, named Mozzy by Facebook fans, has proven especially popular with the dairy's virtual fans.

To date, Table Rock's Facebook page has more than 230 people who "like" the site, and each post receives 400 to 600 views, or impressions as Facebook calls them.

That presents a significant opportunity to educate people about dairy farming, which is one of Hauser's goals for the Facebook page. "I know of two to three school teachers who are using the site to teach students about agriculture," she says. "It's also a place where people can safely ask questions about agriculture or where they can find accurate information."



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Understand the conversation

It's wise to do some background work to learn what's taking place online that can influence your participation. Begin by finding out who's saying what and who is listening. There are more than 112 million active blogs and more than 13 hours of video uploaded to YouTube every minute. How do you find out what's being said about dairy.

- Conduct a key word search – "dairy", "dairy farms", "cows" – through Google (www.blogsearch.google.com) or Technorati (www.technorati.com).

If you find a blog or blog entry that concerns or interests you, check to see if the post or blog is popular. Follow this procedure: Cut and paste the link into the Search window on www.technorati.com. The higher the blog's authority or rank the more influential it is.

- To see what videos are on YouTube, conduct a key word search as described earlier. Also look for additional videos on a topic in the "Related Videos" column on the right-hand side of the page. Check out the "Ratings" and "Views" to determine the popularity of a given video.

- Next, evaluate the messenger. How do you know if it's worthwhile to comment on a blog or to a video? First, consider the source. With regard to dairy, three categories of people and organizations post content:

1. **Advocates:** Like-minded individuals or organizations that are supportive of the dairy industry and focus their posts and comments on positive dairy experiences. You can support them by posting comments that reinforce or expand their points of view.

2. **Opposers:** Strong anti-dairy or anti-animal agriculture positions – think PETA or MFA. You probably won't change anyone's mind here, so use your time and energy for the third group.

3. **Information seekers:** People interested in learning about modern dairy farming practices and who are willing to listen to facts. Your comments and posts can make the biggest difference among this group.

There's no central place on the Web where information seekers gather. They may post something about dairy farming or dairy products on their blogs or in response to a dairy related blog or video. Also look for information seekers among moms, food lovers and people concerned about rural issues.

Opposers are also trying to reach information seekers and may join a conversation on Facebook or a blog. Keep cool and stick to the facts.

If you do respond to blogs or comment on Facebook, keep these points in mind:

- **Be respectful.** If you wouldn't say something in front of your grandmother, don't post it online.

- **Think before you type.** Take the high road. You may not agree with positions or comments, but try to understand other people's opinions and treat them with respect.

- **Remember the medium.** Unlike in a live conversation, jokes, sarcasm and other subtleties can be lost in an online conversation. Be clear and concise.

- **Offer the facts.** Speak from the heart but back it up with science. Provide links to third-party websites and references. Much of this information can be found on www.Dairyfarmingtoday.org or contact your local dairy checkoff group.

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Hauser also uses the site to inform family, friends, agribusiness contacts, employees and their friends and family about events on the dairy.

It might come as a surprise that potential hires are audiences to a farm's Facebook page. "The three top candidates for our last job opening had all 'liked' Table Rock's Facebook page to learn about the farm," Hauser says.

What tips does she have to develop and maintain a Facebook presence?

- Be clear and concise. "I try to limit the amount of text so people don't have to click for more information," Hauser says. "Alternately, I will spread some topics over a few days' posts to make sure the facts are well covered and presented in an accessible format."

- Always post a photo or video with your update. "The public needs to see images of what today's farmers and farming practices

look like," says Hauser. "Visuals also make your post more interesting and more attractive."

- Keep the page updated. Posting at different times of the day captures the attention of people checking accounts throughout the day and night. But 5 a.m. or earlier is when Hauser has time to enter new information and respond to questions.

- Remember your audiences. "Our audience ranges from those with no knowledge of agriculture, to family members in distant locations, to employees who know how the farm works," Hauser says. "I write my posts in hopes that a person with no knowledge of the dairy industry can understand my point."

Hauser is a bit of a Facebook pro, managing three other pages for community events. But if you're not comfortable with the technology, enlist your children, grandchildren, the high school's computer class or local dairy association for help.

Like any new technology, social media may seem unfamiliar at first but give it a try. Who's telling dairy's story? In less than 15 minutes with a laptop, camera or smartphone, it could be you. □

– Eleanor Jacobs contributed to this article.

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employees an opportunity to grow within the farm businesses. For young people, there is always something new to learn and ways to take on new challenges. A young person with interest and initiative can move up the ladder within the farm and take on new responsibilities.

Mueller and Nedrow look for educational programs that are geared to employees' responsibilities and interests. Training provides employees with opportunities for personal development and to bring ideas back to the dairies.

Education is ongoing. The partners encourage young staff members to attend college but don't consider it absolutely necessary to succeed on the dairies.

Employees' ability to own cattle at Spring Hope and Willowbend is another key to retaining young people. All employees have this option but for a young person who is just starting out and looking to develop some ownership, this can be particularly motivating.

First and foremost, treat young people with respect and encouragement once they're on the farm. "Don't chain them to the farm; be flexible with hours," Mueller says. "Remember what it was like to be that age; put yourself in their shoes."

Of course, you can't neglect the standard benefits such as fair pay, vacation, health benefits and retirement plans.

Mueller and Nedrow differ from Knopf on one point: Neither



Partners Barb Nedrow, John Mueller and Kevin Nedrow rely on word of mouth to bring young people willing to give 100% effort to their Clifton Springs, N.Y., dairies.

of them has learned to text message. In fact, Mueller doesn't even use a cellphone. When asked how he communicates with the young people on the dairy, he says, "We talk."

Very Stone Age but it works. The ability to talk through conflicts and work as a team is crucial when working with a large staff of different ages and backgrounds.

Bottom line for Mueller and Nedrow: Follow the golden rule. Treat people the way you would like to be treated. This is as true for working with young people as it is with anyone else. □