

Social media give farmers tools to be advocates of ag

Written by Sandi Alswager Karstens, IANR News Service

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Social media may be taking agriculture by storm and along with it Nebraska farmers and University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Agriculture and Natural Resources alumni.

Often out in the tractor working long days alone, farmers young and old are using newly affordable and accessible technology, such as BlackBerries and iPhones to tap into social media applications. By participating, they are taking Nebraska farmers' ideas, concerns and ideals across the state and around the world.

From top 10 lists of "who to follow in agriculture" to a weekly Tuesday night #agchat—a forum for people interested in agriculture—watching the ag community develop on Twitter has been incredible, said Zach Hunnicutt, a farmer in Hamilton County and 2004 UNL agricultural economics grad.

Just by tweeting or posting, Nebraska farmers are able to engage skeptics and shape perceptions of agriculture within a global conversation, he said.

Twitter, the fast-growing social media tool that allows users to quickly submit brief (140 characters or less) messages to a network of other users, is gaining the same foothold in agriculture as it has in other businesses and industries.

"It gives us each a platform to tell our story about our operations, and it's important that we tell our stories before someone else tells them for us," he said. "It's never been easier to communicate with the entire world, and as consumers pay more attention to ag issues, it's important that we're there to answer their questions."

Zach Hunnicutt is starting his fourth year of farming along with his dad, brother and neighbor raising irrigated corn and soybeans. He can be found [on Twitter](#). His brother, Brandon Hunnicutt, is also a dedicated Twitter user at <http://twitter.com/cornfedfarmer>.

Brandon Hunnicutt, who has been farming corn, soybeans and popcorn for 12 years, said at

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first he just signed up for Twitter because he was curious. Then a fellow farmer suggested they start tweeting to educate people and help protect the animal industry in Nebraska.

The 1998 UNL agribusiness grad said it allows them to see what those in ag in other states are dealing with concerning animal welfare issues and allows them to reach out to people who don't understand modern agriculture production.

"It has become a great way to let people know about the issues we have in ag," he said. "Some may be state specific, like the issues that came up with the checkoffs during the special session and the budget shortfall in Nebraska. It also has allowed us to show what is going on in the ethanol industry."

Or, it may be as simple as talking about the weather. Yet, even idle tweeting can start worthwhile conversations.

"My favorite was informing people how many bags of microwave popcorn are in a semi-load of harvested popcorn," he said.

He said social media really allows those in agriculture in different regions and on many different types of farms to offer a glimpse of the producer's work and life, an equal-parts mix of business, career and lifestyle.

"There are a lot of great guys out there doing a great job spreading the word of what agriculture is all about," he said. "I believe this is a tool ag will have to use in the future. Those that are anti-ag are using it to promote their positions, and we need to be able to spread the truth of what goes on in ag. Plus, as ag becomes more and more high tech we can use it to make sure we keep the best and the brightest to continue to stay in ag."

On Twitter, #agchat is a Tuesday night staple, an online think-tank, of sorts, for ag issues. The open discussion gives everyone an opportunity to start conversations on these issues and help shape opinions, Zach Hunnicutt said.

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“Far from an echo chamber, it’s a wide-ranging group of farmers, agribusiness people and ag enthusiasts that discusses differing views in a respectful, civil manner,” he said.

He thinks Twitter is gaining momentum on the farm due to the rising popularity of smart phones and automation such as auto-steering in tractors. Brandon Hunnicutt said he tries to Twitter a handful of times a day—a task made possible, even in a tractor, with his Web-enabled BlackBerry smart phone.

Zach Hunnicutt also is on Facebook, YouTube, MySpace and LinkedIn. He says Facebook and Twitter account for 99 percent of his social media interaction.

He said he also uses Twitter to get a large amount of his news by following a wide range of news organizations in addition to keeping in touch with friends. Depending on how busy he is, he may post a couple of tweets per day or spend hours sending messages from his BlackBerry on topics as sobering as the Haiti earthquake, and as trivial as “American Idol.”

“Twitter is as quick and easy to communicate with others as text messaging,” he said. “It’s also interesting to follow what topics are on the mind of the Twitter community.”

Paul McHargue, a farmer near Central City, who graduated from UNL in 1993 with a degree in mechanized systems management, said he started tweeting because he is on the Nebraska Agricultural Technology Association board and they challenged members to use all the new technology that they can. He’s been tweeting for a couple months and can be [found here](#) .

While trying to be a better advocate for agriculture, he said he probably doesn’t tweet as much as he should but does try to at least once a week using his phone.

He believes Twitter’s reach will grow and thinks it is a tool farmers and ranchers can use to their advantage in the future.

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“Letting people know how we farm and why we care so much about food safety is very important,” he said.