

Agriculture Producer's Guide To Twitter

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I know many farmers and ranchers are skeptical of social media, particularly Twitter. Twitter is very different from other types of social media and I urge livestock producers to give Twitter a chance. Not only is Twitter the best way to get and share information today but it is also a powerful networking and marketing tool.

There are five major reasons why livestock producers should be on Twitter:

1. Twitter is quickly becoming the fastest way to get and share news and ideas. Livestock producers can easily follow all major news sources (e.g., CNN, Fox News, New York Times, local newspapers) and agriculture publications (e.g., Drovers, Beef Magazine, Cattle Network). Whether it is news on a vote in Congress, scores from a high school basketball game, updates from an agriculture conference or livestock show, or news about the livestock industry, you can get this information first on Twitter. News junkies are very attracted to Twitter for that reason because it is the best way to get “breaking news.”
2. Twitter is a unique forum for discussions on issues affecting the agriculture industry. The agriculture community on Twitter has a powerful presence. Each Tuesday night at 8pm Eastern Time, ag tweeps from around the country have weekly discussions by Michele Payn-Knoper (@mpaynknoper). The third Tuesday of the month is #FoodChat while the other Tuesdays are for an #AgChat. You can easily have Twitter discussions through programs like TweetChat or Twubs (see below). These discussion groups have done a great job fostering communication among people in the ag industry and tweeps from all different backgrounds and geography participate.
3. Twitter is a great networking tool. Facebook is more about who you know while Twitter is more about who you want to know. I have easily met more people through Twitter than any other social networking site alone. Before long, you will be exchanging emails with tweeps outside of Twitter and making plans to meet-up in real life. There are many Ag “Tweet-ups” (“Meet-ups”) around the country. Twitter has highlighted just how intertwined the agriculture industry really is and how we all share common goals. As a cattle girl, I might not have met other types of livestock producers if it wasn't for my Twitter presence.
4. Twitter is a great marketing outlet. If you have a farm or ranch blog, then having a

Twitter presence is a must. By posting your links to your updating blog entries on Twitter, you can increase your readership exponentially. Additionally, Twitter is a great place to brag about your business accomplishments or highlight your knowledge of the industry. Also, Twitter is a great venue to meet agriculture journalists and marketing experts that will help get the word out about a particular livestock operation.

5. Twitter is a perfect way for livestock producers to tell their story to the public-at-large. There are a lot of non-ag people on Twitter and folks in the agriculture community are using Twitter as a platform to explain what they do to try to communicate with the consumer. For example, @Tykerman1 was on CNN explaining the “tractor tweet.” Last October, Kay Johnson Smith from @AnimalAg mentioned at an animal welfare conference that it would be great for livestock producers to tweet about their specific experiences (e.g., birth of calf, keeping animals warm in blizzards) to help demonstrate the unique life of livestock producers to people who do not understand. Also, agriculture folks start hashtag trending to help spread the word about agriculture issues and campaigns (e.g., #ThankaFarmer for the national campaign to “Thank a Farmer”, #Oink for pork is safe despite H1N1).

Twitter 101

Username. Picking your user name is important because it will become your brand on Twitter. Some opt to use their real name (e.g., @NateJaeger, @TroyHadrick) while others try to brand themselves with a nickname (e.g., @AgriLawyer, @AgChick, @JPLovesCotton, @TheHollyLane). Some do a mixture of the two (e.g., @FarmerHaley).

Twitter Speak. You only have 140 characters on Twitter so brevity becomes an art. All links should be “Tiny URLED.” Programs like Tweetdeck automatically shorten links. Twitter has its own language as well. Here are some pointers to help de-code Twitter speak:

1. The Hashtag. The hashtags (#) make a term searchable on Twitter if you have a public profile. For example, on Tweetdeck some livestock producers have columns for all tweets that mention #AgChat, #FoodChat, #Angus, #Cattle or #Pork. Hashtags can be used anywhere in the tweet.
2. The Retweet. Folks retweet (“RT”) other people’s tweets when they want to share that information with their followers. This is the real power of Twitter and how news reaches the masses. It is very easy to “RT” in programs like Tweetdeck.
3. The @ Mention. This is how people on Twitter communicate with each other. If you look at the @ Symbol on your Twitter homepage, you will see all the tweets that mention you. Tweeps tend to have conversations with each other over Twitter with @ Mentions but if it’s something private you can direct message

(“DM”) people.

4. Follow Fridays. On Fridays, people on Twitter recommend other people to follow. This is called a “Follow Friday” (#FF, #FollowFriday, #FarmerFriday). You should at least try to pick a few tweeps to recommend each week.

Frequency. Furthermore, it is important to add that it is completely acceptable to tweet multiple times a day. Twitter is a completely different animal than facebook. It is okay to share several tweets throughout the day so long as you are giving value to your followers.

Twitter Technology. I also recommend downloading Twitter to your cell phone by using UberTwitter or TwitterBerry. Having access to Twitter on your cell phone makes Twitter really come to life. Programs like Tweetdeck or Seismic make Twitter communication very easy and allow you to also selectively update your Facebook status. For discussion groups like #agchat or #foodchat, programs like TweetChat or Twubs should be used. These programs automatically block out all other tweets other than the tweets with this particular hashtag. As a warning, your Twitter profile must be open to the public for your hashtags to be searchable on facebook or give you the ability to participate in Twitter discussion groups.

Twitter Etiquette

The Do’s

1. Do bring value to your followers. Post articles, retweet interesting blogs, and share ideas.
2. Do thank people for “retweeting” you or mentioning you on a #FollowFriday.
3. Do try to make @ mentions when you can. Make Twitter an interactive forum instead of a place to just post your status. Twitter is about building relationships with people.
4. Do follow people you don’t know personally.
5. Do unfollow people who spam you or no longer offer value to your Twitter stream.

The Don’t’s

1. Don’t smack-talk. Tweets are archived indefinitely and more importantly it is completely unprofessional.
2. Don’t tweet non-stop throughout the day. Some folks are constantly tweeting about what they had for lunch and every detail of their life from the moment they wake up. This will annoy people and you will soon lose followers.

3. Don't be a walking advertisement. Even though Twitter is a great marketing tool for your business, it's not all about just advertising. It's about cultivating relationships. Bring value to your followers– don't just advertise things.
4. Don't use automated direct messages or tweets. People want to know that they are tweeting with a person instead of a machine.

Ag Tweeps You Should Follow

@FollowFarmer has developed a helpful list of all the agriculture tweeps - <http://www.dataforag.com/followfarmer.a5w>. After you join Twitter, let @FollowFarmer know you want to be added to the list. Also, go through this list and start following away! The great thing about Twitter is that you do not necessary follow (or get followed by) people you know personally.

The following ag tweeps have a big presence on Twitter and I recommend following them:

@MpaynKnoper	@AgriLawyer	@NateTaylor
@TroyHadrick	@OhioFarmBureau	@WriteNowBiz
@JeffFowle	@NateJaeger	@AFBFMace
@RayLinDairy	@AndyVance	@DebbieLB
@FarmerHaley	@AgChick	@AnimalAg

On a final note, @OhioFarmBureau has an informative resource guide on social media located at <http://ofbf.org/uploads/social-media-guide.pdf> that is particularly helpful on explaining Twitter. I also recommend watching a tutorial on YouTube before you get started.