

Dairy Farming under the Social Media Microscope

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■ Take Home Messages

- Social media has fundamentally changed the way the Canadian dairy industry can now communicate with consumers and fellow producers
- With this fundamental shift in communicating and the many social media networks available, the Canadian dairy industry must leverage the power of social media as it is free and easy, and has an endless audience
- Canadian dairy farmers have many tremendous stories to tell and messages to share with the Canadian consumer. If they are not sharing their personal stories, then who will speak for the industry?
- The Canadian consumer drives the marketplace - if they demand the product, then the industry will continue to supply them. How can the dairy industry educate/inform them so consumers continue to support and consume the product? Social media can help bridge this gap between dairy producers and consumers.
- Canadian dairy farmers are truly the beholders of their own destiny in how viable the Canadian dairy industry will be in the future. Using social media as a platform to share the truths of the industry will help to promote the industry and ensure sustainability for future generations.

■ Introduction

Social media has fundamentally changed the way in which we, as a society, as an agricultural industry, and as a dairy community, communicate with each other. It has single-handedly changed who we are able to connect with; how quickly we can correspond with each other; and the conversations that can now take place because of social media interaction. Like many other 'game-changers' in the agricultural industry, such as the introduction of the first mass-produced gas-powered tractor in 1917 (Batchelor, 1994) and the

innovation of milking machines in the early nineteenth century, the evolution of social media has also become a 'game-changer' in the way dairy farmers across Canada now connect to share information with each other and with consumers across Canada. Social media is no longer a fad; it has become a necessary vehicle to communicate and with 50% of the world's population under the age of 30, it certainly has become the most prominent means for which the largest demographic wants to receive information (Qualman, 2012). Many compare social media to the greatest revolution since the industrial revolution (Engauge Media, 2009).

■ Evolution of Social Media

Since the first communication via the worldwide web on Christmas Day in 1990 (Greenemeier, 2009) the internet has evolved and drastically changed the way society acquires information and shares it. The creation of the internet opened doors to the introduction of social media in recent years. It is hard to believe it was only nine years ago that Facebook was introduced in 2004; since then it has drastically changed the social media landscape to how we experience the World Wide Web today (Facebook Newsroom, 2013). Additionally, the creation of sites like the video-sharing platform YouTube in 2005 (YouTube, 2013) and the 140-character micro-blogging site Twitter in 2006 (140 Characters, 2009) have helped people realize the power of social media for not only personal uses but for business purposes as well.

In a Farm Credit Canada (FCC) survey in June 2010 on the use of social media among agricultural producers in Canada, 54% of farmers were using social media for personal use and 30% were using social media to promote their businesses (Farm Credit Canada, 2010). The introduction of smartphones has truly propelled the use of social media and a recent study conducted in March 2012 by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs and the University of Guelph showcased the significance of using social media in the Ontario agricultural industry through the use of smartphone devices (Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food, and Rural Affairs and University of Guelph, 2012). 95% of respondents in the Ontario study stated that they use the internet. Of all respondents, 69% have a smartphone and 47% said their smartphone was essential to do their job. The widespread use of social media was evident with 84% of respondents in the study stating they use social media, of which 73% said social media was very important to use.

As social media has become popular among the Canadian public, so too has the use of it increased among producers within the Canadian dairy industry as it provides four key purposes: 1) an opportunity to network, 2) educate, 3) inform, and 4) provide knowledge-transfer opportunities between fellow producers and with Canadian consumers. It is apparent that social media is

an integral communications tool for both personal and business uses among farmers across Canada.

■ Significance of Social Media

With the ease and cost-effectiveness of social media platforms, the dairy industry must leverage the power of social media. The agricultural industry has been very proactive in joining social media channels to help spread 'good news stories' with willing listeners, but for dairy producers who are not part of these social media conversations, they must now engage and involve themselves in this process.

Canadian consumers are asking questions that they have never asked before - especially in the agricultural arena where consumers have taken a distinct interest in where their food comes from - especially with milk production. With people now two to three generations removed from the farm, only 2% of Canada's population lives on farms and with consumers being farther removed from the truths of what dairy farmers do day-to-day, this provides a gap in the knowledge that consumers have (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2012). This is also due in part to the media, who has played a role in painting an inaccurate picture of modern-day agriculture. Combine that with the role of vocal animal activists, the harsh reality of farming practices in other countries, and with farmers not speaking up and dispelling the myths that exist, Canadian consumers may view the Canadian dairy industry in a portrayal that is different than Canadian dairy farmers would like. In a 2012 study conducted by Farm and Food Care Ontario, 88% of those polled had a positive impression of Canadian agriculture, but 59% said they wanted to know more about farming (Farm and Food Care Ontario, 2012).

The agricultural industry, including the dairy industry, must use the multiple social media channels available to continue to tell their story and reach out to the 59% of consumers who clearly stated they want to learn more! Followers on social media are like creating an army of loyal followers who work for free for you. Social media is essentially like 'word of mouth' but on steroids. Recent interest by the media on supply management in Canada has encouraged more dairy farmers to stand up and speak out in order to help educate consumers on the truths surrounding supply management. In 2011, there was a very distinct 'dairy outburst' in the media that caused supply management to be a topic of conversation among many major newspapers and media sources across the country. It was the first time that dairy farming in Canada was truly being scrutinized under the social media microscope. While many major newspapers slammed supply management and tried to gain momentum with Canadian consumers by stating that Canadians were paying too much for their milk, many efforts were taken by industry organizations and dairy farmers to combat these less-than flattering stories about the Canadian dairy industry (The Vancouver Sun, 2012). Dairy Farmers

of Canada (DFC) took a proactive stance in creating Yourmilk.ca, a website dedicated to educating the Canadian consumer on what supply management is from the Canadian dairy farmer's perspective (Dairy Farmers of Canada, 2012). Numerous dairy producers took to their Twitter and Facebook to share their viewpoints on why they believed supply management was beneficial for the Canadian consumer, the economy, and the livelihood of over 13,000 dairy farmers across Canada. And the momentum seemed to work as many consumers in opinion polls stood behind supply management with 78.6% of respondents in a 2011 Maclean's study stating that the federal government should not abolish supply management (Macleans, 2011).

■ Usefulness of Social Media in the Canadian Dairy Industry

Our Canadian dairy farmers must be active in helping to change the perception of how consumers view the Canadian dairy industry, and who better to share the perspective of the Canadian dairy farmer than the farmers themselves! Consumers are willing and open to listening and want to be told correct information to be well-informed. With 90% of people trusting peer recommendation versus 14% trusting advertisements, the power of one blog post or one tweet in favour or not in favour of dairy products can sway a large number of potential consumers (Qualman, 2012).

By sharing simple terminology, pictures, and family adventures on the farm, producers can instantly positively portray dairy farming to an urban audience. Dairy farmers, like all other Canadian farmers, must be transparent and open with consumers on issues relating to animal welfare and how they reconcile economics while remaining humane, and they must show how they are environmentally-conscious and stewards of the land in an effort to remain sustainable. Dairy farmers must share the rigorous standards and procedures that are implemented on-farm for the safety of milk and the traceability protocols for the health and well-being of animals including on-farm programs. Dispelling the misconceptions of the use of growth hormones that are prohibited in Canada and most importantly, showing consumers how farmers do what they do, 365 days a year, can easily be communicated through social media networks. Consumers would be hard pressed to find flaws in a Canadian dairy operation if they knew the hard work and dedication that Canadian dairy farm families put in to producing a product that is held to the most rigorous standards.

Take for example, the largest breed organization in Canada, Holstein Canada, who has leveraged the power of social media since joining Facebook in July of 2011 and more recently, Twitter in October of 2012. Since joining these two social media networks, the Association has gained over 2,600 fans, which is close to 25% of total Association membership. The latest Association

news, statistics, award information, and stories from membership are shared in an instant and Holstein Canada followers love the constant interaction. With a fully-bilingual social media strategy, the Association is able to communicate with both English and French speaking Holstein Canada members and share with them the information they want to receive in a timely manner. With the ease of Facebook analytics, the Association can view statistics such as what demographic of Holstein Canada Facebook members are female versus male (44.2% vs. 54.6%) and in what age category the majority of the Association's Facebook followers come from (25-34 year old age category).

On the social media channel Twitter, Holstein Canada is 600 followers strong and conversations take place daily where members can ask questions or comment on services in a matter of seconds. The use of Quick Response (QR) codes throughout the Association's *Info Holstein* publication has allowed readers to easily scan a QR code with their smartphone and instantly be taken to a website that tells the reader more about the article. The response from Holstein Canada membership has been extremely positive; members enjoy the many facets in which they receive their information.

What is most difficult though in social media is determining which method of social media to use. The many choices that are available can be simply overwhelming and the amount of time it takes to cultivate a good network and produce content can be daunting. In the FCC study from June of 2010, of the respondents who were non-users of social media, 43% said they did not have the time to use social media (Farm Credit Canada, 2010). This can be a fair statement since there are time constraints with signing up for an account - having to learn a new language/lingo, constantly updating, exposing oneself to an unknown audience, or lacking accessibility to a smartphone, computer, or high-speed internet. While these challenges are all fair sentiments, choosing at least one network to join that best suits a person's schedule, skillset, interest, and audience is very important in the success of using social media. If you are a short-winded person, perhaps the 140-characters of Twitter sounds more appealing versus someone who likes to write and would find a blogging platform like WordPress or Blogger more desirable.

Once the appropriate network has been chosen, choosing the content to share is just as equally if not more important. Dairy producers who are interested in connecting with consumers need to remember to find common ground with consumers - find what makes consumers tick and relate it to something that farmers share in common. Always keep in mind that while farmers may have positive experiences with most consumers on social media, there are always going to be the extremists whose minds you will never be able to change.... connect and try and educate the rational majority! (The Center for Food Integrity, 2009). Important messaging around farm history and connecting the past and showing how many generations have existed on the family farm will go a long way when relating to consumers. Linking

science, common sense, and the reality of what dairy farmers do to deliver a safe, high-quality product to consumers is important. Always try on social media networks to use visuals of what modern-day farms look like, how animals are treated, and how farm families are involved in daily chores - these visuals will be more powerful than words.

■ Summary

Canadian dairy farmers help produce one of Mother Nature's most natural products - a product that cannot be replicated and produced in any other way, shape, or form. Farmers must stand behind their product and their industry to remain viable for the future. The Canadian dairy industry offers exactly what consumers want in today's society - local 100% Canadian milk produced by hardworking trustworthy people; a safe, high-quality product at a fair price, a price that allows farmers to be stewards of the land; environmentally friendly and sustainable for the next generation; economically strong for the local, provincial and national economies; and family-focused, thanks to supply management. The Canadian dairy industry must not rest on its laurels - it must continue to 'market the moo' with these strong values.

Social media has created many free avenues that society, the agricultural industry, and the dairy industry have never had the opportunity to use before. The audiences on social media networks are endless. By the simple click of a button, there is an audience of millions of people who are ready and eager to listen and learn and who WANT to be educated on where their food comes from.

Canadian dairy farmers must realize that as the industry continues to change and evolve, they must be part of the movement in using social media networks as a common educational and communications tool. By using social media, dairy farmers are able to educate consumers and show them that the industry is comprised of people who 100% stand behind their product, are proud of what they do each and every day, and are able to maintain their lifestyle because of the structure of supply management, which is mutually beneficial for both farmers AND consumers. If Canadian dairy farmers don't tell consumers their story, then who will tell it for them? Dairy farmers across Canada have many tremendous stories and messages to share and they must be told! Social media is a free, easy, and convenient method to share these stories and messages. We must remember as an industry that the Canadian consumer drives the marketplace - if they demand the product, then the industry will continue to supply them. Canadian dairy farmers are truly the beholders of their own destiny and will determine how viable the Canadian dairy industry will be in the future. A simple tweet or Facebook post can single-handedly change a person's perception of a dairy farm, whether good or bad. Who better to tell the positive stories of dairy farming in Canada than

the dairy farmers themselves - the people who help the most beautiful animal in the world turn grass into the world's most natural and best-tasting product!

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