

Sharing Your Story: Strategies to Get the Truth about Dairying to Consumers

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■ Take Home Messages

- ▶ Our industry's current and future success relies on consumer confidence in the quality of the dairy products we produce and how they are produced. Ensuring that our consumers have accurate information on which to base their opinion of the dairy industry should be a paramount priority for our industry. Millions of Canadians use social media to connect with the world and people around them, and base their opinions on various topics by what they see and read on social media. Currently, much information found online and on social media is biased and slanted toward an animal rights' agenda. As farmers, sharing our daily lives can help to combat this by showing consumers the real truths about dairy farming.
- ▶ It's relatively easy to begin sharing your dairy story on social media. A photo and accompanying information can help consumers to see behind the figurative barn doors and gain a glimpse of real dairy life.
- ▶ Various industry groups are dedicated to helping farmers and industry affiliates who share their stories expand their audience and improve the impact of their messages.
- ▶ If you would like to begin sharing your dairy life on social media, be prepared for both antagonism and enthusiasm. Try to be accepting of different viewpoints. Remember that your posts and responses should be polite and professional; as the public face of our industry, our conduct shapes how consumers view dairy farmers and the dairy industry.

All dairy farmers must at some point in their dairy careers give some thought to the future of the dairy industry and of their own farm. Dairy farming is, by nature, a family affair, and so thinking about and planning for future generations is something that we all can relate to. Whether you are a lifetime farmer thinking about turning over your farm to a younger generation, or a new farmer thinking about the future of dairy farming and the dairy industry

and what it will look like for the next generation to come, we all, at some point, must think about this important question: “What will our farm and our industry look like in the future and **what can we do to ensure that the industry we know and love continues to thrive?**” In my opinion, sharing our daily life with our consumers and showing them what goes on behind our barn doors will help to achieve the success of our industry for years to come.

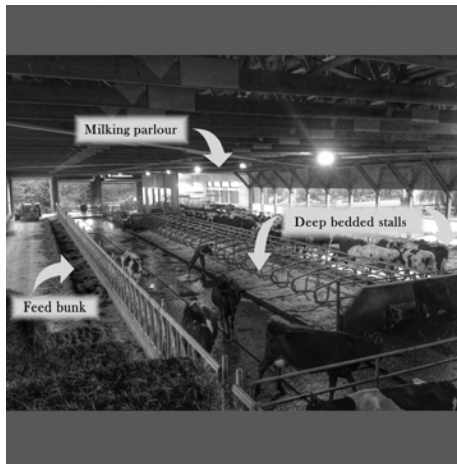
Dairy farming provides a very tangible opportunity to benefit our fellow Canadians. Our consumers rely on us to provide them with the top quality dairy products that they have come to expect from our excellent industry. To me, there is no greater source of pride than in knowing that our family and our fellow dairy farmers impact the lives of so many of our fellow citizens in such a positive and beneficial way. But only a tiny fraction of Canadians actively farm — only 2%! This means that the vast majority of the people we, as farmers, interact with on a daily basis — either face to face or online on social media sites — have little to no experience with, or knowledge about farming. When people are so far removed from our industry, it's prime ground for myths and misconceptions to flourish. And believe me, those myths and misconceptions are becoming more and more common among the non-farming public.

For example, a simple Google search for information about dairy farming will quickly lead to sites with these types of horrific claims and accusations: “Cows are raped to produce a calf every year, and are spent at two years of age from the constant abuse and torture they are subject to on dairy farms.” or “Calves are cruelly torn from their mothers, their milk stolen for the greedy appetites of consumers, leaving both mother and baby to mourn for weeks on end.” or “Milk is full of pus, blood, antibiotics and artificial hormones.” Sadly, a large part of the information about animal agriculture found on the internet comes from animal rights groups, not to be confused with animal welfare groups, which aim to improve standards of care for companion and farm animals. Animal rights groups have this agenda: the cessation of all animal farming. These groups present this type of information to the masses who have no idea that many of these “facts” are inaccurate, misconstrued, biased or even outright lies. Animal rights groups prey on the knowledge that the average Canadian citizen is so vastly disconnected with agriculture that they have no idea that some or all of the information presented does not at all convey an accurate picture of our family farms. Besides American dairy farmer Dairy Carrie, a well-known, influential, and amazing blogger who has helped immensely to combat these lies and accusations, there is scarcely any accurate information to be found relating to dairy farming on social media, especially Canadian dairy.

When I realized, just 2 short years ago, this lack of real information and the amount of slanted and biased propaganda that filled that void, I was shocked. I grew up in a farming community and had friends who lived on farms, and

thus was quite well versed in all things “ag” even before I met and married my dairy farmer husband and fell in love with dairy farming. To think that this type of false and misconstrued information was being broadcast to our consumers with very little accurate information to combat it was inconceivable; I wanted to change that in whatever small way I could. I began sharing photos and stories about farm life on social media and I was impressed with the appetite for information about farming that I found in our consumers who use social media. Over the past two years, I’ve amassed more than two thousand loyal followers, many of them consumers, over various social media channels.

So what do I share with my followers? Well, everything!



When I head out to the barn for chores or even just to have a look around, I always take my cell phone with me. A cell phone can capture remarkably clear photos, and then it is incredibly easy to share these images on social media. New calves, cows on pasture, cows being milked, crops being harvested, or our children helping out on the farm are new and interesting topics for consumers. I usually take the time to explain exactly what each photo or series of photos shows, and then am sure to answer any questions that my readers may have. It can be quite surprising which posts are popular with consumers. A simple, 10 second video of the first row of cows entering the parlour on their own without coaxing, along with the explanation that milking is enjoyable for a cow and not something that is painful or to be feared, has been my most popular post and has garnered over 23,000 views and reached nearly 60,000 people!

Unfortunately, new animal abuse videos are shared online quite regularly, and so it is incredibly important to show that this type of treatment of animals is not acceptable, but even more importantly, that it is not the norm. I make it a point to emphasize that animal welfare is a paramount priority on our farm. It

is something that as a family we speak of and discuss often, even around the dinner table, and so it is only natural that I share these values with my readers. We firmly believe that in order for future generations of dairy farmers to succeed, they also must have a firm commitment to bettering the welfare of the animals that provide us with our livelihood.



I also occasionally share pictures of our children with our animals, thereby showing that our farm is family owned and operated, and helping our consumers to feel emotionally connected to our farm and family, and associate the dairy products they purchase with family farms like ours.

Transparency is incredibly important to me. I firmly believe that if a consumer is to trust what I have to say, I need to show all aspects of farm life. While it certainly is easy to share a photo of a cute new calf, or a video of happy cows galloping out to pasture for the first time in the spring, it's even more important to show the less "pretty" side of farming. I have shared stories of cows that have had to be put down or shipped to slaughter, and used these instances to share the feelings of failure and loss that can accompany such events. I think it is just as important to show the difficult aspects of farming as it is to share the joys and triumphs, so that our consumers understand the struggles we sometimes have to face while providing them with the milk products they enjoy.



During the last year, I have written quite extensively about supply management and the Trans-Pacific Partnership. It has been so incredibly heartening to see consumers and farmers alike sharing these posts. Consumers have commented that they had no idea what supply management actually was until I wrote a post explaining the basics. Documenting the developments of the trade agreement has now allowed me to segue into writing about the superior quality and safety of the milk produced on our Canadian farms, thereby gaining consumer support by showing that our national CQM program and the ProAction Initiative guarantees that our milk is the safest, highest quality milk in the world. I hope that by sharing this, consumers are encouraged to look for Canadian dairy products in the grocery stores now, before we even begin to see the increased amount of imported dairy products on the shelves. And, so far, it seems to be working: I have been pleasantly surprised to hear and see the outpouring of support on social media for our Canadian dairy farmers and I am impressed with our consumers' commitment to supporting our farms.

Occasionally, animal rights activists will band together to target dairy related pages, and my page is no exception. It can be frustrating and discouraging, and I have occasionally felt that perhaps this whole "sharing our story" idea wasn't such a good plan after all. But then there are messages like this one, sent by a consumer after a particularly nasty attack, that make it all worthwhile: *"I am an animal lover. I am not an activist. But I don't want to be a part of the demand that perpetuates negative treatment of animals, which I was certain I was, until being introduced to many of your posts. So I wanted to tell you how grateful I am for this, for your time and education and how excited I am to finally be learning through the source instead of organizations like PETA. I am just worried about how they, the vegans, could shut down the dialogue. I am so worried that you all will eventually grow too weary from the renegade vegans and we – the "me" types – will lose out on this great resource."* This message continues to drive my willingness to share our dairy

life. This one message shows so clearly that sharing our stories is something that can have a real, positive, and lasting impact on our industry. And that is what keeps me going. If more dairy farmers would share just small tidbits of their daily lives, dairy farming will be less of a mystery to those so far removed from the farm, and we will gain the support of the people who keep our industry alive: our consumers. And that, of course, is our common goal: ensuring the vitality and vibrancy and success of our industry for generations to come.

I invite you, my fellow dairy farmers, as well as those connected to dairying in any way, to join me in sharing your stories with the general public. I'm sure that you have also seen the lies and misconceptions being bandied about as truth. If we work together, we can combat that type of information with the real truths as found on our farms. There are multitudes of ways in which you can educate and inform the consumer about how you run your farm and treat the animals under your care. You can open your farm doors to the public, approach a consumer purchasing dairy products in the grocery store, or join me in sharing photos and stories of life on the farm on social media. Regardless of your means of conveying information, each method will begin a conversation about agriculture, bringing new opportunities for you to tell your stories.

If you choose to share your stories online, there is a variety of media to choose from. I personally prefer Facebook for most of my posts. Other "advocates" favour Twitter or Instagram or even Snapchat. It really depends on how you wish to convey your message. The Facebook Pages app allows for longer posts to describe the photos shared, making it easier to go into detail about the topic at hand. Followers can easily share your posts and content, expanding your audience exponentially. Twitter is quick and tends to get your message out to a broad audience fairly easily. However, it can be difficult to convey a strong message within the 140 character limit. I use my Twitter account to interact with fellow farmers and to keep up to date on the latest trends and topics in our industry, giving me more fuel for future posts. I also use Twitter to post abridged versions of my Facebook content for my consumer "tweets". I've started using Instagram fairly recently and I like having the ability to share my posts on Twitter and Facebook directly from the Instagram app. When I have a large topic to share, such as the recent trade negotiations and how they could/will impact our industry, I compose blog posts and then share them via Twitter and Facebook. This helps to expand the audience beyond just blog email subscribers. Recently, I've noticed other farmers taking to Snapchat to share photos as well. I have yet to add this medium to my own repertoire.

There are various agriculture-related resources available online and on social media to support those of us who have taken to publicly sharing our way of life. "Agriculture More Than Ever" has a wealth of educational information

available to help to teach strategies to get your stories to consumers. I have found various ag-related support groups on Facebook, such as the “Ask the Farmers”, “Farm and Food Discussion Lab” and “Women in Ag”, to be very helpful as well. Dairy Farmers of Canada’s communications staff have also been incredibly supportive to me, both in sharing my content and offering support and encouragement. One of the most wonderful aspects of sharing your story is connecting with other like-minded farm and dairy industry personnel who have the same goal: ensuring consumer confidence in our industry both now and for the years ahead.

In the two years that I have been sharing our farm life with consumers, I have learned some invaluable lessons:

- **Be aware and be prepared:** Be aware that some will not listen and will not hear what you have to say. Be prepared for hostility, antagonism, and disbelief from those who have been conditioned to unquestioningly believe the animal rights’ dogma. But also be prepared for sincere gratitude when a consumer realizes that the lies they have been told by these extremists are not the truth, and that the bucolic and caring farms of their imagination do in fact still exist.
- **Be transparent:** Explain or show the consumer our common farming practices. Open your barn doors for tours. Answer questions about your farm and farm procedures honestly, and point out the reasoning behind them. Describe calf care. Explain AI procedures. Show examples of older cows in your herd. Talk about the Canadian Quality Milk program and the ProAction initiative, and explain how this guarantees milk’s safety and quality and the care that animals receive while on our farms. Show the consumer that you are open and above board on all aspects of farm life, and they will no longer feel that we have anything to hide.
- **Be accepting:** Realize that not all farms and farmers are alike. Refrain from farmer or farm-type “bashing.” Remember that our target audience is our consumers. Belittling or demeaning other types of farms or farmers will not help our consumers feel confident about our industry. We need to stand together regardless of whether our farm is organic or conventional, a tiestall or free-stall, consists of mixed breeds or registered herd, has high or low producing cows, or is a pasture or barn-based herd. None of these characteristics make a farm or farmer better than another; it simply makes us different. Describe how you farm and let other farmers share their own stories.
- **And finally: Be polite and courteous.** Our first reactions may be anger and resentment when presented with false and misleading facts about farming, but we need to swallow this anger and respond in a respectful and civil manner. Outrage and annoyance will not win

any support, but polite, well thought out responses will engender respect and will lend credence to your statements.

Looking ahead to the future, I believe that if we all work together to share our stories and ensure that the general public is confident in the products we produce and *how* they are produced, our industry will remain vibrant and healthy for future generations of farmers and consumers. And I'm certain that that is something that we can all agree is worthwhile and necessary to strive for. How will you do your part to ensure this?



