

Coming of Age with Social Networking

By Megan Brownell, Farm Bureau Director

"Our students have changed radically. Today's students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach."

Marc Prensky wrote the comment above in his MCB University Press publication, *On the Horizon*, in 2001. What does this have to do with social media and the Farm Bureau? Everything, to put it frankly.

Agriculture is being forced to produce more, better-quality, further-regulated yields on less ground. This issue isn't a new one. Social media, however, is a brand new issue to agriculture. The beauty of social media's issue is it can widen agriculture's reach and, ultimately, help to educate the soon-to-be-voting population – in seconds.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, You Tube and LinkedIn are tools to be reckoned with. How else can you contact 27,000 American Farm Bureau Federation members after writing about the next gathering date, time and place?

As a young 4-H'er, I was on the telephone committee multiple years to remind members of our potlucks, meetings and record book due dates. The subjects and committees haven't changed. But a quick text message or e-mail can be viewed at a moment's notice, and plans to change a meeting location made known at the push of "send" on any mobile phone or e-mail program today.

Thousands of AFBF members are already on board with social media, helping to spread the word of agriculture. Everyone from wives of dairymen to cattle ranchers to aquaculturalists use social media to launch and manage their businesses and educate the world about their jobs on farms and ranches.

Workshop November 20 –

"New Media: Making Agricultural Marketing Personal"

UC Davis invites agriculturalists to learn about blogs (online journal entries), Twitter messages (short online notes) and other forms of social media at the New Media workshop, which will host 200 attendees and a panel of agriculturalists who use social media. Melissa Borel, a member of Cal Ag Leadership Class 40, and Dr. Annie King, UC Davis, are two of the many people behind the new program. Their goal is to create dialogue and provide examples of how social media can give the agriculture industry a boost.

"Such avenues [new media] are telling stories about living on the farm, provide useful information that connects food production to the general public's food consumption, and market agriculture products."

-Workshop website <http://agnewmedia.ucdavis.edu>.

Why is social media so important? The future voting population of youngsters were born into the digital world. While the current 20-somethings were entertained by "Sesame Street" on television, today's kids can watch "Sesame Street" recorded for them on the digital video recorder (DVR), view online You Tube videos, or chat on Facebook with their favorite characters.

Today's youth is so different as a result of technology that studies are finding they learn differently. Marc Prensky further explained in his article the challenges of so-called "digital natives" and "digital immigrants." The latter "immigrants" are said to include generations prior to social media.

Prensky observed, "Unless we want to just forget about educating Digital Natives until they grow up and do it themselves, we had better confront this issue. And in so doing, we need to reconsider both our methodology and our content."

Let me assure you, though, that changing methods and content doesn't mean we shy away from detailing the hardships and changes of the Dust Bowl era or that we go through soil samples entirely on the computer. No, the intent doesn't change, only the presentation and timing of information.

If you were to take all the technology away from a young person, do they know what direction they're facing? Can they provide an idea of what time of day it is without pulling their cell phone out? A large majority of the youth population will not do so well.

But if you were to ask a young person who grew up among walnut orchards, banded lambs before school or bucked acres of hay, you might get a worthy answer. But the issue still exists that the population growing our food represents just a few percentages of the population compared with those that rely on technology. Logic must be instilled through education and experiences. When it comes to educating people young and old about agriculture, we need to reevaluate the channels of learning – and social media is a new one to embrace.

A fourth grader is still amazed when transplanting lettuce and broccoli, making butter or watching a horse work a cow down the fence. Anyone who stops by the annual Great AGventure can see what hands-on life experiences can do for a young mind.

Agriculture is hands on, and it's our job to engage people through new methods to, for example, grow their own herbs and understand how pesticides are crucial to maintain their food supply. Sending tweets and joining online blogs are new ways to teach old tricks.

Social media also is a direct line to personal aspects of one's life. Imagine the benefits of not just writing a letter to a congressman, but posting a note on their Facebook page for all those followers to see why a certain bill is not agriculturally friendly. Social media is another tool we need to add to our belts, tractor cabs, barn aisles and field crops.