

Farmers and Social Media

Communication, Connection, Community

Instinctively as human beings we want to communicate. When children fail to speak their first word on time at the designated age, modern parents rapidly seek a medical and scientific reason for this failing in their offspring. Sometimes not reaching milestones is a good indicator of something not being well with the child and sometimes the child is just doing things in his own time. The alarm it brings to the adults in the child's world indicates the importance of communication. Communicating connects us to first to the community of our family and so on as we grow and become independent, ideally expanding our community and communities as we grow.

Social media in this age of technology is our voice. The voice of a person who isn't always sure they have something of worth to say but is pretty sure there are others out there in the cyber world who are of a similar mind, stage, experience in life. Social media starts out as a communication, a word, a post, a static statement that invites comment, responses and connection. Connection is a discussion, ongoing comments, a shared and retweeted statement, photos and stories becoming a community. Community, online is a fluid group of strangers and friends that welcome and regulates each other and guests, that fluctuates in numbers at any given time, that dies a natural death only to be resurrected by a new comment from a passerby.

When our physical community isn't enough, our social media communities fill the gap; add value and validity to our efforts and our days, giving us knowledge and education, friends and sometimes even family.

"Facebook wants to populate the wilderness, tame the howling mob and turn the lonely, antisocial world of random chance into a friendly world, a serendipitous world" (Grossman)

The philosopher Descartes is best known for teaching the Latin saying "I think, therefore I am" as a tagline for explaining that we exist when we think for ourselves,

test information given us and understand that most information that comes our way is an opinion. However in our modern time the saying could be rewritten as "I communicate, therefore I am" maybe reversing or embracing the very point Descartes was making.

Social capital and community

Throughout our human history we have endeavoured to create communities, ideally of like-minded people but often of whoever was around at the time. It was survival of the strongest and smartest. We gathered together for protection of numbers, to spread the workload of hunting and gathering, to socialize and build wealth and empires. As humans most of us have a drive to connect with others so we are able to fulfill our needs and our wants. As society has developed and in theory progressed, our desire to connect with others and to create community hasn't changed.

We gathered in market places, then in towns and ultimately we have become an urban society, leaving a small portion of our population working the land to provide for the greater society's needs.

With the improvement of technology the need to have a local labour population available for farm work has decreased. The flow on effect has been a decrease in the rural based population making for an increasingly isolated population just at a time when connection, collaboration and organised co-operation is most needed.

Social capital, the idea of the expected collective or economic benefits derived from the preferential treatment and cooperation between individuals and groups (Putnam) is a tool that many of us use. We use to it to build our reputations, to gain better outcomes of projects, business dealings, meetings, a multitude of activities and events we encounter in all parts of our lives.

"A society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society, for the same reason that is more efficient than barter."
(Putnam)

Social capital was first documented by Alexis de Tocqueville in his book "Democracy in America" written as an observation of the newly formed American society in 1835. De Tocqueville noted on his tour of this fledgling country that Americans enjoyed attending many meetings and gatherings to discuss a wide range of topics. He supposed that this regular interaction and discussion lead to higher levels of transparency in society causing greater participation in society than in older countries with their monarchies, town burghers and layers of society. This in turn allowed for democracy to function well in this new country based on individuals feeling ownership and membership in their community.

As societies have developed into our modern times, social capital has become more important simply because we feel are becoming increasingly physically disconnected with our neighbours and communities. This is only the appearance of disconnection, as in reality our communities are offering more and more opportunities for connecting with others in person though long established community groups, increased educational opportunities, availability of transport, industry organised gatherings and many other efforts to help us network and connect with others. We choose to participate or not.

The cyber world is the same. Participation or degree of participation is an individual's choice. Through the social media mediums of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc. we can show our colours, flaunt our colours, obscure our colours and change our colours if we choose. Through the hardware of smart phones and tablets we take our social media world with us and share, involve, educate and argue with our connections, our 'friends' from around the world in our every moment, activity and perspective depending on how we choose to present ourselves. But the degree of attention and interaction we gather from our posts and interactions are based on the value of our social capital and increases or decreases our social capital.

The obvious indication of our social capital value is simply our number of followers. In all mediums of social media we build our communities by following and being followed by others, usually starting with those we know in our physical communities and then by their friends, we've often never met and then by strangers that we may

meet. In social media your social capital is measured in what is called your reach – how many people might see your post. You may post about the latest Fonterra payout on Facebook and tweet it on Twitter. Your reach is greater than just those who follow you because hopefully one of your followers will have retweeted or reposted your original communication and thereby adding their reach to yours. If you have influential followers, and you might be surprised how many famous and influential people reciprocate follows, your reach increases.

Types of Social Media and explanations

There are about 2000 different types of social media around the world. Many built as copycats or from necessity as some closed countries do not allow mediums such as Facebook and Twitter and have created their own versions.

The four most popular mediums in New Zealand are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. YouTube has the highest use but doesn't require membership.

Facebook – started in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg while he was at Harvard. Facebook set out to be a limited membership website for Ivy League students. Facebook has 1.26 billion users of which about 8% are fake. Oceania statistics for Facebook use at September 2012, with a total population of 35,903,569 in Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands there are 14,614,780 Facebook users. That is 67.6% of the total population. The rest of the world sits at 34.1% (internetworldstats.com). Posit to say this is a reflection of internet access issues and reliability of service.

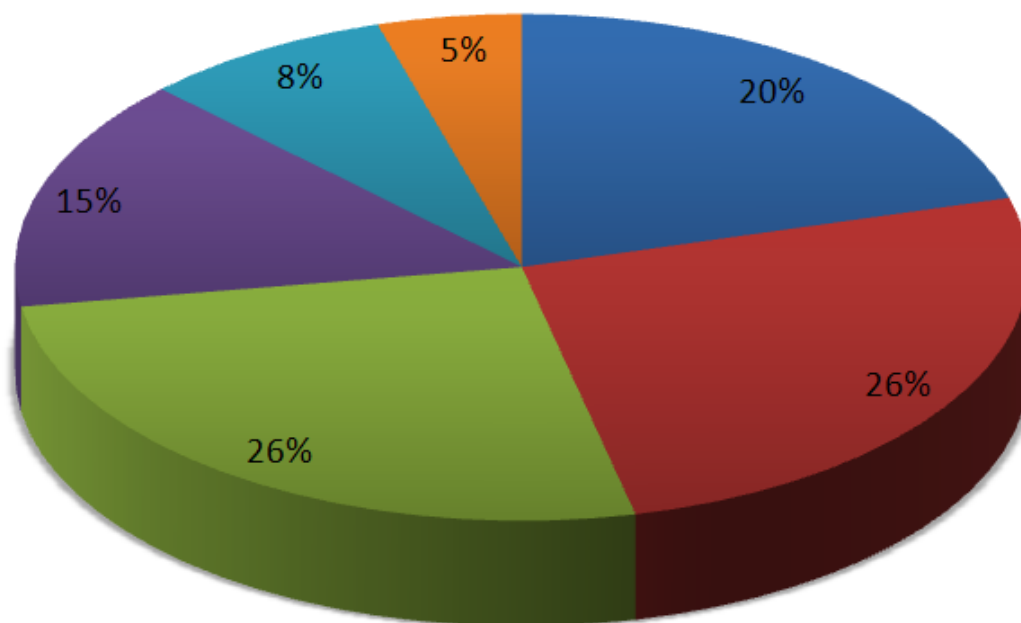
There are 728 million daily active users posting an average on 217 photos on profiles per person. Profiles include basic information about the user and an average of 4.75 billion pieces of information are shared daily. (expandedramblings.com October 2013)

Facebook is largely for use of friends and family. It is a relatively easy way of keeping others informed of the goings on in your life by using posts, photos and sharing things of interest to you. Others may like, comment or share your posts, thereby expanding your reach. The demographics of Facebook users is aging as parents and grandparents join to see photos and messages from their junior family

members. This is increasingly valuable as families' move overseas for employment and the world becomes more of global employment environment. Facebook retains popularity by allowing users to maintain their privacy at levels that suit them thereby only allowing some people the ability to see a profile.

Facebook - Users by Age

■ 13-17 ■ 18-25 ■ 26-34 ■ 35-44 ■ 45-54 ■ 55-64



(expandedramblings.com October 2013)

Twitter – began in 2006 with 500 million registered users by 2012, who post 340 million tweets a day with 1.6 billions search queries a day (Teachcrunch.com/2012/07/30). The recent launch of Twitter on the stock market gave us more accurate statistics with 100 million daily active users, 231.7 million monthly active users. There are 5700 tweets per second. As an example if there 2,000 people tweeting about a TV programme in realtime using a hashtag, in reality 100,000 are seeing those tweets. (brickfish.com).

Designed to be a microblogging medium with each tweet has 140 characters, so succinct messages including links are required. Wit, humour and photos get attention. Twitter is the best environment for networking. Connecting with followers through conversation threads are common with some very famous people tweeting themselves and responding to replies.

Instagram – launched in 2010, Instagram is a photo sharing and video sharing site that allows you to take photos, edit and filter them and post them quickly. More like Twitter than Facebook, followers are often strangers but choose to follow because you have a shared interest like agriculture or rodeo or fashion. Hashtags are used to create a theme or link the photo to an existing theme in the same way that Twitter does. Instagram 'likes' are done by tapping the photo on screen and comments can be made.

With 150 million active monthly users about 13% of internet users use Instagram. There have been 16 billion photos shared in the three years Instagram has been going, 55 million daily. 8500 likes and 1000 comments per second are recorded. In April 2012 Facebook bought Instagram for \$1 billion. (expandedramblings.com/important-instagram-facts November 2013) This created an environment where you can post Instagram photos automatically on Facebook thereby expanding your reach.

Linkedin – Almost as old as Facebook, LinkedIn was launched in May, 2003. LinkedIn is a professional networking site that records a short CV and allows the user to link to others in their fields and professions. The site is available in 20 languages and has 259 million users. LinkedIn has groups that a user can follow that expand in the networking aspect of the site. There are 2.1 million groups. These themed groups are started by a user or organization and there are 200 conversations per minute taking place.

Increasingly used as a HR vetting site by recruiters, LinkedIn also provides advertising for jobs. LinkedIn purchased supporting websites such as CardMunch which allows the user to photograph a business card and overnight uploads the card

information to the users LinkedIn profile allowing them to invite the business associates to join their LinkedIn network.

For the purpose of this report, I have focused on Twitter. I believe Twitter to be the easiest medium to use as it is spontaneous, immediate and to the point. It is from using Twitter that I have gained the strongest connections and started communities of interest. Twitter isn't for everyone and that is fine.

Social media and rural New Zealand

There are no specific statistics for rural based New Zealanders use of any social media. New Zealand as a social media population not only are we small but we are beginners. The uptake of social media is increasing as young people come of age, usually 13 for social media sites but also use is increasing for those in the retired demographic, perhaps supported by free computer lessons, family pressure and increasing ease of use of computer hardware such as iPads and tablets.

What is available is usually from media and advertising businesses such as Adcorp and is probably promoted by having strong overseas links (Adcorp is in Australia and New Zealand) (table credit Adcorp New Zealand May 2013)

TOP 15 SOCIAL MEDIA SITES MAY 2013

Australia				New Zealand			
		Percentage of Australia's Population (22,042,382)	Percentage change from April 2013			Percentage of New Zealand's Population (4,468,068)	Percentage change from April 2013
Facebook	11,534,540	50.06%	+0.01%	YouTube	2,278,597	51.00%	-0.03%
YouTube	11,255,674	48.85%	+0.02%	Facebook	2,276,620	50.95%	+0.18%
LinkedIn	3,918,409	17.01%	-0.98%	LinkedIn	737,367	16.50%	-1.02%
WordPress	3,272,673	14.20%	+1.44%	Tumblr	699,521	15.66%	+2.30%
Tumblr	3,263,119	14.16%	+1.94%	WordPress	677,714	15.17%	+1.32%
Twitter	2,174,227	9.44%	-2.78%	Twitter	395,314	8.85%	-0.01%
Pinterest	1,629,564	7.07%	+0.55%	Instagram	276,376	6.19%	-
Instagram	1,376,001	5.97%	-0.03%	Pinterest	271,594	6.08%	+0.41%
Flickr	944,837	4.10%	+0.08%	TripAdvisor	193,467	4.33%	-1.86%
TripAdvisor	580,403	2.52%	-1.50%	Flickr	137,788	3.08%	-0.01%
MySpace	490,048	2.13%	-0.31%	MySpace	71,179	1.59%	-0.11%
StumbleUpon	321,656	1.40%	-0.17%	Reddit	27,297	0.61%	+0.03%
Reddit	163,783	0.71%	+0.71%	StumbleUpon	26,163	0.59%	-0.07%
Foursquare	82,709	0.36%	-0.15%	Foursquare	21,066	0.47%	-0.06%
Bebo	16,287	0.07%	-0.02%	Bebo	14,930	0.33%	+0.11%
Digg	12,242	0.05%	+0.01%	Digg	3,221	0.07%	-0.06%
** Google+ insufficient data				** Google+ insufficient data			

As part of my research I contacted a number of media businesses to see what kind of social media they were promoting and using. Some of them understood the power of social media they found they were road blocked by rural businesses not appreciating the immediateness of social media and making an assumption that New Zealand farmers were unlikely to ever use social media. Some ignored social media as a medium of communication telling me there was minimal activity in the New Zealand agricultural sector, which to a degree is true.

Information ages very fast in social media world.

In June 2013 I took a considerable amount of time to document the New Zealand followers of popular New Zealand farmers who used Twitter. I did this by choosing three New Zealand rural based business people for who Twitter was their choice of social media – Colin Grainger Allen @nzcows a Central North Island dairy farmer (2,463 followers, klout* score 52) William Morrison @morrisonfarming lower North Island Sheep and Beef farmers (1887 followers, klout* score 50) and Aaron Meikle @aaronjmeikle a lower South Island Beef&LambNZ Extension Manager (684 followers, klout* score 48) and my own account @sarajrussell (512 followers, klout score 48) and documenting as many New Zealand based followers as I could identify. I believe these people had a reasonable catchment of most rural New Zealanders as possible.

I categorized each user

- by user name,
- name,
- location,
- industry sector,
- how many tweets,
- how many followers,
- how many followed,
- another twitter account,
- website,
- other associations such as Kellogg or Nuffield.

*Klout is a website that measures an individual's reach over all social media mediums they use. Daniel Carter, who the most popular New Zealand social media personality, klout score is 74.

In June 2013 there were 234 rural linked New Zealand individuals who were signed up to Twitter. 121 had made less than 99 tweets, 49 had made fewer than 500 tweets, 64 had made over 500 tweets which Colin Grainger- Allen @nzcows making 5764 (November 2013 7,285 tweets). Colin is not the most prolific tweeter from rural New Zealand, that honour belongs to Chanelle Purser with 43564 as at June 2013.

There were 23 sheep and beef farmers, 61 dairy farmers, 126 service people (education, consultants, lawyers, researchers, politicians and media) and the remainder didn't have enough information in their profiles. The highest identifiable group was Kelloggers (not just those from the 2013 cohort) and Nuffield scholars. Nuffield scholars represent well among farm tweeters.

The numbers are not huge but they are increasing. As a strong connector with a good Twitter profile showing my agricultural creditability, I gain on average one new follower a day. Mostly they are agricultural industry based individuals or businesses.

Colin Grainger-Allen started Tweeting as a way on connecting back to his English farming roots and keeping up with people back home. Subsequently he has recruited staff, spoken at conferences and appeared on TV all from using Twitter. William Morrison started taking photos of his farming activities with witty comments. This combined with his already strong Australasian network meant he had followers quickly who loved photos of his dogs, cattle and green paddocks – there are often comments from envious, drought ridden Australian farmers. Aaron Meikle uses his Twitter feed to communicate educational information about sheep and beef farming and lucerne growing. All showcase New Zealand land use, farming practices and scenery to an international audience. All have interacted with others, engaged in varying degrees of lively debate and shared knowledge about farming in New Zealand.

For every tweet there is an audience and often an audience that lurks, reads, digests and moves on. There is an unspoken etiquette in the Twittersphere based on the social capital and reciprocity. Lurking is fine, retweeting is great, interacting is fantastic.

Connection and communities

As farmers increase use of on farm technology and hardware becomes hardier, smaller and more portable, carrying a smartphone or an iPhone on farm is becoming commonplace. Internet connectedness is improving as internet providers improve infrastructure and hardware becomes more internet linked. New Zealand will never have complete internet coverage as the rural population is too scattered.

But this isn't stopping farmers from using social media to connection and build communities. The isolation mentioned in the opening paragraphs is becoming more and frustrating to farmers as their business needs become more urgent, more online based and their knowledge uptake requires constant tending. While some rural based businesses have picked up on social media as a vehicle to communicate with their customers, current and prospective, that still is largely the domain of large international businesses such as AgCo, an international farm machinery dealer whose American branches really work their Facebook page and it's proving to be a community of tractor affectionados who share stories about their tractors, including photos. Bonding over tractor stories is building an AgCo community that translates into customer loyalty and sales. In New Zealand, smaller businesses such as some of the independent meat processors and tech suppliers and support providers use social media to build individual relationships to expand their spheres of influence.

Individual farmers take a little bit of coaxing to get them engaged with Twitter in particular (with Facebook, if you are going to have a page, you will already have one. The growth for Facebook is in the very young and the retired). Those engaged are because they know someone who is already involved or have been to a presentation at the Rural Business Network or another rural association. It is common for people to join Twitter and ebb and flow in their activity due to the busyness of life.

Apps are making accessibility easier and easier. Downloaded to a smart phone or iPhone, apps can be set to refresh all the time or at a timed sequence. This means Twitter is one tap way from connecting us with our online community. All social media automatically come as an app these days. Accessing social media via apps on

phones have increased the use noticeably. Vine is a very new video sharing medium similar to Instagram. The user can make 6 second videos and edit them (to a degree) on their phones. Followers like or download your vine clip to their social media timeline or feed. Vine videos drop into Twitter and Facebook automatically, if set up to do so. Vine was founded in June 2012, purchased by Twitter in October 2012 and launched January 2013. Vine is not yet a year old and already it's popularity outstrips Twitter at the same time post launch. Vine, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn etc. are all free to join, free to download their app – they make their money through third party advertising and collecting your data, then directing advertising that suits your interests to your timeline or feed.

What do New Zealand farmers currently get out of tweeting? Networks and connection is the answer from those I've asked. It is easy to see the interaction taking place regularly on your own twitter feed. There are serious discussions about drought conditions, cost of silage, buying of feed, grass growth and rugby. Every interaction increases knowledge that little bit more. Information is sought, advice is given and activity takes place.

What can New Zealand farmers get out of tweeting? Networks and connection. Twitter in rural New Zealand is about the national community it creates. Those who are active, who interact find they have friends all over New Zealand (and elsewhere) who are willing to lend an ear, share knowledge and provide support and encouragement. 2013 New Zealand Nuffield scholar, Young Farmer and Rural Bank Manager Sophie Stanley used Twitter to travel around the United States as she researched AgChat communities. She tweeted her plan to travel to certain locations and followers responded offering a farm tour and a bed. Because you can vet tweeps (Twitter users) using their profiles and tweets, it is a relatively safe practice and took her to farms never visited by a Nuffield scholar before.

NZ Inc.

As farmers and rural based people, we offer a unique insight to New Zealand that takes a tourist over the electric fence and into the heart of what we understand to be heartland New Zealand. Through Twitter and Instagram we share images of what we love about the real New Zealand. A good tweet has a photo with an explanation of what's going on. Instagram is all about interesting photos and can have much longer commentary than Twitter. Following agricultural people provides endless photos of central Otago hillsides, tractors pulling out fence posts, pet calves and ploughing competitions.



AgChat

On 17 October 2013 the first ever world AgChat took place on Twitter using the hashtag #AgrichatWorld. With 632 contributors from the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, and other European Union countries the two hours from 8am until 10am New Zealand time had 3,664 tweets and reached 8.44 million timeline deliveries. This doesn't include the lurkers who hung back and watched the conversations as farmers from around the world shared the best things about their jobs, their country's agriculture, opportunities and challenges facing their country's farmers, the effects of globalization, the future of food systems and how the world's farmers can work together. The comments and connections sipped across cyber space as farmers interacted in real time in whatever time zone they were in.

Instigated and led by AgChatUK, AgChatNZ, AgChatOZ and AgChat(USA) leapt at the opportunity to take part in creating an environment for our farmers to connect.

AgChats are not-for-profit foundations focusing on;

- connecting farmers via moderated Twitter conversations at a designated time using a designated hashtag e.g. #AgChatNZ;
- educating farmers about using social media in their businesses;
- helping farmers advocate on their own behalf as well as others.

The original AgChat is the North American AgChat set up by farmers for farmers in 2009. A grassroots organization developed by volunteers so connect and grow farm businesses and provide another avenue for the farmer's voice to be heard. The organization grew quickly as farmer's realized the power of social media. Within a year AgChat was organizing workshops to help farmers develop their own blogs and websites, up skilling to fully use social media and to help farmer's find their voices as advocates. Meeting on Tuesday evenings, moderators call for questions, collate and organize the questions, promote theme of the evening via Twitter #AgChat and moderate the Twitter conversation. AgChat regularly has 12,000 participants from numerous countries and has expanded making every third Tuesday #FoodChat connecting foodies, nutrition professionals and consumers.

AgriChatUK took up their hashtag #AgriChatUK with their Twitter conversations on Thursday evenings following the same lines as AgChat. Focused on connecting farmers so they can use a collective voice to advocate beyond the farm gate, AgriChatUK's most successful experience was coordinating the SOS Dairy campaign with the UK Farmer's Weekly newspaper. Taking a leaf out of some environmental organizations social media strategies, AgriChatUK concentrated dairy farmers desperation as a series of milk price cuts in early 2012 made farming increasingly impossible. With farming families being put out of business after being locked into loss making contracts with milk companies farmers began taking their tractors to town and protesting. Realising that small and random groups of muddy farmers weren't going to have the impact needed, AgriChatUK coordinated the online and protest campaign. Industry good groups worked together, each doing what they do best, to return the milk payout to a reasonable price. 2,500 farmers descended on London using Twitter to coordinate and channel anger. A song was written and released on YouTube, 800 people added the SOSdairy ribbon to their Twitter profile pictures and more used the #SOSdairy hashtag. It wasn't just farmers, consumers understanding the cheap milk in their supermarket equated to imported milk, another primary product imported into Britain, joined in. The result was a livable milk payout. Never before have so many farmers been so well coordinated.

AgChatOZ's mission is to break down barriers between rural and urban Australians, to give rural Australians a public voice and engage the public. Their AgChatOZ Twitter forum has tackled topics such as live exports, foreign investment, succession and farm budgeting. Their Twitter forums are held on Tuesday evenings and are promoted on Twitter and Facebook. By providing a forum that allows arms length discussion about sticky issues facing agriculture, AgChatOZ has created a non-confrontational environment to clear the air through discussion and education. Dispelling the myth of McLeod's Daughters by explaining how it really is for farmers and connecting farmers to provide support for each through online forums and communities.

AgChatNZ

After hearing about the successes of the international AgChats' Colin Grainger Allen and I decided that AgChatNZ was what is needed to take New Zealand farmers forward using social media as a business marketing tool, a connector and to build an online community that extends to in-person meetings and training opportunities.

This came about in August 2012 when I organized the first Social Media for Farmers workshop in Wellington. After contacting Colin via Twitter, meeting him and floating the idea of the workshop we agreed that someone needed to step up and start the conversation about how social media would benefit our rural businesses and communities. Living by the motto – if it's going to be, it's up to me – I did. With 40 attendees paying a nominal fee and speakers - Dorje McKinnon and Alana Harrison from Lincoln University, Tom Philips from OneFarm, the Lincoln Massey Partnership for Excellence, Colin and myself – we had a can-do workshop. Those who attended were largely from agricultural organizations rather than farmers but the point we make clear was that farmers are getting used to using technology and to being connected through social media and it is time capitalize on this change in how farmer's operate. Farmer now have the same real-time avenues to communicate that once were only available to those who lived in towns, they can make a critical and influential mass as an online community. Where once advocacy was the domain of Wellington based organizations, an online community is a swifter, more co-operative, collaboration than conventional organizations. Issues that used to affect a handful of farmers at either end of the country now have a vehicle to become a coordinated voice of support and encouragement to those who need it and a voice of agvocacy to those who need to hear it and a marketing and education tool to our own urban population.

Subsequent workshops were given to NZIPIM 2012 North Island and South Island conferences, 2012 TBfree Committee Chairs annual meeting, Manawatu Rural Business Network and an online webinar for OneFarm.

All these set the scene for AgChatNZ.

Where to from here for AgChatNZ?

With the Trust deed organized and a Board of Trustees in place, AgChatNZ is ready to train the AgChatNZ advisor team, to start its online forums in the New Year and hold social media workshops around the country.

The AgChatNZ mission is to:

Connect farmers, rural based people and businesses in an online community using social media that encourages, supports and educates advocates so they are enabled to communicate and represent vibrant rural businesses and communities to our urban population and the world.

Our founding principles are Communication, Connection, Community.

Conclusion

In some areas of social media use, such as Facebook New Zealand is equal to anywhere in the world. However with newer social media mediums like Twitter and Instagram, New Zealanders are only beginning to see the possibilities of potential uses. The rural sector is not different in its uptake of social media than the general population.

Rural based businesses and farms stand to gain much more from Twitter especially as a marketing tool. Rural communities will gain a sense of connectedness and build communities of interest by using Twitter. At it's most simplest level Twitter and any social media is a choice. Different mediums suit different people. Either it gels for you or it doesn't. Some see value in using social media to promote their businesses, others to gain knowledge from experts and peers, some just to enjoy the jokes and witty comments that come from others.

By introducing AgChat to New Zealand we offer a forum for farmers, rural businesses and interested parties the opportunity to discuss and debate the most current of issues. If other countries are any indication to go by the uptake will be positive and hopefully the connection the forum provides helps strengthen an already small industry. That social media is constantly renewing and updating means there will always be a medium that suits the needs of a range of users.

Twitter is just one of many mediums, but it is a proven medium that works for rural people. The AgChats around the world are doing just as they proposed – creating communication, connection and community for those who this is often difficult to maintain. And that it can be done from the back paddock, the lazy boy in front of the TV or online on a desktop computer means its accessibility for the rural population is effective and increasingly user friendly.

Maybe the first campaign of AgChatNZ should be improved, faster connectivity of internet services to rural households.

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