

# Harnessing Social Media in Agriculture

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The power of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is now literally in our hands. We have never before had such a powerful tool to connect with millions of people from the comfort of our own home and all around the world it is changing the way business is done. Social media has given the power to the voice of the everyman, and whilst that may come with its challenges, the opportunities are there for the taking, especially when it comes to telling the story of New Zealand agriculture.

Social media is now a mainstream form of communication around the world, and continues to grow in popularity with the increase in the number of smartphones, and the ease of use whilst on the go. There are now 1.5 billion users of social networking platforms in the world and other industries have embraced these platforms in business and consumer engagement, however it has not been widely accepted in agriculture. Limited research available shows that there are increasing trends in farmer and agribusiness uptake in social media as the popularity of smartphones increase.

The purpose of this report was to assess the value social media could have for the New Zealand agricultural industry to propel us into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By meeting a wide range of farmers, agribusinesses and professionals around the world, particularly in the UK & USA, I discovered four main themes of value for the industry.

The value of social media for the agricultural industry lies in the value of social capital. It brings the farmer, industry and consumer closer together so that there is more transparency, engagement, trust and authenticity in the supply chain. Financial returns are often an indirect result of improved social capital, however this is difficult to measure.

The four key areas of value are:

1. **Networking (Farmer-Farmer)** via social media platforms (such as Twitter) can:
  - Reduce social isolation for farmers
  - Enable farmers & agribusinesses to meet and network with other farmers, agribusinesses and consumers domestically and globally

- Enable interaction directly with people of influence
- Provide you with a wealth of knowledge and ideas from a range of sources
- The AgChat model (Twitter online discussion group), which is widely used in USA, UK, Australia & Ireland, is a great concept for facilitating discussions of industry issues between farmers and agribusinesses.

## **2. Industry Knowledge, Extension & Marketing (Farmer – Agricultural Industry)**

- Marketing using social platforms can enable agribusinesses to connect with a growing farming demographic online by providing content that is of value.
- Lobbying on social media brings together a collective voice to bring about action and change by interacting with people of influence and power directly. Facilitating large groups of people and discussion around an issue of importance is made easier using these platforms. Examples of this are:
  - UK #soddairy campaign in which Twitter was used to coordinate protest efforts and spread the message to the public about what farmers were actually getting paid
  - In Australia, the ban on live export brought about a growing number of farmers engaging in social media to lobby to politicians & #supportliveex
- Extension and knowledge transfer of agricultural practices may reach a wider audience by using social media tools

## **3. Consumer Engagement (Farmer/Industry – Consumer)**

- Connecting and engaging with consumers is becoming more important as our consumers increasingly are using social platforms to make purchasing decisions. Opportunity for producers of food and fibre to use social media as a tool as part of their marketing toolbox.
- Social Media enables farmers to be part of the conversation surrounding controversial and emotional issues to do with farming practices E.g. animal welfare, genetic modification and environmental issues. People will be talking about our industry whether we are involved or not.
- Allows farmers and the agricultural industry to better understand our consumers needs and viewpoints
- Helps build trust by being transparent and authentic

#### 4. Crisis communication

- Communication strategies for the agricultural industry should include social media by using two-way communication with authentic, efficient and transparent voices.
- Learning's from the Fonterra botulism case in 2013 highlight the need for effective communication on social media in the agricultural industry.

In all respects it has been acknowledged that social media is not a silver bullet for every communication challenge that the industry has in respects to crisis communication, marketing, lobbying and networking however it does add a lot of value in conjunction with traditional methods.

My recommendations for getting the best value from social media and the above findings:

- More industry training for farmers and agribusinesses is required so that farmers and agribusinesses understand the capabilities of the tools better.
- Formation of AgChatNZ Twitter discussion forum (currently in the process of this with other industry members).
- Farmers should be utilised more in social media marketing for our produce internationally as they are the human face in the supply chain, which provides authenticity and trust.

We have the opportunity to bring the world to our farm gate and connect to our consumers with authenticity and transparency. We have the responsibility to tell our story to protect our industry, and now we have the power to as well.

***“It is not the strongest that survive, nor the most intelligent; but the ones that are most responsive to change”***

**Charles Darwin**