

Darin Grimm - AgChat

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Let's go to southern California where a conference on social media is underway. Participants are learning how to utilize the new technology of social media. Remarkably, one of the speakers is a farmer from rural Kansas. He is a cofounder of a new entity which is helping thousands of urban consumers learn more about agriculture. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Darin Grimm is a farmer near Hiawatha, Kansas. He has always been interested in technology.

“As a high school student, I was interested in computers,” Darin said. As a self-taught computer expert, he did tech support for a couple of local companies.

In 1995, he moved back to the family farm, outside Hiawatha near the rural community of Morrill. “I live in the house where I was born,” Darin said. He continues to farm with his father and partners while maintaining his interest in technology. In fact, for several years he did consulting on precision agriculture. Then his interest in technology led him to discover Twitter.

“As a technology person, I heard about Twitter early on,” Darin said. “After I had been on Twitter for a while, a farmer in Ohio made a list of ag accounts on Twitter, four hundred or so. I converted that into a list that was searchable and sent it back to the farmer in Ohio.”

The two started an online conversation. As unlikely as it may seem, these aggies started communicating on Twitter. They were on Facebook as well, along with a number of other farmers.

This growing interest in social media and agriculture culminated in the creation of a new group called the AgChat Foundation. Created in April 2010, the AgChat Foundation is a non-profit organization. Its mission statement is simple and straightforward: “Empowering farmers and ranchers to connect communities through social media platforms.”

In practice, the Foundation educates and equips farmers and ranchers with the skill set needed to effectively communicate in this new world of social media. That means engaging on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, YouTube, LinkedIn and other social media services.

For generations, farm organizations have talked about the importance of telling agriculture’s story. Social media give individual farmers new tools to tell their story first-hand more effectively than ever. Research shows that social media are a growing opportunity for farmers to have a stronger voice in educating people about the business of growing food, fuel, feed and fiber.

“Consumers have sincere questions about their food, and it’s our goal to help farmers and ranchers answer questions about how food, fuel, feed and fiber are produced,” said the AgChat website. “We also believe it’s all of agriculture’s responsibility to build that connection.”

In August 2010, the AgChat Foundation sponsored its first-ever two day conference on social media. Some 75 people attended, and it was so successful that it became an annual event. More than one hundred people attended the most recent conference in Kansas City. AgChat is now doing regional training sessions as well.

Every Tuesday evening at 7 p.m. Central time, AgChat hosts an online discussion of timely topics, from USDA school lunch policies to how to manage a farm during a drought. The organization’s website is www.agchat.org.

Will people discuss agriculture on social media? According to the AgChat website, when ag groups coordinated Thank a Farmer on Twitter during Thanksgiving 2009, it generated 6.7 million online impressions. Wow.

The AgChat Foundation is not a membership organization. It is supported by sponsorships from individuals and agribusinesses. The foundation has a national Board of Directors with members from Oregon to Florida. The president of the AgChat Foundation is Darin Grimm from the rural community of Morrill, Kansas, population 270 people. Now, that's rural.

“So many people have so little connection to the farm anymore,” Darin said. “Social media is a way for people to interact with real farmers.”

It's time to leave California where a conference on social media is underway, featuring a Kansas farmer talking about the AgChat Foundation. We salute Darin Grimm for making a difference by pioneering this innovative form of communicating about agriculture through technology. The success of this rural technology initiative makes me all a-twitter.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.