

Farmers 'like' social media

Connecting with your peers isn't the only advantage of getting your farm online

WORDS: CAMERON COOPER

The reputation of farmers as reluctant social media users may soon be disproved, with online entities such as Farmz (farmz.com.au), AgChatOZ (agchatoz.org.au) and Ask An Aussie Farmer (askanaussiefarmer.com.au) attracting farmers and agribusiness professionals from all over Australia.

Farmz is the brainchild of Alex Sparkes, a sixth-generation beef cattle producer from Taroom in central Queensland. Conscious of the difficulty of staying in touch with other farmers, he believes technology can enhance the way rural and regional Australians lead their farming lives.

Through a customised website akin to a 'miniature Facebook', Farmz allows farmers to profile their properties and share ideas about better agribusiness practices. A digital rainfall calendar even enables them to detail specific weather information.

Farmz is a social network with about 1500 farmers. The website also uses Twitter and Facebook.

Sparkes hopes to ultimately grow user numbers to about 50,000 farms and has revamped the site so that non-farming agribusiness professionals, such as agronomists, vets and stock and station agents, can participate as part of the wider community.

"We're allowing farmers to communicate and socialise in an environment that is built purely for them [and] gives farmers the ability to access other individuals who will be able to value-add to their farming business," says Sparkes.

Online community AgChatOZ started four years ago and now has more than 8400 Twitter followers and a presence via Facebook, LinkedIn and its website.



Alex Sparkes believes social media enhances the lives of regional and rural Australians.

A feature of the network is a weekly Twitter discussion on Tuesday nights from 8pm, when users discuss topical issues affecting farmers. The live cattle export ban, genetically modified food and women in agriculture are among the topics that have generated most interest.

Co-founder Sam Livingstone says AgChatOZ has created a digital community that is "simply another tool" for farmers to network, discuss issues and market their products.

"It's great for us to see that people are using it not just for the chat but for all kinds of agricultural issues," says Livingstone.

The website Ask An Aussie Farmer was founded in response to a federal government ban on live cattle exports to Indonesia in 2011. North Queensland beef producer Kylie Stretton decided farmers needed a voice to tell their side of the story, so she and other volunteers established the website to engage people on the topic of food and fibre production and provide an online platform for farmers to communicate.

Today, many farmers are also using the forum to discuss diverse topics ranging from weed control, to raising a poddy calf.

"We really do need to start communicating with one another, as well as the general public," says Stretton.

"We need to band together and have a better understanding of one another."

Ask An Aussie Farmer also has a Facebook page and a Twitter account. With more than 9000 likes on Facebook, Stretton says it's been the ideal platform for reaching people because they can post a lot of photos, while Twitter has been used primarily to disseminate quick grabs of information or to respond to people's queries.

As the power of social media grows, Stretton believes it will be an increasingly crucial platform for sharing ideas and increasing public awareness of Australian agribusiness, and she urges farmers to give it a go. **W**

WHERE CAN YOU CONNECT?

agchatoz.org.au connects rural Australians and city dwellers on agricultural topics.

askanaussiefarmer.com.au answers the public's questions about food and fibre.

farmz.com.au is a social network for farmers.