

Digital Harvests

Farmers grow offline, then connect with a new audience online as the use of websites and social media gain ground in agriculture.



LOW DUNN

THE FARM-TO-FORK mentality is less a trend and more a lifestyle. Sites like Eggzy.net, which locates local chicken farmers, and HomeGrownCow.com, a conduit for beef, chicken and cheese lovers looking for farmers in their area, are bringing a digital edge to agriculture.

Consumers are concerned about the traceability of their food, but 98.5 percent of the population is not directly involved in food production, according to AgChat.org, a site focused on “advocating” and connecting farmers through social media. Even though foods with local origins have a lower deliverable cost, consumers still pay up to 50 percent more for these items. Consumers see the value in eating local and are willing to pay. As farmers compete for recognition and repeat customers, new online channels are specifically aimed to help agricultural businesses maintain their presence off the farm.

Relying simply on word of mouth, Mark Thompson and his wife, Charlene Smith, of New Hope, Pennsylvania, launched a public online eggstand called Eggzy. Thompson, a software developer, used his tech background to create their concept. He knows the keys to good agricultural commerce: face-to-face marketing and traceability. Currently a free service, Eggzy allows those interested in purchasing eggs to search for local chicken farmers.

Home Grown Cow launched in early 2011 for consumers to find cattle farms. Taking a small percentage of each transaction, Home Grown Cow is a marketplace for farmers to post

their entire inventory. Meats and cheeses are packaged and distributed around the country. Home Grown Cow is open to all beef, poultry and cheese producers.

Connecting with consumers on a local level leaves a neglected clientele: businesses. Undergoing a major relaunch in the summer of 2011, Food-Hub.org is a regional site with a business-to-business mindset. Restaurants, corporate food service providers and cafes utilize Food Hub in the Pacific Northwest to find goods local to their area. Food Hub is currently considering expanding its service area to the rest of the United States.

More farmers around the country are creating their own sites to fill a digital gap. “If we’re not going to use social media, we might as well be talking to the cows,” says Jan Hoadley, a farmer and avid blogger based out of Alabama’s Birmingham area.

Just two years ago, Hoadley, who has a small farm and raises traditional animals like chickens to more exotic varieties like Giant Chinchilla rabbits, launched an award-winning page at SmallFarmCoop.com. Passionate about providing consumers the truth about livestock and produce, she directs people to her blog (*SlowMoneyFarm.wordpress.com*) even when she knows they may never buy an egg.

With all of these new media concepts for agro-professionals, what about the grandparents of social media: Twitter and Facebook? Farmers are using them, too, but they also should check out Farmbook.info. Farmbook launched just this year and is for farmers all around the world. Modeled after Facebook’s ease of use, Farmbook is meant to be a connection for all aspects of agriculture on a localized level.

Farmers can get connected, get cooking, and update their social media statuses when it’s time for dessert.

— Tara Lynne Groth

 ON THE WEB

Shop an online farmers’ market.