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The Write Type: PennAg Uses Bloggers to Educate Public About Ag at Farm Show

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12/28/2013 7:00 AM

By Nicole Herman Reporter



EPHRATA, Pa. — When you think of agriculture, you probably don't think of computer screens, the tappity-tap sounds of a keyboard, or an electronic flurry of tweets, posts and pics. But that's just what PennAg Industries Association thought of when it needed to spread the word about its Today's Agriculture exhibit at the upcoming Pennsylvania Farm Show, in Harrisburg, Pa., Jan. 4-11.

The need to more fully inform the public about agriculture arose over the years as more consumers became disconnected with the farming culture. Along with the disconnection came misunderstandings — mostly about how farm animals were being raised and how crops were being grown.

PennAg built the exhibit to meet this need and it worked — more than 400,000 people have visited the exhibit that totals 10,000 square feet and houses everything from live pigs, cows and turkeys to planted soybean and corn crops in various stages of growth.

But that wasn't enough. It needed a different, creative type of attention to connect with more consumers.

Melissa Sankey, assistant vice president at PennAg, along with other staff members, had witnessed other companies utilizing bloggers to educate the public about their products and services and it sounded like a successful idea.

“Most consumers today are five generations removed from agriculture,” Sankey said during a recent interview. “Bloggers afford PennAg and the Today's Agriculture display the platform to spread the message about agriculture.”

As a result, last year — its second year as an exhibit, in January 2013 — PennAg had invited the Central Pennsylvania Bloggers, a group of social-media-savvy individuals, to take an exclusive, one-on-one tour at the Today's Ag exhibit.

“Our objective,” said Sankey, “is to educate bloggers about agriculture and employ them as advocates. Their authentic blog posts allow the thousands of people who follow them to catch a glimpse of agriculture and the people who are passionate about the industry.”

So, last January, armed with pads of paper and smartphones, a group of 12 to 14 bundled-up bloggers stepped into Penn Ag’s renowned exhibit for the first time as an invited group.

The tour went through the exhibits of beef, veal, chicken, ducks, turkey and pork as well as farm equipment and crops. During each section, the bloggers were given a brief, fact-filled explanation of each agriculture industry. Afterward, they were treated to dinner at the PennAg food stand.

Sarah Mock, a York, Pa., resident and writer of “How I Pinch a Penny,” a blog that focuses on saving money and keeping a healthy, happy home, was one of the bloggers present. The mother of three young children was interesting in attending the tour because not only is the Farm Show a free event — an opportunity that resonates with the focus of her blog — but it is also educational.

“Part of it is that if we don’t have farmers, we don’t have food,” Mock said. “The other is about education and where food comes from.”

Although she has a national following on her blog, many of her readers are local to Pennsylvania. She also writes a column for “Smart Magazine” and makes a weekly television appearance on Good Day Pa. as the host of “Thrifty Thursday with Sarah Mock.” Even though she is interested in agriculture and was part of the 4-H program growing up — preferring baking and sewing activities — she still learned some things while touring the Today’s Ag exhibit.

“It’s good to hear from the farmers what they are doing and what they believe and how they are operating,” she said. “With media, we are told one thing and that might not be true.”

She had thought that pigs would be better off if they were free-range rather than penned, but the group of bloggers heard from PennAg that swine can be very aggressive and they are penned for safety reasons.

At the veal-calf exhibit, Mock was “pleased” to see the condition of their pens. In her blog post, she wrote: “I had visions of ultra tight pens, not allowing calves to move at all, binding them tight together. But the set up has allowed the animals to move around, get up and down as it wanted and was less restrictive than I has assumed.”

Lindsay Sica, of Mechanicsburg, Pa., offered a different reason for joining the tour. Sica only started blogging in September 2012, but her bubbly personality and relatable demeanor has attracted many followers to her blog that focuses on her weight goals and being healthy, all the while training for a half marathon between grad school and working at a nonprofit. Because she wishes to lose weight, as do many of her readers, she thought the tour would be a great opportunity to learn about the foods she eats.

“I think that it’s really interesting,” Sica said. “I eat a lot of meat and I’ve never gotten the information on how the animals are housed or treated or how they get onto your table.”

When it came to trying new foods at the PennAg food stand after the tour, Sica said she was hesitant, but also willing. “It was my first time eating veal and it’s hard to think of it as a baby cow, but it was in a sandwich, so that made it easier.”

Throughout the tour, the bloggers noted that they were able to understand the presentations, thanks to their careful consideration of what little farming information and lingo the bloggers knew. Mock stated that the farming industry reps were “approachable” and “very easy to understand.”

Sica mentioned that her favorite part of the whole experience was “seeing the different animals and seeing the people’s passion for the animals and what they do.”

Steph Couch, of the blog “The Event Crashers,” also toured the exhibit, and was excited to discover that one of the farmers was actually a blogger as well.

“It was great to meet individuals who were so knowledgeable about their profession and had a passion for educating others as well. ...” Couch said. “Many times when you’re walking through exhibits, it’s overwhelming and confusing as to where (you) should even start. Getting a guided tour and having the opportunity to network and debrief with others after the fact was an amazing experience.”

As far as blogging about the experience goes, each blogger had their own approach. Mock, who’s been blogging since 2009 and creating posts about three to five times a week depending on her schedule, took notes and tweeted on the social networking site called Twitter. She said she later used her tweets as a foundation for her actual blog post. Sica, however, had never covered an event such as the tour before. She tried typing on her iPhone as the group went along, but she couldn’t type fast enough and missed some points. She laughed as she said that she will be sure to bring a pad of paper for the 2014 tour, taking place later this week.

The bloggers were not paid for their time and their posts, but they were offered a free dinner of PennAg food stand products. Most of the bloggers provided a disclaimer along with their post about the tour, saying that despite the free food, the commentary was their own, unbiased opinion.

PennAg does not limit or control what the bloggers post, saying that if a blogger does post a negative review, it at least gives them a better, truthful understanding of what people who come through the display may feel.

“We want them (the bloggers) to speak authentically about their experience,” said Melissa Sankey. “What encapsulates so many of their followers is their true authenticity and speaking from an emotional aspect of their life.”

Sankey told about one blogger who posted a negative review after the tour about the veal display. “While it’s something we may have cringed at, it was also important for the blogger to express their opinion.”

Besides hundreds of online followers, the bloggers posts about PennAg’s Today’s Agriculture exhibit have the potential to reach thousands more across the Internet — and those people don’t even have to step inside the Farm Show complex to get a personal experience.

“For PennAg, a victory for us was educating at least one blogger to open their eyes to agriculture and squelch the misconceptions they had,” Sankey said, further noting that she believes they have been able to reach beyond the blogger group and out through the online public. Since the 2013 tour, Sankey has kept up with some of the Central Pennsylvania Bloggers’ meet-ups and has created “a great relationship with them,” calling it a “rewarding experience.”

The 2014 tour will take place Jan. 3 at 6:30 p.m., and is expected to attract even more bloggers than last year. New for 2014 is a focus on how crops end up in the grocery store as well as points regarding genetically modified organisms, or GMOs.

The prospect of utilizing the bloggers for future events remains strong.

“Yes, we plan to continue working with the blogger group,” Sankey said. “They have a loud voice that can help propel our message far beyond our sphere of influence.”

More information can be found at www.pennag.com/TodaysAgriculture.aspx or by calling 717-651-5920. For real-time updates on the exhibit, follow PennAg on Twitter at @PennAgIndustry.

For Sarah Mock’s Farm Show blog post, visit www.howipinchapenny.com/2013/01/visit-the-pa-farm-show.

For Lindsay Sica’s post, visit www.lindsayweighsin.com/2013/01/09/pa-farm-show-with-pennag-industries-and-the-pa-bloggers.

For Steph Couch’s post, visit www.theeventcrashers.com/pa-bloggers-at-the-farm-show.



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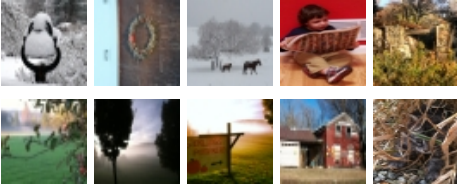
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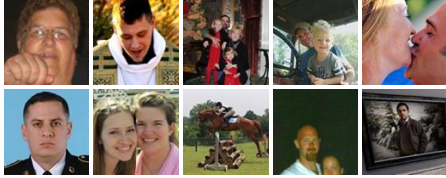
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