

A little birdy told me



SARAH JOHNSON

South Australian farmers haven't flocked to join social media, but an increasing number are logging in to access a global goldmine of ideas and practical expertise.

Many farmers will readily admit their aversion to social media, with Facebook receiving a particularly bad rap. The word 'hate' pops up; along with the opinion that it's a 'time-waster' and only useful if you want to know what people are eating for dinner.

These negative attitudes would seem to suggest that it is unlikely many farmers would be tempted to sample the social media space, but an emerging group in South Australia have not only tasted what social media has to offer, but accepted it as part of their daily diet, with Twitter emerging as a legitimate platform for farmers to share ideas and stay connected.

"I wasn't really a fan of Facebook but you can get a lot of useful information from Twitter," said Eudunda farmer Anthony Pfitzner (@AnthonyPfitzner), who first tried Twitter 12 months ago. "It's not about whether you're having pumpkin or tomato soup for tea."

Tom Robinson (@AnashkaFarms), a fifth generation farmer from Hoyleton, near Balaklava, said he wasn't 'overly keen' on the idea of social media until he saw the scale of its uptake during a visit to the United States. "A lot of farmers over there are on Twitter, along with a lot more seed and agronomy companies," he said.

Anthony and Tom agree that Twitter is a great way to keep in touch with other farmers.

Tom uses it to stay in contact with people he meets at conferences in Australia and overseas. He met two Canadian farmers at the No-till on the Plains conference in Kansas last year and has continued to connect with them via Twitter. "At the conference we talked about cover cropping and stubble residues and that conversation continued on Twitter for another six months," he said. "We're still in contact now, and rather than using email as a way to keep in touch we're using Twitter and it's a three-way conversation."

It is also an effective way to trigger your memory about the key points of a conference speech, according to Tom. "I



YOU CAN GET A LOT OF USEFUL INFORMATION FROM TWITTER, ACCORDING TO EUDUNDA FARMER ANTHONY PFITZNER.

find it easier to remember ideas from conferences because there can be 10 guys from that workshop on Twitter and the conversation continues after you've left. The great thing is that when 10 people listen to a speech, they get 10 different messages out of it," he said.

Former SANTFA president and Wirrabara farmer Russell Zwar (@ZwarFarms) finds social media helps him keep in touch with SANTFA members since he retired from the board in August last year. "It's really good for keeping in touch with the guys you know. You can see what each other is up to and swap ideas," he said.

"There are also other farmers from interstate and around the world. I try not to follow too many people but there's a wealth of information out there and it's really interesting. I guess the thing about Twitter is that you can choose who you want to follow, so you're not inundated with too much junk."

Farmers are finding that social media provides access to a mine of information and expertise gained by other farmers around the world.

"You can tweet a question and it's amazing

how quickly people respond," said Russell. "I know a guy in Victoria who tweeted a problem he was having with millipedes in canola during seeding. Some of us in the Mid North who have dealt with millipedes for years shared what we've done with them in the past. The information is out there; sometimes it's just a matter of finding it."

Anthony Pfitzner had a similar experience soon after he created a Twitter account. "Last year I was having trouble with the pick-up front on the header," he recalled. "I put a comment on Twitter and within a couple of hours we had the problem solved. One bloke that helped out was in Western Australia and there was another from New South Wales. I didn't know them from a bar of soap."

He also inadvertently discovered the power of social media to gain the attention of a machinery dealership. After failing to get a response from a dealer about a two-year-old air seeder cart that was faulty, Anthony turned to Twitter to ask other farmers if they had experienced the same problem. "The dealer rang me a couple of days later," he said.

However, he suggests that farmers not set out to 'name and shame' dealerships on social media intentionally. "You've got to go about it the right way and attempt to make contact directly."

Anthony uses Twitter mostly as a source of information and ideas he stores away for future reference. "At the moment there are a lot of crop emergence photos on Twitter, along with the issues people have encountered and their achievements. It's interesting to file away what works and what doesn't at the back of your mind to possibly try on your own farm."

Establishing the integrity of information on Twitter is no different from the method used with any other source, according to Anthony. "You've got to use your own judgement, just the same as if you were talking to a salesman or anyone. It's a matter of sorting the wheat from the chaff."

Tom Robinson believes any advice should be filtered for relevance to each farm's unique characteristics. "Every farmer has to bring the information back to his own patch and make a decision, just as he would normally do," said Tom. "It's just a guideline. I learn a lot of things from guys in the US and I've even had advice from an agronomist in Kansas."

Social isolation can be a by-product of a farming lifestyle and Tom has found social media can bridge the gap. During solitary hours spent on the seeder while sowing this year he kept himself occupied by following hashtag 'plant 14' (#plant14). Hashtags are used on most social media platforms to collate tweets, posts or

BE A TWIT

How to join Twitter:

1. Go to to <https://twitter.com/signup>.
2. Enter your full name, email address and a password.
3. Click *Sign up for Twitter*.
4. Select a username
5. Click *Create my account*.
6. Twitter will send a confirmation email to the address you entered on sign up. Click the link in that email to confirm your email address and account.

messages that share the same subject matter. In this case, #plant14 signified farmers seeding in 2014. "It was great because I was out on the tractor by myself and there were 15 or 20 other blokes doing exactly the same thing," said Tom. "We were talking about cropping techniques, chemicals and what's happening in the world markets. I guess it helps knowing that you're not alone out there at midnight on the tractor. You're having a conversation with other people about what's happening in agriculture."

Russell Zwar has used Twitter to share the trials and tribulations of his farm's recovery from the Bangor bushfire earlier this year. "I'm wary of posting too many photos of our burnt farm on Twitter, but

sometimes it is a bit of an outlet to get stuff off your chest," he said. "People can either respond to it or ignore it. When I was seeding and it was really dry and dusty, I took a photo and tweeted that I was really missing my residue. I guess it's just a way of talking about it."

On the other hand, social media can be an unwanted distraction, as Anthony Pfitzner discovered to his detriment. "When you're on Twitter in the paddock you probably don't concentrate properly on what you're doing," he said. "It happened to me a couple of weeks ago and now I've got some fencing to do." He had just taken over operation of the seeder for the evening and thought five minutes checking Twitter wouldn't hurt. "I looked up and I was sort of in the wrong spot!" Of course, social media was there to share the consequences of Anthony's lapse in concentration, with photos of the fence fiasco posted on Facebook.

There are some photos that farmers are happy to share, including the successful results of seeding and harvest. Tom says all farmers have bragging rights on Twitter. "We all do it," he said. "One of my mates put up a photo of his beans recently. He tagged me, along with Russell Zwar, Brad Moyle, Bruce Morgan and Ted Langley. We're all from different parts of South Australia but it was like we were standing in his paddock, looking at his bean crop. It really is an easy way for all of us who have been on the SANTFA board to keep in contact with each other and keep the conversation going about our farms."

One of the obstacles for Tom is variable internet coverage, which interferes with his Twitter use. "It would be handy if I got good internet coverage wherever I go," he said. He accesses Twitter via a smartphone which he carries in his pocket or via a tablet mounted on the wall in his tractor cab. "I can't remember the last time I went on Twitter on my home computer or my laptop. During seeding and spraying, when I've got time, I can have a quick scroll through and see what's happening in the world." He doesn't believe that his social media usage makes him less productive. "I don't find I need to monitor my use of it. In a way, it's taken over from a phone call. Three or four years ago I'd spend an hour on the phone with another farmer, so it's no different to that. And now, with Twitter, when I'm busy, my phone stays in my pocket."



TOM ROBINSON USES TWITTER TO STAY IN CONTACT AND SHARE IDEAS WITH PEOPLE HE MEETS AT CONFERENCES.

In addition to connecting with other growers, many farmers also use Twitter to keep up-to-date with grain marketing reports and agronomy news. Anthony Pfitzner says he follows two grain marketing consultants on Twitter and checks the overnight grain prices every morning.

Clare-based grain marketer Malcolm Bartholomaeus (@Malcolm_Bart) of Bartholomaeus Consulting has used Twitter for the past 18 months to share daily reports. Each day he sends two tweets that report on the wheat and canola markets, along with the key market drivers. "I do that regularly every morning in the hope that my clients get in the habit of looking at it," said Malcolm. "It's an effective way of keeping people up to speed with what's happened overnight."

As the former editor and senior analyst for Profarmer Australia, Malcolm shared updates via SMS and email. "SMS is quite expensive and a lot of people weren't looking at the two-page newsletter I sent out every morning," he said. "They had to download it, open it up and then spend time reading it." The front page of the newsletter featured a small box with a snapshot of the overnight market results, which Malcolm decided to tweet as an additional service. It provided a bite-sized portion of information that time-poor farmers could digest quickly.

The succinct nature of Twitter could be the reason for its popularity amongst verbally-thrifty farmers. Tweets are constrained by a limit of 140 characters,



GRAIN MARKETER MALCOLM BARTHOLOMAEUS FINDS TWITTER IS AN EFFECTIVE WAY OF KEEPING CLIENTS 'UP TO SPEED'.

which equates to about 30 words.

"It stops the rambling and allows for that quick exchange of conversation," said Tom Robinson.

Concise messages mean there is less nonsense on Twitter, according to Anthony Pfitzner. "Because you've only got 140 characters you can't give too much detail, which means there is less rubbish as well. Plus the people that do tweet rubbish don't get much airtime.

On the other hand, the blokes that have a genuine issue and want to sort it out usually get lots of responses. The other night another farmer tweeted that he's

looking at a new spreader and he received heaps of comments, giving him feedback about whether it was good, bad or otherwise. From my experience, there are a group of about 20 or 30 farmers on Twitter who are pretty keen to help each other." 

FOLLOW THE LEADER

Who to start following:

- @SANOtill
- @VicNotill
- @WANTFA_farming
- @SACountryHour
- @JohnDeere
- @SA_PIRSA
- @abcnews
- @ABCRural
- @PlantNutrition
- @ABARES
- @theGRDC
- @AgChatOZ
- @SACountryHour
- @stockjournal
- @Malcolm_Bart
- #plant14
- #spray14
- #harvest14
- #wheat

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