

# Social media use in farm practice

Jon E. Higgins, VMD

Acorn Farmvets LLC  
Belle Mead, NJ 08502

Social media (SM) usage and farm vet practice has been a good fit here at Acorn Farmvets, and this presentation will review the important points to this date as well as positives and pitfalls in SM usage.

**Key words:** social media, Instagram, Tiktok, Facebook

## How it started

This started back with an early interest in tech in practice. In fact, a 1999 AABP practice tip was given on the Palm Pilot down in Nashville which allowed picture-taking, documentation, communication and notation that just made it easier to work on farms. The email that came in on it was the early pre-social media built on existing networks such as the wonderful asset that AABP-L, the listserve, which was invaluable in practice in learning and building colleague community.

From there, the first start to it after smartphones (true smartphones came around 2010) for me in using Twitter. It was an easy way to build essentially a global network particularly with colleagues in both the vet and the farm community. It also made it easy to transition conversation off social media to events and conferences whether they are local or national or international veterinary meetings. It's easy to conduct direct messaging with colleagues and farmers to work with that – case in point was meeting with Canadian cow vet colleagues at a Manhattan presentation on bovine reproduction, in the group was Cody Creelman, someone who has done so much on SM to speak to what large animal veterinary medicine really is.

For me, Instagram has been the app that has had the most impact to me and it is kind of my daily story. I always carried a phone, a camera right alongside me in the car, even with film in it. But it was a way to capture the visual and verbal record of the day. I'm not a writer like Herriot and I always liked his quote: "I love writing about my job because I loved it. It was a particularly interesting one when I was a young man as it was like holidays with pay." All of us here know that is how farm practice can be on so many days. And for me, Instagram does truly lend itself to the daily visual record via photography.

## Instagram and other platforms – how do they fit?

So, what is the reach and audience? Instagram has really a lot of, for me, focus on veterinarians and veterinary students. I'm fortunate enough to have over 20,000 followers now which is just great (and bewildering). I learn equally in writing posts and seeing those of others – but it just lends itself to other opportunities. A lot of direct conversation with potential extern students, involvement with vet groups such as the Sheep Veterinary Society, AETA and other veterinarians around the world occurs, and it's been tremendous for that as well as just the audience in general and talking about what we do every day as farm veterinarians.

And the experience has been like in the graphic (Figure 1) that shows intersecting concentric circles. In the center is the veterinary community of colleagues, students, organizations like AABP, AASRP and clients along with that, and then you can kind of work outward to the farm animal enthusiasts. There are a lot of people who are very interested in what we do since agriculture is such a small part of the population or people's interest with veterinarians, and then you reach the general population.

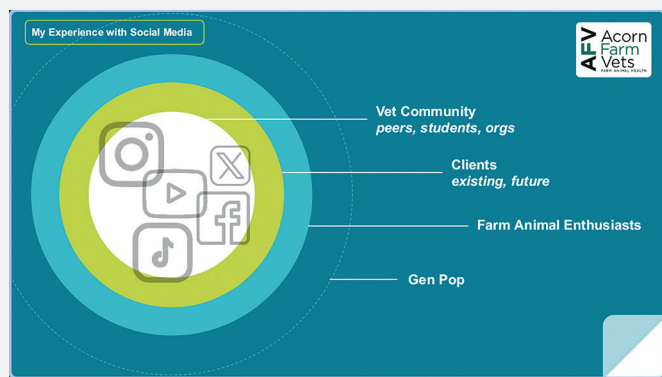
For building an official online presence, of course traditional websites are important. But really it seems that how Facebook has worked for me as a business page is that I can do local outreach directed at clients, whether it's meetings we're going to have or seasonal reminders that it is time to start treating for lice or think about pregnancy toxemia and sheep or just kind of being part of the community.

And we all know how close the ties are in the farm and farm veterinary community; being a farm veterinarian is really being that individual within that community. Use the Facebook page to build community, make clients aware of timely issues, and celebrate them for their accomplishments and other achievements.

One of the offshoots from Instagram that I've used, for example, is TikTok. The thing that has fit in there for me and moving forward is the sharp increase in mini cows! I've decided to embrace them since there are so many people with them around and they are generally new to cattle and need help. The idea with posting on Tiktok is if people have those animals and are aware – Acorn Farm Vets is the veterinary practice that can help me!

On a sidenote with Instagram, a side project page @thesheepdoc is where I'm really looking to focus posts, stories and engage with subject matter to the followers who are interested in sheep. And finally, getting the opportunity to manage the AASRP Instagram page, and just letting people know you know what this organization has to offer which is always a positive

**Figure 1:** My experience with social media and how different sectors interact.



## What I've learned

Keeping audiences engaged is a key thing. How do you put up content in a way where it is often alternating, where you keep the medically relevant info coming and interspersed with more general “entertaining” or “day-in-the-life” items which can appeal to all groups. Like the post about a fetal mummification and story that day showing a local farmer with his four dogs.

Both have a role and appeal, for different reasons.

This is how it is for each platform. This is one of the important diagrams (Figure 2) to emphasize that each platform has a specific job to do, even though there is overlap in a way with all apps. Building an audience, starting out with Twitter/X and building up that whole network of people that moved over, and I also moved over to them also on Instagram where you have a different audience there and really build with education and visuals. Facebook for me has been really good to engage local communities and then using Reels and TikTok to create dynamic video content. Another side thought is to think about where the people are; it's not really “social media” but worth a quick mention to see how many farmers (local and international) are on WhatsApp – and utilize that both for day-to-day local and for outreach to other groups. Anything that can make it easier to communicate is a plus.

What I've learned – it takes hard work, commitment and ongoing effort. You can't say “well, okay, I'll come back to this in three months”. Also, I don't like to cross post the same thing over to different platforms. I like unique content for each. It needs to be timely and interesting and edited. Looking at the comments that you get on the daily, keeping people engaged with daily questions or stories or questions and quizzes, Instagram lives help out.

## What people like and dislike

It's an important thing to navigate client confidentiality. Think about what you're posting, get permission and some things you are better leaving off. Always ask and get client permission on medical cases. I've only had one instance where someone wanted me to take something down. It was a surprise; I didn't think was a big deal – a cow post-claw-amputation. But it's THEIR farm and animal. And then be aware that content can be viewed by anyone anywhere and anytime. It is so easy to take things out of context. Think of tie stall barn chains (“oh are they there 24/7?”), or hot-iron dehorning. There's *no* way you can make a really great imagery of smoke coming out of an animal's head no matter everything you've done that's right – sedation, local, NSAID. And always, always remember do NOT give out medical advice, because you're outside of an active VCPR.

And the benefits to the practice have been that it just opened up opportunities. Building relationships like Sheep Veterinary Society in the UK and being on their board, meeting people and going to places. Figure 3 is a picture from Uruguay that essentially came from being involved with AETA, but also just being involved online on Instagram with people in South America who also helped make it happen.

It helps to build new services and procedures. I'm learning from other vets all around, too. Doubtless, we all have learned from AABP and AASRP, but this has been a really good teacher, too, as well as having some top hosted students. And, two associates for the practice came initially from Instagram contact.

Figure 2: Each platform has a specific job to do.

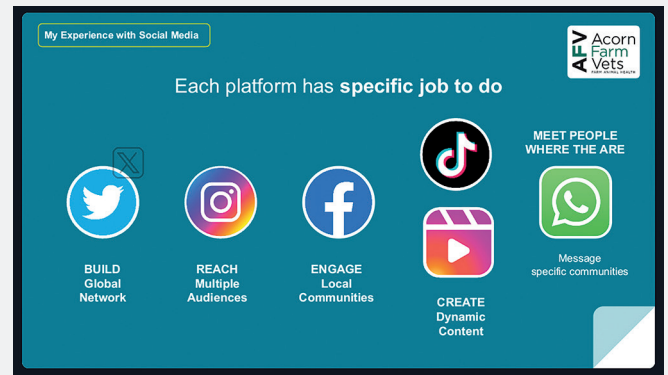
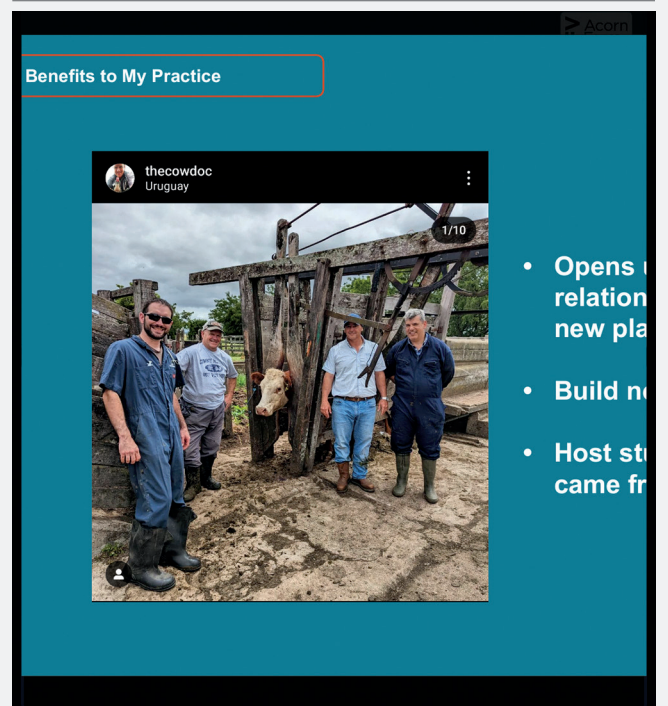


Figure 3: Being online has opened up opportunities for international collaboration.



But the benefits also, just to build awareness of what the practice offers, what we do and don't do proactively in a way to prevent disease or enhance performance with ram testing or advising on seasonal conditions that help prevent problems, such as lately with HPAI updates and protocols.

## Things can be monetized

That's not my priority but it has been an opportunity. I've gotten some nice coveralls and some other products, too, that I've helped promote. But I believed in them and it was just a good win-win for both sides.

That's how social media has helped me in practice. Feel free to message me @thecowdoc on Instagram or TikTok and or acornfarmvets on Facebook.

