

Retailers Meet Farmer-Customers Where They Are

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It takes time and intention, but Keith Byerly and the Central Valley Ag team see payoff in multimedia outreach. PHOTOS: MEGAN O'HARE

After publishing hundreds of articles and videos, Mike Zwingman can distill his message into just one sentence.

"My job is to bring clarity to the grower," says the agronomy research and development manager for Central Valley Ag (CVA). His weekly blog "ReachOut" and its accompanying video are distributed to 3,500 farmers. Its reach grows with posts on Twitter and Facebook.

CVA's strategy is an example of how retailers are using multimedia communication tools to reach their farmer-customers. CVA, which recently merged with Farmway, is a cooperative with 90 locations in Nebraska, Iowa and Kansas.

Social media, blogs and videos are showing to be powerful ways to engage and share the expertise of staff. Rather than view this outreach as a sales tool, retailers are using their content and social media to build deeper awareness and relationships.

“My sales manager doesn’t tell me what to talk about,” Zwingman says. “Sure, we’ll promote our field days, but my goal is I want to give the best agronomic information, regardless of corn price. My job is to lay it out as best as I can, and the decision is always the farmer’s.”

Lean On Your Experts. Zwingman has 21 years of experience with VRT fertility and population.

“At \$3.50 corn, all decisions are mission-critical” he says. He and his colleague, Keith Byerly, each produce weekly educational and instructional content for their farmer-customers. Byerly is CVA’s precision ag manager. While Zwingman talks about plant growth and agronomics, Byerly talks about water management and technology in the “Precision Focus” blog and videos.

“It works well for us to have two different people featured in the videos,” explains Byerly. “Not only is it good for farmers to see more than one person, but we can stay within our specialties. And when people see one of our faces—they know what we are going to talk about.”

For his precision ag-focused videos, Byerly does mention product-specific references, but even with those topics, the goal isn’t to increase sales.

“If we focused on selling widgets, we’d lose most of our audience,” Byerly says. “Sure, there are techies that will buy technology to be on the leading edge. But if that’s where we focused the efforts, we’d leave 90% of the market behind.”

The CVA team aims to identify pain points that customers are experiencing and highlight solutions in the videos. The trick has been to use the team’s in-the-field knowledge and prepare the content in enough time for farmers to still act to correct or resolve an issue.

At Gar Tootelian (GAR), the 2017 Retailer of the Year, the team has found success in tapping the field-level knowledge of its 40 Pest Control Advisors (PCAs) who provide fertilizer and crop-care products, plus water and regulatory advice, to more than 1,400 area farmers.

“As our PCAs come in and out of the office, we ask what they are seeing today,” says Ralph Rendon, director of marketing and finance for GAR. “We also have sales meetings twice a month, and we meet with them during those meetings. That’s when we get a lot of timely, informative material for our Facebook posts, tweets and other outreach.”

TIPS FROM RETAILERS



There doesn't seem to be a one-size-fits-all approach to how retailers could or should be using social media. Here are some tips from retail professionals on how they approach and conduct themselves on social networks.

- "On Twitter, my approach is 1/3 is personal, 1/3 is industry content, 1/3 is random," says Mike Zwingman, Central Valley Ag.
- "When I have a new video posted, I reach out directly to certain farmers to make sure they have the link and/or tweet. It just amplifies who else could see it," Zwingman says.
- "Seasonality always dictates some things. I often try to think three to four weeks ahead of where customers will be," says Keith Byerly with Central Valley Ag.
- "You do hit the time of year when no one wants to spend money, nothing is in the fields, and it's hard to come up with non-superficial topics. And that's the time of year we get a little more philosophical," says Byerly.
- "We try to have a lot of different topics posted across our social accounts. Typically, we are trying to have one post about each of our aspects each day—philanthropy, advocacy and ag-focused subjects," says Ralph Rendon with Gar Tootelian.
- "Social media is very visual. So we are sure to have a visual with all of our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram posts. And it may be the same visual on each platform," Rendon says.

Pick Your Path. Retailers are finding their own ways to push out their messages and identify platforms and mediums on which to focus their efforts. For CVA, once the blogs were launched, Zwingman and Byerly say having an accompanying video was a natural extension, but it does add a new facet to their workloads.

Byerly estimates it takes him about an hour to articulate his thoughts into the blog. And then when they meet up to film, it's a total of 15 to 30 minutes to film each segment.

They've worked through some growing pains, and now in a half of a day, they film at least two videos for each blog with the assistance of a freelance video and production team.

This all started for Byerly when he was asked to do a six-part series on water management. The series included blogs with embedded videos. By the time they produced the third installment, he knew it was just the beginning, and shortly after that, he launched "Precision Focus." He says, farmers who seek out information on precision technology will look online and want an interactive format such as videos.

Experiment With Formats. "It doesn't have to be video—other retailers focus their energy on Facebook and Twitter and blogging, and they've had great success because they've figured out how to engage their customer group," Byerly says. "I think the universal trend is doing a better job reaching farmers online."

While the videos the CVA team produces have evolved to follow a formula—about three minutes in length, timely topics, professionally shot and produced—one thing remains a bit rough.

"All of our videos are shot in one take. It may take more than one try to get the right take, but they aren't edited. We intentionally don't want to sound too polished. If we did, it wouldn't resonate with the farmer," Zwingman says.

"Initially, I read something about using the different platforms for different things—but a lot of the time we do post the same content to all platforms. It keeps our message consistent," says Rendon at GAR.

GAR's three-person marketing team regularly discusses what content to post on social accounts in the near future. GAR maintains active accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Vimeo and YouTube, and as Rendon explains, the team has had the most traction on Facebook.

"We have moved past, 'Oh, what are we going to post today?' to being better at planning out some content and letting other timely and time-sensitive posts flow in," he says. "You can't always tell your customers what they need, but it's really about informing them what's going on and what we are hearing."

The most popular topics for GAR's messages have been regulation updates and crop nutrition content, which are sourced from GAR's in-house experts.

Success is measured by monitoring overall impressions and click rates. Rendon says the team is interested in its social content generating traffic to the website, so click-throughs to the site are closely monitored. And when a post performs well, the team evaluates if it needs to increase the frequency of covering those topics or choosing those types of posts.

For Byerly at CVA, his most-watched video topped 3,500 views and focused on water management. Although his typical viewership is lower, he knows he's targeting and reaching

the right viewers. He estimates half of his audience are key farmer-customers, and half are others in the industry.

Share Success Stories. Using multimedia can help tell powerful stories. A lot of Zwingman's videos are shot in fields that demonstrate how the team at CVA has helped farmers be more efficient and increase yields. One specific example includes when a grower lost acres, Zwingman helped him remain profitable despite fewer acres. With strip-till, they increased efficiency in inputs by 25% and today are producing 230-bu. corn on 165 lb. of nitrogen and less irrigation water.

"For me, I want to help farmers make the best decisions in adopting any new practice or product. For us to be confident in our products, it has to be a two-to-one ROI," Zwingman says about his efforts.

Key Differentiator. At GAR, the team focuses on customer education to demonstrate its value as a service provider. It's one way the retailer aims to be different from its competitors.

"We have a great group of people who are working with growers to make us credible. From a sales standpoint, it goes hand in hand. When you educate a farmer on an issue—you become valuable. You aren't selling just a product—you're selling advice, which altogether is the bigger value," says Rendon.

Byerly at CVA says the biggest value in producing these multimedia stories is it gets conversation started with a farmer. "For a farmer to reach out after reading or watching something, that gets them to engage with us in a way that they couldn't have previously," he says.

He cites his water management articles and videos as driving more growers to look at moisture probes and variable-rate irrigation.

As retailers reflect on how their efforts have helped their businesses, those who have tried outreach with multimedia and social media believe in its potential.

"Originally, the intent was to reach out. Now, we're figuring out is there a way to take this to the next level?" Zwingman says.

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