

Social Media Soldier

A blog, Facebook and Twitter are helping this Kansas cattle rancher reach everyday consumers.

by **Kindra Gordon**

Like many of us, Debbie Lyons-Blythe wears many different “hats” throughout the day. With her husband working in town, she is responsible for the daily duties on their ranch in the Flint Hills of Kansas. Blythe Angus includes 250 cow-calf pairs and a heifer development program. Registered yearling bulls are sold private treaty at the ranch. She is also “mom” to their five children, who range in age from 20 to 16-year-old twins.

Most recently, she has added the task of “ag advocate” to her already busy schedule with the creation of her own blog at <http://kansascattleranch.blogspot.com/>. She also utilizes Facebook and Twitter to share beef-related information.

Lyons-Blythe, who has been a lifetime member of the American Angus Association since 1977 and is a past president of the Kansas Angus Association, explains that she joined the growing army of ag advocates online because she recognizes the importance of connecting with and educating consumers — especially moms — about beef.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF DEBBIE LYONS-BLYTHE

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She paraphrases a fellow ag advocate and blogger Troy Hadrick who has said, “My time online is as important to the future of my ranch as my time with the cows.” Lyons-Blythe agrees and adds, “If we don’t spend time online talking to people who don’t live next door, there may not be a farm for my kids to return to.”

Lyons-Blythe says, “Social media is an

important tool for us to use for advocacy and a good way to reach the people who live in metropolitan areas and are buying the bulk of the groceries. That is who we need to talk to.”

Turning to social media

Lyons-Blythe was prompted to start her blog after an urban relative and her

Angus roots

As the third generation in her family to be a member of the American Angus Association, Debbie Lyons-Blythe and her family have also been advocates for the Angus breed.

She explains that many of the steers they finish each year qualify for the *Certified Angus Beef*® (CAB®) brand, and says, “Through advocacy, I try to put a face on the people who raise CAB.”

She adds, “We are all working in a similar way to produce the best beef, and we need to show consumers that we care about our cattle, and are trustworthy and honest. Social media is a great way to share that story.”

Lyons-Blythe also conveys that message face-to-face through different opportunities. She says, “I connect with consumers at local grocery stores, in farmers’ markets, and even in school through an Adopt a Rancher program. My husband and I also traveled to New York City last spring to promote CAB in the James Beard popup restaurant.”

Whether it’s face-to-face or via social media, Lyons-Blythe says the message is the same: “I want people to feel confident that CAB is a high-quality product raised by people who care about the animals and the safety and nutrition of the product produced.”



While she focuses most of her advocacy efforts toward consumer audiences, she has also shared her experiences with ag audiences and ag publications to encourage others to get involved in “agvocating.” Already, her own children are following in her footsteps. All five are Angus Association members; and her oldest daughter, Meghan, was elected to the NJAA board of directors. The kids also do guest posts about farm and ranch life on Lyons-Blythe’s blog.

family visited the ranch in Kansas a couple summers ago. Lyons-Blythe explains that the relative is raising her four children in Denver, and though she is just one generation removed from the ranch, she was concerned about hormones in milk and antibiotics in beef.

After hearing those concerns, Lyons-Blythe realized there are people even more generations removed from farms and ranches who agriculture needs to reach out to, as well.

Thus, she started her blog, “Life on a Kansas Cattle Ranch,” and shares stories and photos of her everyday life on the ranch.

“I write my blog as if I’m speaking to that relative of ours in Denver,” she says. “I want to educate moms like her about my life as a beef producer.”

One of the most popular posts on the Kansas-based blog included a video clip of a calf being born. Lyons-Blythe has also shared pictures of her family caring for the cows during a Christmas blizzard, favorite family recipes and different aspects of their ranch from prescribed burning on their pastures to participation in the National Junior Angus Show (NJAS).

Lyons-Blythe has focused on consumers as her primary audience.

“I think it’s important to define your audience and stay true to them,” she explains. “My goal is to speak specifically to consumers — the people buying groceries. I especially relate to moms because I am a mom.”

Of her blog content, she adds, “When they hear something about beef, I want them to think about what they have learned from my blog and be able to differentiate what they have learned about the beef industry from the myths and misconceptions that may be circulating.”

Guidelines for social media

In her foray into the online realm, Lyons-Blythe has gleaned several useful tips she shares with others interested in blogging. Foremost, she says, you can post too frequently. She notes that everyone is busy, so posting once or twice a week is adequate for her audience.

Secondly, she notes that photos and video can be a powerful tool to connect with people, allowing them to get a view of real ranch life.

Third, Lyons-Blythe

Hone your advocacy skills

If you are ready to make the leap to help advocate for the industry, Debbie Lyons-Blythe suggests working with the check-off funded Masters of Beef Advocacy program. She notes that many of the facts and figures that she shares with her audience come from information through the resources provided by this program. Find details at www.beef.org/mastersofbeefadvocacy.aspx.

Additionally, to help producers speak up for their industry, the Center for Food Integrity (CFI) has established the ENGAGE Farmer Resource Center (www.cfiengage.com), which offers training tools to help farmers, ranchers and leaders in U.S. agriculture promote and amplify their voice in the industry. The site provides examples of value-based messages, tips on writing letters to the editor or opinion-editorial articles, and tips to consider when commenting online. For online ag advocates, CFI offers a social media help desk available at 877-402-4CFI.

CFI also maintains several educational websites designed to connect consumers with real producers — such as www.farmersfeedus.org — as well as www.bestfoodfacts.org, which allows an interactive format where experts share their food research findings and consumers can comment and ask questions.



cautions that bloggers must be open to criticism. She says, “If you are willing to put yourself out there, you are going to get negative comments. You have the option of deleting them, but I try to respond to them.”

She adds, “A negative comment can help

you learn what others’ concerns are and better equip you to share your side of the story.”

In addition to her blog, Lyons-Blythe also uses Facebook to post photos and links back to her blog. She notes that Facebook can be a means to utilize other people’s “friends” lists to reach a broader audience.

Lyons-Blythe has also worked to develop a Twitter following of primarily moms as another avenue to share industry facts and facets.

In all of her efforts, Lyons-Blythe emphasizes that even though social media is not face-to-face, it is still about building a connection and relationship with consumers. “You can’t just spout facts; you can’t just talk. You have to listen and connect, and you’ve got to be real.”

And, even though she is busy with ranch life and parenting, Lyons-Blythe knows advocating for her industry is an important job that needs to be tended to, as well.



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