

facebook

You Tube

twitter

Online Army

College students from across the country are collaborating online to help build an army of ag advocates.

by Kindra Gordon

In today's world of online technology, if someone wants to collect information or input on a topic like agriculture, there's a good chance they'll turn to popular social network sites like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blogs or YouTube. These are among the fastest-growing social media networks whether you're a teenager, college student or a middle-aged mom.

"Social media is how most people are getting their information. ... If you're not there [online] today, you're not on the map," says Barbara Jackson, a lifelong supporter of the beef industry from Tucson, Ariz. Raised on a commercial feedyard in Arizona, Jackson and her husband have built their career in the animal health business and operate a retail feed store and livestock product mail-order catalog.

Jackson has been a devoted member of the American National CattleWomen (ANCW) and is passionate about promoting and supporting the beef industry. Thus, two and a half years ago, when animal activists' attacks and legislative actions against the livestock industry were escalating, Jackson and her CattleWomen colleagues felt more needed to be done to share true stories about agriculture in online social networks.

They realized, she explains, that often it was animal rights and environmental activists telling a misleading story about how farm animals are raised and food is produced — with groups like People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) promoting veganism and dedicated to putting a stop to all animal agriculture through legislative actions.

"With most people three generations removed from the farm,

they only relate to their pets as animals. So we as a livestock industry need to be completely transparent," Jackson says. "We've got to tell our stories and show how we care for livestock. We need to invite the public to our ranches or feedlots and show them how we take care of our livelihood."

Aggies online

Because it's challenging to physically get most folks to the farm, the CattleWomen teamed up with the Animal Agriculture Alliance (AAA) to get farm and ranch stories, photos and videos to the public through today's modern media — online social networks.

They developed College Aggies Online (CAO), which connects college students from across the country who are interested in

promoting agriculture. Participants receive training and instructions from industry professionals and enjoy access to a private forum to post information about current and emerging issues facing farmers and ranchers. The students are then encouraged to utilize tools like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to help inform and educate others about the importance of agriculture and the stewardship of farmers and ranchers as they care for their land and livestock.

Why did the CattleWomen and AAA choose to tap college kids?

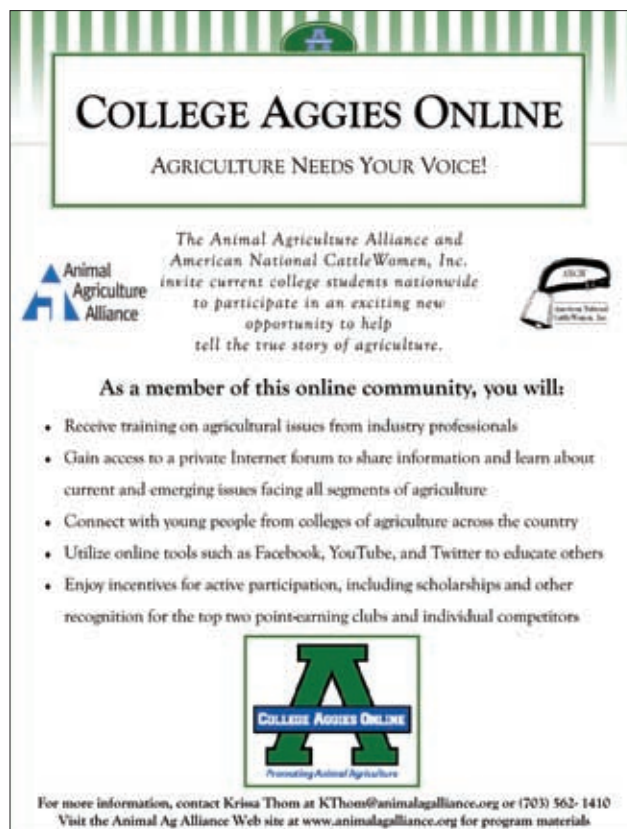
"We recognized this is where most of the recruiting by PETA and HSUS is targeted — at young people," Jackson says. "We wanted to bring like-minded students with a passion for agriculture together and empower them with the information and

confidence to accurately respond to activists' attacks on agriculture."

Since being launched in October 2009, the response to College Aggies Online has been overwhelmingly positive. Agriculture-focused clubs from all universities with an agricultural academic program across the U.S. were invited to sign up for the program. A competition was conducted from Oct. 15, 2009, through April 1, 2010, with student groups earning points by posting blogs, photos and videos to the forum and by participating in online outreach activities.

"We had over 350 college students from nearly 50 universities involved in the competition," Jackson reports. "I think that's tremendous for the first year."

After final point counts were tallied, the winning collegiate ag club was the Western Kentucky University Block and Bridle Club. The group received a \$750 scholarship and a trip for one



COLLEGE AGGIES ONLINE
AGRICULTURE NEEDS YOUR VOICE!

The Animal Agriculture Alliance and American National CattleWomen, Inc. invite current college students nationwide to participate in an exciting new opportunity to help tell the true story of agriculture.

As a member of this online community, you will:

- Receive training on agricultural issues from industry professionals
- Gain access to a private Internet forum to share information and learn about current and emerging issues facing all segments of agriculture
- Connect with young people from colleges of agriculture across the country
- Utilize online tools such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter to educate others
- Enjoy incentives for active participation, including scholarships and other recognition for the top two point-earning clubs and individual competitors

COLLEGE AGGIES ONLINE
Promoting Animal Agriculture

For more information, contact Krisia Thom at KThom@animalagalliance.org or (703) 562-1410
Visit the Animal Ag Alliance Web site at www.animalagalliance.org for program materials

representative to Washington, D.C., for the AAA's annual Stakeholders Summit in April. Casper College Ag Club in Wyoming placed second in the contest and received \$300.

Celeste Laurent of the Western Kentucky University Block and Bridle Club earned the individual high score in the competition, earning a \$250 scholarship. (See sidebar for more about Laurent.) Danielle Hammer of the University of Wisconsin-River Falls came in second for her efforts, earning \$100.

All total, CAO participants shared more than 3,000 photos on the network and authored 100 blog posts. Members also advocated for agriculture in their communities by writing letters to the editor of local news outlets and by participating in other outreach activities.

Fighting for the future

Because of the success of the College Aggies Online program in its inaugural year, ANCW and AAA intend to continue the

venture for the future, with a second competition to be launched next fall.

"We are looking forward to providing the tools that young agriculturists need to communicate effectively with the public," says AAA Executive Vice President Kay Johnson Smith of the program. "Social networking websites offer an effective platform for reaching large audiences of people who do not have farm backgrounds."

She adds, "College students who participate in the program will do more than just build their résumé, they will help ensure the future of America's agriculture industry by sharing accurate information about modern farming and ranching."

Jackson is excited about the future of the online ag advocates effort as well. Her goals are to get more ANCW members involved in each state and to eventually create a similar online program for 4-H and FFA members.

To women in the beef industry she says, "Come join us and help fight the fight." To

college students, Jackson says, "Reach out to your organization and get on board. Be proactive."

She concludes: "One percent of us feed the population. We've got to get active and tell our stories about agriculture. In five years we'd better see a difference in how society views us — or we (ag producers) will be so regulated that the cost of doing business will put us out of business."

For more information about the College Aggies Online program visit www.animalagalliance.org/current/home.cfm?Section=Main&Category=College_Aggies.



Western Kentucky University student wins College Aggies Online contest

As a journalism and agriculture major at Western Kentucky University (WKU), Celeste Laurent feels right at home advocating for agriculture via the Internet. She established her own blog (www.celestelaurent.com) as a class project in February 2009. So it's no real surprise that this college student recently earned the top prize of \$250 in the inaugural College Aggies Online competition hosted by the American Agriculture Alliance and the American National CattleWomen (ANCW).

But for Laurent, the real thrill came in helping members of WKU's Block and Bridle Club get involved in the competition as well.

Laurent tells that she first learned of the College Aggies program via Twitter and immediately thought it would be a great opportunity for WKU Block and Bridle. She presented the idea to the club at their meeting last August, and the club voted unanimously to participate.

"Personally, I had been blogging and twittering for agriculture for quite some time when I got involved with College Aggies," Laurent says. "But, for many of our members, this was their first taste of advocating for agriculture online. I think they were comfortable exploring the idea of online advocacy because they knew the College Aggies audience would be receptive and supportive of their efforts. I was very impressed with how many freshmen got involved. Within weeks of establishing their accounts they had tons of photos posted!"

Laurent ranks the photo sharing via College Aggies as one of the most beneficial aspects of the network.

"It gave our members a chance to see photos from other farms across the country," she explains.

On a personal level, Laurent says the competition motivated her to take her camera along to the barn on her own family farm to snap a few pictures of what her family does every day.

"I'm so glad I did," she says. "I've used these photos for class projects and to better explain what actually goes on around a cattle or hog farm, both online and in person."

Laurent, who is a budding ag journalist, blogger and speaker, credits the contest with helping WKU Block and Bridle students learn more about each other as well.

"Even though we talked about our different farm backgrounds, through College Aggies we got to 'experience' the aspects of animal ag that our friends were truly passionate about. Whether through photos, blog posts, or discussion boards, our members supported each other as we all took steps towards increasing our online agriculture advocacy."

Follow Celeste Laurent online at www.celestelaurent.com and on Twitter at www.twitter.com/celestelaurent.