

AgChat: Third Time is the Charm - What I Learned

People who know me know that I like my feet on the ground. I don't particularly like flying but nothing was going to stop me from going to the AgChat conference held in Austin, TX. People always say the third time is the charm and I would agree wholeheartedly. AgChat allowed me to learn something new, talk with old and new "agnerds," have my eyes opened just a little bit wider and allowed the "inspiration fire" to burn a little hotter.

In a nutshell, the AgChat conference is a place where "agnerds" talk, learn and network with other "agnerds" about how to reach out and engage with others using social media. I met people from all walks of agricultural life from the U.S., Canada and Australia (loved the accents!)

This was my first time to Austin and I must admit I knew very little about the city. My limited knowledge consisted of watching Austin City Limits a few times on TV. Pretty sad, I know. In fact, I had to look at the American Airlines magazine (on my flight from Dallas to Austin) to locate where Austin was located in Texas. Just slightly embarrassing, I know..

Prior to my trip some disturbing details about Austin were appearing in my newsfeed. And it just plain scared the bejeebers out of me. I found out that Austin is the home to over a million bats! And I am talking about the "furry little creatures" kind of bats and not what you hit a baseball with. On top of that, these bats congregate under the Congress bridge (which spans Lady Bird Lake), which happened to be right outside our conference hotel! And congregate (or rather fly) they did! People actually line the bridge and sit in boats to watch these creepy little creatures. I will never understand the desire to be that close to them.

Besides the bats, here is what I learned from AgChat:

1) **It's good to connect with people.** I talked agriculture with my taxi cab driver, a meat scientist, the social media director of Tyson, fellow CommonGround members, Farm Bureau and AgStar employees, people who work for Murphy Brown . . . and the list goes on.

2) **There are some really great advocates.** Congrats to Carrie Mess ([Dairy Carrie](#)) who was named the Farmer of the Year - Social Media. And well deserving, I might add.

3) **"Red Dirt" music is kind of cool, I guess.** A confession here - I am not a real fan of country music, but I **DO** appreciate all types of music. Having said that, I took a tour at [KOKE radio](#) station in Austin. They are known to play a type of country music called Red Dirt music, which is like the old time country music. We also met and talked with Rita Ballou, who shared her story about how she uses social media in the music industry. I must admit I am still trying to figure out this "Red

Dirt" music. . .

4) **AgSwaps are fun!** Attendees were encouraged to bring items that represented the area they live. Items like cheese, seasoning, recipes, candy, lip balms, key chains, etc. all made their way back to Minnesota. My agswap item was Martin County Magic Seasoning--a savory pork seasoning (it's famous, you know). In fact, I brought 30 containers! In my carryon luggage. Do you see any problem with this? As I grudgingly suspected, airport security searched my luggage. Thoroughly. Guess 30 containers of this "Magic" seasoning looked a little suspicious (or maybe they thought I would give them some!) I wore my "Pigs - The inventors of bacon" shirt and tried to explain what AgChat was and why I was bringing the seasoning. But it did little good. Out came the test kit--swabbing both the containers and my luggage. They didn't appreciate my humor either. Good grief. . .

5) **Speakers challenged us and that's a good thing.** One of the sessions consisted of a panel of local food influencers, which included a chef/restaurant owner and a food journalist. The AgChat conference gave us a few opportunities to learn different perspectives from individuals involved in the food industry. Especially areas we aren't familiar or comfortable with. Both of these individuals' focused primarily with small, local and organic farmers. Generally speaking, it was my impression that they are not impressed with conventional farmers. Stereotypes are formed by our experiences (and stereotypes are on both sides of the plate) so when the food journalist made a blanket statement that farmers are poor, my immediate reaction was to flail in my seat (ok, maybe a bit of an exaggeration), take a big sigh, mumble a few things under my breath and honestly sat there not knowing how to respond. But after thinking about it a short while, I realized that I need to learn how to engage with people that may not share my same views. And that involves respect and an understanding only achieved by engagement.

6) An **Olympian also speaks up for ag.** Another speaker, Katie Uhlaender, a past Olympian also spoke to us. While I generally appreciate her youth, frankness and exuberance, it became apparent that she needs to learn a little more about the topic she is talking about. And I do realize she had a tough audience because of our level of agricultural engagement. I really believe she will rise to the occasion and will be a great spokesperson for ag.

7) **Ag opposites can get along.** Another interesting session was between an employee/spokesperson from Monsanto (Janice Person) and Ellen Malloy, a marketing and PR restaurant influencer. Again, just as the food journalist, the foodie view of farming is different. I recognize I live my life in a bubble in rural Minnesota and it's good to be "pushed out" on occasion. She had some lessons for us. One of those lessons is we need to listen and show respect by asking questions for clarification. No preaching. No education (can be interpreted negatively when done immediately). True learning can come only after a level of trust and respect is developed. It became apparent that a word as simple as "food quality" has different meanings. Read below to see what I mean. This was taken verbatim on a thread that was continued after Janice and Ellen's session. She is talking about conventional farmers.

I assume you are growing for quantity and not quality. While I write that, I kinda figure everyone will be thinking: I grow my plants for quality! But I think we see quality, maybe, in different ways. I see quality as stuff chosen for it's flavor and/or nutrition and assume you are more concerned with shelf life/storage capabilities. Probably most exemplified by tomatoes. Buy one at the grocery store and it tastes like nothing. Buy one from Tomato Mountain and it is amazing. But even beyond... I *think* that the wheat from flour you grow has been bred to produce a flour that is making everyone so gluten-sensitive and I *think* that the animals are all in tiny airless pens where they get shot up with scary stuff.

The images in my head are scary to me... they come from all the "propoganda" that I see everywhere all around me and I am biased against industrial ag and that bias is confirmed every time there's a crazy listeria in cantaloupe outbreak or a "reporter" is able to get into a animal operation.

So, I guess, to me, mass-production of food is bad and every time there is a tiny report, it reinforces and grows my belief... and this keeps happening over and over until I am CONVINCED anyone associated with industrial food is producing bad stuff.

It's easy to be angry about this. Yes, there are some definite inaccuracies but we need to understand what her perceptions are and what is important to her. We CAN learn how to engage with people that don't share our same views. We CAN find common ground. After finding common ground, a respectful conversation moves forward where we can speak truth. Are we going to convert people like Ellen? Probably not. But we don't need to. We can learn from each other. We need **ALL** types of farmers and there are farmers who will grow the food she wants. Just like there are people who want and need the food conventional farmers grow.

8) **Agriculture can rise to the occasion and bridge the gap.** Our last keynote speaker was my favorite. Bruce Vincent is a logger from Montana. He was amazing. Passionate and articulate, he delivered a very honest message to all of us. And we needed to hear it. Bruce delivered my main take away from AgChat:

When engaging in conversation we shouldn't dumb it down, we should translate. There's a difference, people aren't stupid.

Again, AgChat has inspired me to do a better job communicating what we do on our farm . . . to find better ways to engage with consumers . . . to listen . . . to ask questions . . .to go deeper to another level of understanding and communication.