



The faces connecting an industry

Consumers are disconnected from their food and its origin. This “mommy blogger” is doing her part to bridge that gap.

By Christy Couch Lee

THE AMERICAN CONSUMER HAS CHANGED.

No longer does the typical family raise their own food on their own land. Far from it.

In fact, less than 2% of current American households are actively involved in agriculture.

“With more and more generations further removed from agriculture and from the dairy industry, if we don’t tell our story, someone else will,” says Mary Mackinson Faber, Pontiac, Ill.

So tell our story, she did.

Faber’s family manages about 165 milking cows and 140 head of heifers and calves on the farm begun by her great-grandfather more than 150 years ago.

Nearly three years ago, she began a social media presence for the family farm, Mackinson Dairy Farm. First, with a Facebook page, then growing a blog to tell the real story of the dairy industry.

She has spoken with moms in the Chicago suburbs about where their food comes from. And she and her family have opened their farm countless times for groups to see exactly how a real dairy farm operates.

Telling the story of the dairy industry doesn’t require a superior knowledge or exceptional public speaking or writing skills, Faber says. All that’s needed? Honesty. Transparency. And the desire to share the truth with consumers who just want to know where their gallon of milk or block of cheese really comes from.

HER START IN THE INDUSTRY

Mackinson Dairy Farm is owned by Faber’s parents, Donald and Rita; her uncle, Roy; and her brother, Matt.

With a dairy legacy in her family, Faber grew up showing dairy cattle through 4-H as a youth.

“My brother, Matt, and I have shown Ayrshires at the Illinois State Fair, World

Dairy Expo, and other shows for about 22 years,” Faber says. “First, we started at the bottom of the class, and gradually we improved. We really appreciate those first places with the animals we’ve bred, and Matt gets the credit for the breeding success.”

Faber desired to pursue a career involved in agriculture, but admits the life of running a dairy farm wasn’t in the cards for her.

“Cows do require seven days a week, 365 days a year, and I knew I wasn’t cut out for that,” she says. “I’m a numbers person, and I knew I wanted to do something in agriculture, so I combined those two areas into an agricultural business major at Illinois State University [ISU].”

Faber went on to receive an MBA at ISU, and, about seven years ago, moved back to her home

area to work as a controller at the local co-op.

While attending a local high school basketball game, she met her now-husband, Jesse, one of the agriculture teachers and FFA advisors for Pontiac Township High School.

They were married, and today Jesse and Mary have two children: Ava, 4, and Eli, 2.

Beginning an online presence for Mackinson Dairy Farm was filling a need, Faber says.



Mary Mackinson Faber (right) appreciates the chance to raise her two children, Ava (left) and Eli (second from right), on the farm that’s been in the Mackinson family for generations. Her dad, Donald (second from left), along with her uncle Roy and brother Matt, manage the operation, while she promotes the dairy industry through social media.

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Mary Mackinson Faber

**Mary Mackinson Faber
Pontiac, IL**

No matter where they live, all Moms have one thing in common – the desire to feed their family well. With the majority of the population removed from their food, the responsibility to share the positive story of dairy has never been more crucial.

At Balchem, we salute Mary and all that are sharing dairy's story, educating about healthy dairy products and connecting consumers to their food.

Visit realfacesofdairy.com to learn how you can become a dairy advocate and other ways to be a part of the Real Faces of Dairy Celebration.

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REAL FACES of DAIRY



REAL FACES OF DAIRY

The Faces of Dairy campaign is a year-long project designed to honor and celebrate the past, present and future people—well known and lesser known—shaping the American dairy industry through their personal stories. It provides a forum to highlight the many advancements creating an exciting and vibrant industry serving a global market.



#realfacesofdairy

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STARTING SOCIALLY

Three years ago, Faber's brother, David, was planning a dairy tour for his parents in Chile. When the Chilean dairy farmers wanted proof that his parents were, indeed, dairy farmers, they asked Faber why their farm had no online presence.

"That's when the Facebook page was born, and it's just grown from then," Faber says. "Through the first year, I loved it. I enjoyed sharing my family's story and my love for the dairy industry."

However, she realized some topics needed more room for discussion than a Facebook post would allow. Thus, the blog was born.

One year later, the blog was launched. Through the blog, Faber has addressed consumer questions, including antibiotics, the increasing size of cows, feed, management and genetics.

And for the past two Novembers, Faber has taken on a blog series. Two years ago, she featured 34 millennials in the dairy industry from across the U.S. and Canada.

"I loved that series; and they love the dairy industry, just like my brother, who I ended the series with," she says. "I sent them a group of questions, and they chose which they felt most comfortable answering."

And at the end of last year, she featured 61 women in the dairy industry – from North America, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Germany and beyond.

"I had no idea of the friendships that would form from my blogging," Faber says. "Through the blogging community, I now have one of my greatest friends, who lives

in Maine. We talk every single day. These friends have each other's backs, if someone needs a nudge, or if we're feeling down or discouraged."

INSPIRATION

Faber finds inspiration for her posts from a variety of sources; often, the ideas stem from questions she has been asked in everyday life.

"That's how the post about the difference between skim, 2% and whole milk was born," she says. "It's simple, but it's important to a mom with a toddler. I was asked, 'What do you feed Ava? What should I feed my son?'"

Being a mom, herself, also allows Faber to share that perspective with other moms.

"As far as antibiotics go, I can explain that it's no different than Ava having lots of ear infections, and we've had to give her antibiotics to help her heal. When a cow gets sick, we are going to make sure we

get them healthy and back to themselves again, too, while reassuring the consumer that the milk during treatment never enters the food supply," she says.

GETTING OUT THERE

She was asked to participate in the Illinois Farm Families program, coordinated by the Illinois Farm Bureau and many state commodity organizations, in 2013.

In this program, urban consumers connect with agriculture by touring dairy, beef, swine and grain farms in the state.

"I was able to meet suburban moms, and they could see I'm just like them — I'm a mom who wants to provide the best care for my kids, too," Faber says.



Faber's children enjoy their life on the farm. She looks forward to providing them the opportunity to continue the family operation into the sixth generation, if they desire to do so as adults.

SHARE YOUR STORY

Throughout 2016, the Real Faces of Dairy project encourages everyone to share their dairy story and upload pictures of what dairy means to them. The dedicated website features interactive activities, including photo and essay contests. Visit www.realfacesofdairy.com.

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– Mary Mackinson Faber

Most often, she has been asked about antibiotic usage and the differences between conventional and organic dairy products, she says.

“I’ll admit, sometimes I’m uncomfortable talking to strangers for the first time,” Faber says. “But as a mom, it’s easy to find a commonality with another mom. Talk about their kids’ cartoons, sporting events, T-ball, swimming. Then, you can get into the conversation.”

Faber says sometimes, in the dairy industry, we may be nervous about answering consumers’ questions, about not having the “right answers.”

“You know the info they’re seeking,” she says. “But if you don’t know, take their phone number or e-mail. Find the answer, and get back to them.”

Providing a positive, caring face for the dairy industry can take many forms.

“I always enjoyed answering the public’s questions about cows at the fair; I did more of it than I ever realized,” Faber says. “My family has been giving tours of the farm for years, and my mom brings her kindergarten class to the farm every spring, too.”

HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Offering tours on your farm may not be your thing. Social media and blogging may not be, either.

But there are other options for you to share the good word on the dairy industry, too.

“You and your family have to be comfortable with whatever you choose. Maybe you’d rather go to a classroom and make ice cream, or take a baby calf to a petting zoo,” Faber says. “You just need to relate to the consumer and be open.”

Yes, the consumers of today are much different than those of just a few decades ago. Now, more than ever, it’s critical for us in the dairy industry to tell our stories.

Together, we can bridge the gap and share the truth about what we do and how we do it; and that we do it well, and with care, compassion and knowledge, too.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christy Couch Lee combines a background and passion for agriculture, and has owned Cee Lee Communications, Hoopston, Ill., for six years, specializing in freelance writing and photography in the agricultural industry. You can read more about Christy at www.realfacesofdairy.com.



View the interview with Mary Faber at <https://vimeo.com/167479768>



We value your input; please take our survey at <http://bit.ly/253HCaa>



Maintaining a blog and social media presence for Mackinson Dairy Farm takes time and commitment. But Faber says the rewards come in sharing the story of our industry with urban moms and consumers, who strive to do what’s best for their children, too.

NEXT MONTH: Next month, we will explore the faces of a sustainable industry. The dairy industry can be sustainable, and we are ahead of the curve today. What does sustainability mean to you and to the consumer? And how are the great minds of our industry leading the way to an even more sustainable future?

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