Add Internet to List of Useful Farm Tools

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Others may sport the Internet, Lloyd and Diana McPherson harvest it. 

For as long as milk, the McPhersons are dairy farmers in Stuarts Draft, a small Virginia town nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In between milking cows and sending milk to other shores, they visit the World Wide Web to monitor prices for the grains they feed their Holsteins and Jerseys. "To get this information before, we had to make telephone calls - lots of them," says Mr. McPherson. "On the Internet, it's easy to find and we can check it whenever we want." 

All at once people who don't even know about the surplus of trivia on the Internet and the multimedia World Wide Web, farmers like the McPhersons are putting the global network to work, sensibly and with little fanfare. 

The McPhersons, it seems, don't need the animated icons and flashing text that some surfers with short attention spans require. Like other farmers, they do need up-to-the-minute information that is relatively obscure. And they are willing to wrestle with the Internet as long as they can gain access to valuable information there. 

Henry James, author of the recently published "Farmer's Guide to the Internet," was amazed by the amount of agricultural information on-line. His book includes internet addresses for about 1,000 farm-related sites. He likens the sites to tractors. "They're utilitarian," he says. "They aren't fancy, they aren't pretty, the way a car might be." 

For Kent Kruekwell, a farmer who raises white corn just a few miles away from the towering grain elevators of Prito-Lay Inc. 's Midwest Corn Handling Facility in Sidney, Ill., that means the ability to log into a Prito-Lay Web page to check on his supply contracts late in the evening. That way, he doesn't need to interrupt work in his fields to place a call during the facility's office hours. 

"It's a timesaver," Mr. Kruekwell says. "You're able to make these connections at your convenience." Prito-Lay uses it too: if the company can get more farmers to use the system, it can cut down the number of phone calls to its office, freeing up the employees who now field those calls. 

The Prito-Lay site is a model of function over form. Managers at the facility, which purchases corn from farmers to make stock foods, wanted to offer growers as unadorned source of instant information. "We tried not to make it flashy," explains Scott Friedland, Prito-Lay's procurement manager. "We wanted it to be simple to look at and understand." 

Though most of the Web site's displays consist of plain black text on a bland background, they are packed with information. Farmers can type in their names and passwords to summon a complete accounting of how much corn they have delivered to Prito-Lay and how much money they will receive for it. 

Mr. Kruekwell, 46 years old, is exactly the kind of farmer that agriculture-related businesses hope to reach with their Web sites and Internet addresses. He's the third generation of his family to cultivate the Sidney acreage and loves to tinker with antique tractors, but he has also been using a personal computer for years to manage his farm's finances. 

It was a natural next step for him to plug a modem into his Kmart stove and link up with the Internet. Mr. Kruekwell says he has been especially impressed with on-line discussion groups, which allow him to exchange tips on "no-till" farming and other cutting-edge techniques with hundreds of fellow farmers. 

Rick Heidel, an agriculture extension agent for Augusta County, Va., has started a series of Internet classes for would-be cyberfarmers. On a recent rainy morning, a half-dozen farmers gathered in a Fishersville, Va., classroom as Mr. Heidel held forth on Internet basics and then turned his students loose on a group of computers linked to the Web. 

Soon the farmers were eagerly cruising from site to site. One who raises trout quickly tracked down an illustration of a fish, which he plans to use in a brochure for his business. "See, it's just like going to the library," Mr. Heidel told the class. 

But farmers who wire up still face problems of spotty rural phone lines, limited Web listings and long-distance charges to get to the Web via city-based ISP. 

Please Turn to Page 40, Column 1
Now Add the Internet
To the List of Tools
Farmers Find Useful

Continued From Page 47

access providers. Some businesses are also well of establishing a major on-line presence, says Clark Schroeder, a consultant at ARC/Onset Partners in Cary, Ill., who advises agriculture companies on technology. In particular, companies that sell their goods through dealer networks worry that direct communication with customers through the Internet could involve conflicts with their local dealers.

That didn't stop Commodity Specialists Co., which queries grains and foodstuffs from its Minneapolis headquarters. The company put together a low-budget site running on an old spare computer, figuring that posting lists of its products and prices online might bring in new customers.

Before long, the company was recording 50 to 60 visitors a day, including users who apparently stumbled across it using Internet search tools. "It turned out that one-third of the inquiries were coming from overseas," says Kurt Marziani, manager of strategic development. Now Commodity Specialists is handling new orders for sugar from India and China.

Smaller businesses and individual farmers hope to duplicate that kind of success. Greg Nolan, a co-owner of the S&P Simmental Stock Farms cattle ranch in Douglass, Manitoba, put together a series of Web pages to advertise the ranch's breeding stock. Before, the ranch had relied mainly on catalogs to hawk its goods, but those are costly to print and mail. With the Internet, Mr. Nolan figures, he can reach more potential customers at a low cost and better compete with larger outfits. "On the Internet, it's all the same," he says. "Whether you're IBM or the Bar S, you're on a level playing field."