

The Ag Journalist of the Future is Among Us

By John Walter, AAEA president

The first time I met him was at the 2005 Agricultural Media Summit in Milwaukee, and to tell you the truth, I found the experience to be a bit unnerving. He was running circles around the rest of us, shooting photos and video, conducting audio interviews in the corner of every room, dashing off to the media room to file Web reports multiple times daily, and generally practicing our profession at a pace I'd seldom seen before. Ag journalism on steroids.

At that time most of us had not even heard of the inelegant word, "blog," and he had already coined the term, "agriblogging."

The same year, he won a stipend to cover the International Federation of Agricultural Journalists meeting in Switzerland on his blog, for the first time offering AAEA members who stayed home same-day coverage of the meetings, tours and social gatherings. I toted along my camera and notebook to Switzerland, but would have to return home before filing a Web report.

A year later, at a National Agri-Marketing Association meeting in Kansas City, I was walking back to the hotel after an early breakfast, mulling over the day's agenda. I bumped into him on the street. He was coming back from an early Mass, and already was carrying his equipment off somewhere to create his first report of the day. He was wearing his usual friendly smile, like some kind of Zen monk who's just discovered the meaning of life.

Last month, I ran into him at the Commodity Classic in the hallway of the Opryland hotel between the trade show and the press room. I suppose I thought I was functioning pretty well as a multimedia reporter these days, rushing to the press room to file a Web report, complete with a photo slideshow and a video clip.

There he was coming down that long hall, hustling off to the next press conference with a video camera and tripod in hand. Why did I get that déjà vu feeling that he was running ahead of me, his Web 2.0 tools and can-do attitude in tow? All of a sudden it seemed like my stuff was stuck in the holster again.

I cooked up the notion right there to corner him for a column - maybe just to slow him down a little, if nothing else. So this is it, folks. By now you no doubt have deduced that I'm writing about Chuck Zimmerman, an embodiment of what life will be more like in the future of our profession, I think, if it isn't already for a fair number of you.

Chuck, along with his wife, Cindy, own their own company, ZimmComm New Media. Their ag marketing communications business specializes in blogging, podcasting and managing RSS feeds - all forms of media that have been invented in the past half

decade. Check out AgWired (www.agwired.com) to see a broad representation of their work.

Chuck probably has interviewed about half the people in our industry. So here's how he sounds on the other side of the Q&A:

When did you invent blogging?

I certainly can't take credit for inventing blogging but I will take credit for coining the term, "agriblogging". I started my first blog in the fall of 2004, because I was told it was an easy-to-maintain form of a Web site. It certainly is, and since then I've been involved in the creation of more than 20 blogs either for our company or for client companies. My primary personal blog is AgWired, which focuses on what's new in the world of agribusiness. I've written almost all of the 4,700 articles or posts onto AgWired to date. No, it's not an addiction. Feeding the blog monster is something else. I'm just not sure how to describe it.

How many balls can you keep in the air at the same time?

I wish I could give a definitive answer. To be an effective new media reporter today you need to be a photographer, writer, broadcaster, videographer and know how to utilize many different software programs to edit all of the content you create. I have shot stills with my right hand at the same time that I'm shooting video with my left hand, and while I've had an audio recorder running from a multi-box. I don't recommend this as a common practice. I do often edit jpegs while the video I've edited is rendering so I can upload it to YouTube. I think the most number of blogs I've posted content on to in one day is nine, four of those mine and five for different clients.

How many hours of sleep do you get at night?

Wow. Sometimes it's as little as three or four hours. I'm getting too old to keep that up for more than about four days in a row, though. Generally speaking, I create content during the day at events and then edit and post it online in the evening, finishing up, I hope, before midnight. There's nothing worse than when you start slurring your keyboard. When I can't focus on text it's time to quit.

Are you getting rich?

No. I have more than one kid in college. Universities are getting rich. Actually, I now outsource work to seven different people. We are more than paying our bills and our banker is happy. Yes, agriblogging and farm podcasting can be a profitable business.

What advice do you have for ag journalists?

The first thing I suggest is to start a blog. Write about what you're passionate about. It doesn't matter if that's cooking or feeding cows. Write often and regularly. Tell everyone

you know. Write like you know that the most important people in the world (your boss or clients) will read it. Within months you'll become an expert and people will solicit your opinion and perhaps ask you to do some work for them. Keep that multi-media thing in mind, too. Nothing makes a Web site more interesting than good pictures, audio and video, and did I mention writing?

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