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Take your farm blog from personal narrative to profitable information disseminator with advice from experienced bloggers.

BY NANCY MANN JACKSON

Lisa Steele launched her blog, Fresh Eggs Daily (www.fresh-eggs-daily.blogspot.com), as a way to organize the chicken-farming advice she was frequently dispensing on social media. An enthusiastic chicken farmer in Virginia, Steele hosted a Facebook page about raising chickens where she posted photos of her hens and answered questions from others interested in poultry.

"I got tired of answering the same questions over and over, and it was time-consuming," she says. "I realized that a blog would allow me to write my response one time, organize advice and information, and then just supply

Facebook fans with the link to the appropriate post to answer their question."

While that plan worked well, it wasn't long before the blog became more than just a creative outlet; it became a business in its own right. "Another blogger mentioned that I could get sponsors to pay for ads on the blog, and a light bulb went off. My goal remains to help chicken keepers raise their flocks to be happy and healthy, using natural methods and preventatives, but as a former entrepreneur, I am thinking of other ways to use both my Facebook page and blog to take me to the next step," Steele says.

Steele isn't alone. A number of hobby farmers have



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Your Business

unintentionally built small businesses by drawing an online audience to their blogs about farming and homesteading topics. With sponsors and advertisers, some blogs can provide a regular income stream.

Setting Sail

A blog, short for Weblog, is an online journal. While most of the earliest blogs took the form of a diary, many of today's blogs offer a form of "service" writing, instructing readers on how to do something or sharing news or current events that might impact readers. In some cases, the blog format evolves as the blog's readership grows. Katie Sullivan started her blog, Brighton Park (www.brightonparkblog.blogspot.com), to share family activities and happenings with relatives living in other states. "In the two and a half years since I started, it has changed to be a place where I want to and can share my expertise in homeschooling, homesteading and other topics and have a platform about those things I am passionate about, [such as] healthy living, sustainable living and screen-free parenting," Sullivan says. "My goals for my blog have

not changed: Provide good quality content, useful content and authentic content. Financially, I would love for my blog to continue to make a regular monthly income."

Like Sullivan, many hobby-farm families start a blog to share their farm life with friends and family. The first step is choosing a blogging platform. While there are plenty of options for purchasing blog platforms, many bloggers recommend starting out with a free option, such as Blogger (www.blogger.com) or Wordpress (www.wordpress.com). Karianne Wood, who started her blog, Thistlewood Farm (www.thistlewoodfarms.com), to record her family's extensive renovation of their turn-of-the-century Kentucky farmhouse, originally began writing on Wordpress' free platform but later purchased her own domain name and moved to a self-hosted Wordpress platform when she was ready to sell advertising. "It was free and easy for someone with relatively few computer skills to manage," she says of her initial account. "I recommend Wordpress because of the variety of plug-ins and widgets available to customize and personalize your blog." Other platform options include Tumblr (www.tumblr.com), Expression



Although Lisa Steele launched *Fresh Eggs Daily* to answer frequently asked questions from other chicken enthusiasts, it's now a multifaceted small business.

COURTESY FRESH EGGS DAILY



Katie Sullivan launched *Brighton Park* to keep relatives up-to-date on her family's activities.

Engine (www.expressionengine.com), Movable Type (www.movabletype.com), TypePad (www.typepad.com) and Squarespace (www.squarespace.com).

The Captain's Blog

As with any type of writing, cultivating a unique voice or personality in your writing is one of the most important aspects of writing a blog. "Determine what you are an expert in and remember to be authentic," Wood says.

A unique voice and a memorable design can set a blog apart from its competition and keep readers and advertisers coming back for more. Take some time to develop your blog's look and feel, allowing your personality to shine through. When Steele started *Fresh Eggs Daily*, she had a pretty good sense of what she wanted to project: "Rustic and farm-themed, but [I wanted] readers [to] know that you can go from heels and lipstick to muck boots and mud in three seconds flat, and then back again," she says. "I had always used natural remedies and that remains the focus, but I also have fun with it and let readers know that there's nothing wrong with putting on a cute apron to gather eggs or collecting cute barn boots."

Steele also spends time beautifying her blog with photos and adds personal touches whenever she can. "No photo goes on the blog without being cropped, edited, the color fixed," she says. "A beautiful photograph is a huge bonus and draw for readers. I have also recently started signing my posts with a signature of mine that I scanned. I have started adding photos of myself here and there on my

posts. I think that the more personal you can make your blog, the more fans will identify with you and tend to keep coming back to see what you're up to. They enjoy having a face to connect to the information."

Getting Readers Hooked

Every blogger needs an audience, and it can take considerable effort to grow that audience beyond your immediate circle of friends and family. For many hobby-farm bloggers, interesting, heartfelt content has been the key to building large readership. "My blog is my personality, style, likes and loves all poured into an online journal," says Jennifer Kiko, the blogger behind *Farmgirl Follies* (www.farmgirlfollies.com). "I photograph things that appeal to me and things I believe others might like. I write about topics that affect my heart, things that make a difference to me—good or bad. And I believe that's the key to any successful blog. It must be honest and come from the heart. Without honesty, it's not genuine, and writing must be genuine to be truly compelling."

In addition to writing interesting, readable posts, Kiko also works to draw readers with search-engine-optimization strategies, such as including descriptive and accurate titles for each photo; adding plenty of links for more information about the places, books, movies and other things she writes about; and using keywords in her posts to make her blog more easily searchable.

Amy Renea, who blogs about her farm, gardens and photography at *A Nest for All Seasons* (www.anestforallseasons.com), builds her audience by spinning her



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COURTESY KARRIENNE WOOD@THISTLEWOOD FARM

Karianne Wood began her blog, *Thistlewood Farm*, on Wordpress' free platform, but she eventually purchased her own domain name and moved to a self-hosted platform.

Jennifer Kiko, of *Farmgirl Follies*, says authenticity is the key to her success as a blogger.

content into traffic. She has her blog listed on compilation sites such as Craftgawker, Apartment Therapy, Tasteologie and Design*Sponge, which in turn drives traffic to her site. Pinterest has become a more significant driver of traffic to her blog than Google, so she makes sure each of her Pinterest boards has a category and includes a host of tags on each pin. She also designs a custom "pin-it" button with the exact photo and hashtags she chooses to accompany each post.



COURTESY FRESH EGGS DAILY

At *Fresh Eggs Daily*, Steele blogs about her chicken-keeping adventures, as well as strategies other farmers can use to keep their flocks healthy.

Reeling in Sponsors

When you're ready to monetize your blog, there are several options. Some bloggers join publishing networks, such as BlogHer, which syndicate blog posts and offer sponsors for them. Others work directly with sponsors who are interested in reaching their audiences to sell advertising on their blogs or write sponsored posts about their products. Others recommend products and receive commissions when readers purchase those products through their links.

"There's a fine line between marketing yourself in a subtle manner and turning your entire blog into a big advertisement," Steele says. "I opened an Amazon store on my blog, and I market that by linking to a product anytime a fan asks where they can purchase X, or what they can use to treat Y." She receives a commission based on blog readers' purchases.

Kiko joined a blog-publishing network but found that some of the ads directly conflicted with her personal views. "I returned to my roots, so to speak, and a week



COURTESY AMY RENEA

Amy Renea uses outside websites, such as Apartment Therapy and Tasteologie, to drive traffic to her blog, *A Nest for All Seasons*.



COURTESY SETH AUGUST

Emily McGrath blogs about her family's urban-homesteading journey at *Our Little Coop*.



COURTESY FARMGIRLFOLLIES.COM

Kiko labels the photos on *Farmgirl Follies*, to optimize search-engine capabilities.

after I went back to writing from the heart instead of attempting to please the masses. I received offers for product reviews," she says. "I was more than happy to test-drive a pair of work boots. And just the other day, I received an offer to try and blog about a brand of artisan cheese." These paid reviews allow her blog to continue generating income. While different modes of monetization will work for different bloggers, Web analytics are important regardless of the method you choose. "It is important to be able to show people what your blog can

offer them in terms of unique visitors, followers, and exactly how many people a month would see their advertisement and be exposed to their company, blog or product if they were to advertise with you," Sullivan says. "It is also important to monitor how many unique visitors are coming to your site and from where. This enables you to know which link-up parties are giving you the most traffic, what blog out there is promoting you, and if you are paying for advertising, which [ones] are worth it."

Steele uses Blogger's free stats page to find out where her traffic is coming from, the keywords being used to find her blog, and how many page views each post gets. Renea recommends going beyond your host site's statistics and adding Google Analytics to your marketing package. "While other programs give good information, stats can vary wildly from site to site," she says. "I use the stats on my Blogger dashboard on a daily basis to see where the bulk of my traffic is coming from and which posts are receiving the most traffic. When I approach an ad network or brand, however, I use Google Analytics exclusively." Renea and her fellow bloggers say they favor Google Analytics because it provides the most useful information and is universally respected by advertisers and sponsors. "When you dig into your statistics, you should notice trends and traffic patterns. Compile these into a simple, single-page media kit, listing your average traffic on any given day, overall monthly hits, demographic information and include any larger publications you have been a part of. Include social-network stats from Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and any other network that you are active in," Renea adds.



Sullivan's Brighton Park blog covers topics she's passionate about, including sustainable living.

While sponsorships and ads are nice, for most hobby farmers, making money from their blogs remains an afterthought. "I started my blog with no intention of profiting from it, and I maintain that stance," says Emily McGrath, of Our Little Coop (www.ourlittlecoop.com), which documents her family's journey of transforming their 1/4-acre property into an urban farm. "My blog is a place for me to share my life experiences and has never been about money. Is it nice to make a little money for the hard work you put in to a project? Absolutely! But money has never been the goal and is not something that I have focused my energy on. Instead, I have focused more on building relationships with my readers. I believe that if your intentions are good and you are coming from a place of love and kindness, great success will follow." *

Freelance journalist Nancy Mann Jackson writes regularly about small business, as well as homes, gardens and family. She lives on a small hobby farm in Alabama with her husband and three boys.

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