



THE
(HORSE)
POWER
OF
SOCIAL
MEDIA

MARKETING
AND
PROMOTION
DO NOT
HAVE TO BE DIRTY
WORDS TO HORSEMEN

By Jennie Rees

LET'S FACE REALITY: IN THIS DIGITAL AGE, TRAINERS MUST TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE TOOLS OFFERED BY SOCIAL MEDIA. IF NOT, THE GUY OR GAL IN THE NEXT BARN WILL. AND THAT MIGHT BE WHO YOUR POTENTIAL CLIENT SEES IN CYBERSPACE AND PERHAPS SUBSEQUENTLY SENDS HORSES. THE SAME CONCEPT APPLIES TO OTHER ASPECTS OF THE HORSE INDUSTRY AS WELL, WHETHER YOU ARE STANDING STALLIONS, PROVIDING SALE PREP OR SELLING HAY.

"You have to realize that it's part of what the future is, part of life whether you like it or not," said trainer Eddie Kenneally, who recently redesigned his website and started utilizing Twitter. "If you're going to run a successful business, you have to be involved in it and evolve with it. There was a point that I didn't think it was necessary. Now I think it's a must."

The concept of horsemen and the racing industry using social media to reach the public directly, rather than relying on the sometimes biased or uninformed general media, was one of the topics discussed at the National HBPA's winter convention earlier this year, and it appears many are heeding that advice.

Young fans at Ellis Park get an up-close experience with a horse at an event designed to give the public a behind-the-scenes look at racing.

Coady Photography



GIVING THE PUBLIC AN INSIDER'S LOOK AT RACING

Doing basic things to get your name out to the public is not mutually exclusive with horsemanship. What it does is let people know about you and your operation while sending the message that you are accessible and on the cutting edge.

Trainer Murat Sancal credits 99 percent of the business he has today to the powers of social media: Twitter and Facebook. He's also in the process of developing a website.

The Kentucky-based conditioner has a growing racing stable in addition to a breeding and sales operation for which he leases Elmendorf Farm in Lexington.

"We have so many horses at the farm, so many horses at the track," he said. "They are quality horses, but nobody knows who we are and who they are. Last year we sold a \$2 million horse at Keeneland, but nobody knows it. All the good you are doing, you have to share with people. What if you turn a horse out in the field and he's happy and you're sharing with the people how happy this horse is? [That is] on our Facebook page, and almost 4,000 people watched that video and commented on it.

"They ask, 'Is that a show horse?' 'No, he's a racehorse and a very nice horse and he's just resting there for 20 days.' 'Oh, I want to see the farm.' When they go there, they see those [famous Elmendorf] columns, the history, and then their mind just changes. I think social media is very good right now for our business. You can reach everybody."

One of the benefits of social media and websites is a global reach, and Sancal's clientele currently is all overseas, primarily connected to his native Turkey. He started his racing stable four years ago with one horse, \$160,000-earner Stoptalkingmaria, owned by assistant trainer Maria Sol Aller,

Trainer Murat Sancal (right) said the social media effort managed by assistant trainer Maria Sol Aller (left) is vital to the success of his stable.

Courtesy Maria Sol Aller



who also handles much of the social media for which he credits with his full barn today.

Sancal told racing digital media consultant Gwen Davis that he views the commitment and cost for the website she's designing for him as having another horse.

"And I need to pay attention to this horse and do what I need to do to get it ready to go," he said. "Except this horse is going to pay off much more, because this horse will bring in owners. This is an investment, and it will pay off."

Trainer Tom Amoss got on Twitter at the insistence of his two daughters, who both work in social media in New Orleans.

"Look, I'm late to the party," he said. "And my only real excuse is that I'm old-fashioned, No. 1, and No. 2, I didn't perceive Twitter correctly. My perception was it was ego-driven and a platform where you had the opportunity to say, 'Look at me.' My opinion of Twitter has changed 180 degrees since then. Surprisingly, what convinced me was the number of people who started following me. It led me to believe that people have a real interest in that stuff. And the second thing I liked, particularly as it pertains to video clips or pictures, is that people have an interest in what we do. I don't mean me. I mean what the horse industry does."

Trainer Michelle Lovell puts pictures of her horses, including win photos, on Facebook in part because her owners are on Facebook, and they like to share the posts with their friends. Lovell can't say that she's picked up owners because of social media, "but it gives them a chance to vet you out. They see your face, what you do, catch a few glimpses of your morning."

With websites, budget definitely comes into play, though there are some good free templates, such as WordPress. For the do-it-yourselfers, or those with technologically inclined children or grandchildren to do the legwork, a basic website can be had for less than \$100 a year. Of course, a professionally designed website can cost many times that amount. Keep in mind that a website is the first impression a lot of people will have of you, so it needs to be well done and kept updated.

An excellent free resource is OwnerView.com's profile pages for trainers and owners. The information website was developed by The Jockey Club and Thoroughbred Owners and Breeders Association for new, prospective and current Thoroughbred owners and has a wealth of information. You (or your emissary) can create your profile page or ask for assistance from Suzie Oldham, who administers the program.

OwnerView has categories not just for trainers, but also for stallion farms, owners (including syndicates) and advisors. For trainers, the online directory will list pertinent statistics, plus a bio, contact information and client references can be added.

Beaten up in some media outlets, two-time Kentucky Derby-winning trainer Doug O'Neill has very effectively used his Davis-designed website and social media to go directly to the public to show his philosophy and how he cares for his horses.

"It's all just trying to add value and to try and bring what's going on behind the scenes to more people," O'Neill told the *Los Angeles Times*' John Cherwa. "When they get to see the care that racehorses get and get to see the personalities of the people involved, it's something that we're proud of."

Davis, whose company Davis Innovation specializes in marketing, website design and social media for the horse racing industry, enlisted and paid a nominal fee to University of Louisville equine industry students to help with O'Neill's Nyquist social media coverage during the colt's run-up to a Kentucky Derby victory.

"That's a great way to get these kids experience and also to bring younger people into the industry and get them engaged behind the scenes," Davis said. "There are so many young people with such great talent, especially where technology is concerned. We have to do something to appeal to young people where they are, and they're on their phones."

Trainer Marvin Johnson demonstrates the role of a pony rider during one of the "Grand Mornings at the Track" sessions at Indiana Grand.



Courtesy Indiana Grand

Kentucky HBPA Vice President Dale Romans still doesn't know a lot about the mechanics of social media, but he quickly understood it was something horsemen and the sport needed to embrace. He began with his bookkeeper, horsewoman Laura Hernan, doing a Facebook page and a rudimentary website that Davis subsequently redesigned. Then he went all in.

Calling it Raceday Live, Romans teamed with Davis, Hernan and photographer Lawrence Van Garrett to give fans backside access in real time to Keen Ice's pre-Travers Stakes and race-day preparation on Periscope (a live video app), along with Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. It paid off in spades when Keen Ice pulled off the upset of Triple Crown winner American Pharoah and social media users got to experience that in a way not possible years ago.

HORSEMEN MARKETING HORSE RACING

Everyone who makes a living in racing or cares about the future of the sport should be an ambassador. Traditional media have cut back on horse racing coverage and many tracks have eliminated or reduced their publicity presence. It's in the entire horse industry's best interest to take steps to help fill the void.

That can be as simple as taking phone pictures and posting them to Twitter, Facebook or Instagram. Many HBPA affiliates and state owner/breeder associations have Twitter accounts and Facebook pages. But the key, as with websites, is a stream of current, engaging content. Davis emphasizes that it doesn't have to be the actual trainer or a horsemen's organization staffer doing the posts. You can enlist tech-savvy employees and family, as many trainers do. Horsemen's organizations could consider interns from the area.

The Indiana and Kentucky HBPA affiliates have taken marketing involvement to heart.

Taking a page from Oaklawn Park's highly successful program, the Indiana horsemen in conjunction with Indiana Grand stage "Grand Mornings at the Track" one Saturday morning a month during training hours, with a free continental breakfast and each session featuring a different aspect of the sport.

"It's not a huge turnout at this stage; we consistently have 20-25," said Indiana HBPA Executive Director Mike Brown. "But we think they'll tell their friends and we see a lot of people coming back, so we think there's some value in what we're doing."

Brown said the Indiana HBPA is lucky because the slots legislation includes a percentage to horsemen for equine promotion.

"We recognize we have a responsibility to get some fannies in the stands, too," he said. "Not everybody has access to a funding stream, which makes a

huge difference. There's no limitation beyond our own imaginations in terms of what we can try to do. . . . We need to try to be involved in co-promoting with our track partners."

The Indiana HBPA had an event at the State Fair and put on a "Back to School" night, having drawings for backpacks stuffed with school supplies and iPads. Another educational program after the Friday races was less successful, with Brown saying they'll probably look to tweak it for 2017. But he says it's important to try things to get the successes.

The Indiana HBPA recently started using Facebook but is not yet on Twitter. Brown cheerfully attributes the delay to the "intellectual limitations of the person who is supposed to implement it—me.

"I do see Facebook as a really good way to reach people," the former newspaper reporter added. "This is a 20th century sport or business that happens to be happening in the 21st, so it's a challenge to use social media and have it be worthwhile. . . . It's a brave new world out there, and among the many duties the staff of an affiliate has, certainly marketing is going to be one of them."

Kentucky HBPA board member John Hancock, a third-generation trainer based at Ellis Park, long thought his hometown track should take advantage of having morning gate schooling in the mile chute next to the parking lot, giving fans rare public access. When Ellis hired me to do racing publicity, Hancock shared his concept, and the Saturday morning fan experience called "Making of a Racehorse" was held July 30 with the HBPA partnering with the track.

Such ventures cost little more than sweat equity and passion. And social media is a powerful way to help promote them.

The Kentucky HBPA, for whom I created a Twitter account, loved my idea to have the sons and daughters of the Kentucky Derby trainers tweet on @KyHBPA about the experience. We had more than a dozen kids participate and more

Bailey Romans (daughter of trainer Dale Romans) at left and Tess Von Hemel (daughter of trainer Donnie K. Von Hemel) are interviewed on Louisville TV during Kentucky Oaks morning about the Kentucky HBPA's #KyDerbyKids Twitter program.



Jennie Rees

than tripled the number of Twitter followers for the Kentucky HBPA. The venture received extensive exposure in print and on radio and television that week.

The program now has its own Twitter handle, @KyDerbyKids, and has been expanded for horsemen's children to tweet about the 2-year-olds with which they are connected, as well as any aspect of horse racing. Others can participate by tagging #KyDerbyKids or @KyDerbyKids.

Kentucky HBPA Executive Director Marty Maline said racetracks should embrace horsemen's marketing ideas.

"Some of our horsemen are very creative thinkers, just a wealth of knowledge and experience on the backside and people from all walks of life who come into this," he said. "If people are willing to listen, there are ideas back there." 

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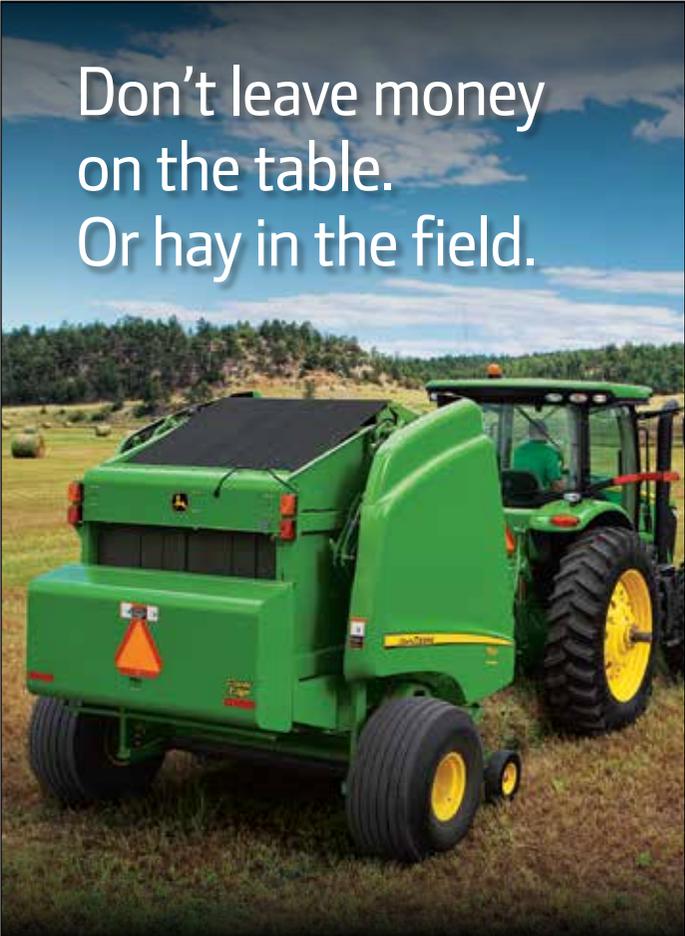
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