

There’s an app for that?: Increasing use of Smartphone Technology in the Beef Industry

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It’s no secret that smartphone use is on the rise in recent years. From just 2010 to 2011, the smartphone adoption rates among America’s agriculture community have jumped by 30%. It is estimated that approximately half of all farmers in the U.S. own a smart phone. It seems the days of relying solely on a CB radio to communicate around the farm and relying on the local weatherman to tell you when to cut hay are behind us.

Smartphones can be defined simply as a mobile device with more advanced connectivity and computing ability than traditional cellular phones. Many farmers and ranchers use their smartphones to do a lot more than talk. Many use them as mobile computers that fit in their pockets.

The most common smartphones use the iPhone, Android, or Blackberry platforms. These handheld computers give producers access to a wealth of information and resources that allows them to do a lot more than talk from the cab of the pickup or tractor. Most popular apps run on all platforms, however many are available on only one of the 3. It is important to consider this when choosing a new smartphone, for example many of the new apps developed by the Mississippi State University Extension Service are only currently available for Apple devices. It is also important to consider you location. Some wireless companies have better coverage in certain areas, and while many apps are able to function without internet access, there are still many that rely on an internet connection for up to date information.

There are an amazing variety of applications better known as apps available for beef producers. A wide range of apps are available on these devices. There are apps for monitoring weather conditions, market conditions, herd management, record keeping, functional app such as flashlights, and even apps that allows for keeping track of employee work hours. In addition to apps, the web browser in smartphones allows producers to connect to websites from anywhere on the farm. Producers even have the ability to connect their phones to records stored on the home computer for easy access in the field.

Weather apps are extremely popular among farmers and ranchers. A search for “weather” on the iTunes store gives hundreds of choices for weather tracking and radar. In addition to the popular apps that provide localized weather forecasts and current radar, most local news stations also provide apps that give weather and news specific to your area. These apps are invaluable for farmers during hay season, and even when planning cattle working or shipping.

Perhaps what some deem the most useful smartphone feature is the market tracking apps. There are numerous options available, but most provide both fat and feeder cattle prices along with feeder calf prices. Drovers/Cattle Network and Revalor sponsor an app called Beef Market Central that provides users with current Chicago Board of Trade futures market reports of live cattle, feeder cattle, energy and crop inputs, 10 minute delayed quotes, and streaming news. While this many apps provide free information, some which offer more services charge a fee. Popular cattle market services such as DTN/the Progressive Farmer and CattleFax offer app

versions of their subscriptions, to allow producers to keep that information at their fingertips. There are even apps available that give local market prices. Cattle Talk Mobile provides USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service reports for local livestock markets in 20 states. Although, Mississippi is not currently included in its reports, both Alabama and Tennessee reports are available and may provide insights into market trends in the southeast.

Herd management is another popular app category for beef producers. There are apps available for all areas of herd management from herd health to nutrition to reproduction to record management. Some animal health companies offer apps which link to information on their cattle vaccines. There is even a "Feedyard Manager" app that may be adapted for stocker operations to track information on inventories, shipments, animal health, and profit and loss. Cattle Visions offers an app to quickly calculate breeding date or desired calving date which is helpful when planning an artificial insemination protocol. There is an app called "Bovine Estrus Synchronization" which plans, tracks, and sends reminders for an estrus synchronization plan. An app called "Pro Cattle Breeding" tracks the entire breeding season from heat detection through calf delivery information and allows for tracking on individual cattle. Crystalyx offers a free "Beef Cow BCS" that allows producers to score and track body condition scores on their cow herd, and offers comparison photos for each score for producers new to body condition scoring.

Social media has continued to increase in popularity as a news source. Apps such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube which link to these popular websites offer beef producers a way to stay in touch with current news while on the go. Most major beef industry groups maintain a presence on each of these sites. Twitter is simply an online social networking service that limits the length of messages users can share to 140 characters. These short messages are known as "tweets", and have quickly become the source for late breaking news. The Mississippi State Beef Extension Team provides news and information on Twitter which can be found by following @MSUBeefCattle. Facebook is similar to Twitter, but without the character limit on messages. Often beef industry groups will provide news and information on these pages. YouTube is a popular video sharing site that can also be viewed through a smartphone app. It is best used as a source of educational information or quick how to videos. The Mississippi State Beef Extension Team (www.youtube.com/user/MSUBeefCattle) provides educational clips that are approximately 4 to 5 minutes long on a wide variety of topics such as Freeze Branding and Transporting, with new videos added on a regular basis.

Another category of apps popular in the farming and ranching community are simple utility apps such as a flashlight, calculator, level, camera, or even a magnifying glass. These utility apps typically function to turn your phone itself into some type of tool. There are numerous options for each of these apps. There are literally hundreds of apps for the flashlight alone. Most function to provide more than just a plain flashlight though, offering options for flashing or colored lights as well. Many beef producers carry their phone with them at all times. This comes in handy when one of these bulky devices is needed quickly, and they can easily be pulled out of a shirt pocket.

The Mississippi State University Extension Service has recently entered the world of app development. Currently, there is a Breakeven app available which offers the ability for producer's to determine the minimum price that must be received for an animal for you to not lose money based on a beginning weight, gain, cost of gain, and expected sale price. A recently released app offers a directory for producers to find contact information for resources within the Extension service. Currently there are also several other beef cattle related apps in the development or planning stages. A "Cattle Calculator" app will be the first to be released. It

offers basic calculations for reproductive, performance, and management applications. It performs such functions as calculating calving dates, adjusted weaning weights, and dosage for antibiotics and dewormers. The Beef Team also has plans for apps which will allow for comparisons of alternative feeds with common feeds, estrus synchronization planning, and an app version of the popular Beef Cattle Pocket Guide publication.

No matter which smartphone device or app you choose, it is important to remember that there are many options available, likely one to fit most every need. New apps are developed every day. Don't be afraid to try free apps. Many are available in the stores free of charge, and if you don't like them you can always delete them. There is a wealth of information and potential available at your fingertips from these smartphones, be sure to use them to your advantage.

For more information about beef cattle production, contact an office of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, and visit msucares.com/livestock/beef.