

# Digital crossroads help build your brand

Mario van Vliet

48 **Whoever does not use Twitter or Facebook has quite some explaining to do, so it seems. But do those social media actually have added value, for example in communication with the agricultural sector or consumers? “Certainly”, say some seed companies. “You can spread your message widely using them.”**

**Social media** has taken off rapidly. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, blogs, LinkedIn, they have become indispensable. What initially seemed like a fun, hip pastime for a small group has become a phenomenal means of communication. No business that takes itself seriously dares to neglect social media. At least, so it seems.

.....  
**#GirlsDay 7 out of 10 girls are interested in #science. Only 2 out of 10 will pursue it as a career @Bayer4Crops**

Social media is in fact for many companies a complex phenomenon. For example, just having a Twitter account or just starting a blog, that is not enough: that account must also be maintained. That takes time, good ideas, discipline, a good strategy and enthusiasm. A cocktail which is difficult to mix.

Apparently that also applies to a number of companies in the seed industry. Some seed companies indicated that they did not want to contribute to this article. That happens with some embarrassment, because whoever does not use Twitter, Facebook, blogs or YouTube, has some explaining to do. “We are a very modern company, but we do not use social

media. Maybe later”, explains a seed company. Fortunately, there are plenty of companies that do want to contribute. Monsanto, for example. Spokesman Mark Buckingham: “We want to be present in places where people talk about us.”

## Same old questions, new platform

Companies like Monsanto have basically two groups with whom they want to communicate: agricultural clients and society. And with both groups communicating via social media is playing an increasingly important role, says Buckingham. “Furthermore, the use of social media continues to grow.”

Approximately three years ago, Monsanto started to

.....  
**10yrs and up to 10 mio invested in a new potato variety.. How to protect what you #breed? @HZPC**

communicate via Twitter, initially mainly with the agricultural sector. “In the agricultural sector, social media has quickly and significantly established itself. How come? I think that the agricultural sector is accustomed to sharing information, for example by solving problems together.”

In addition to Twitter, Monsanto now uses a number of other social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, LinkedIn and blogs. Furthermore, it recently launched a special website for consumers: [discover.monsanto.com](http://discover.monsanto.com). Through this website, consumers can read blogs, get in touch with the people behind Monsanto and share information with friends and acquaintances. The theme of the website is ‘Be part of the conversation’.

With this website, Monsanto wants to tell consumers, citizens and civil organizations what it is working on, and why. Buckingham: “It is nothing new that

.....  
**#Cumulus #Asparagus for the 4th time in a row ‘the tastiest asparagus of Brabant’ #BejoZaden**

questions are being asked of a company. Only the way in which that happens is new. Social media gives consumers a new platform to ask questions. And that

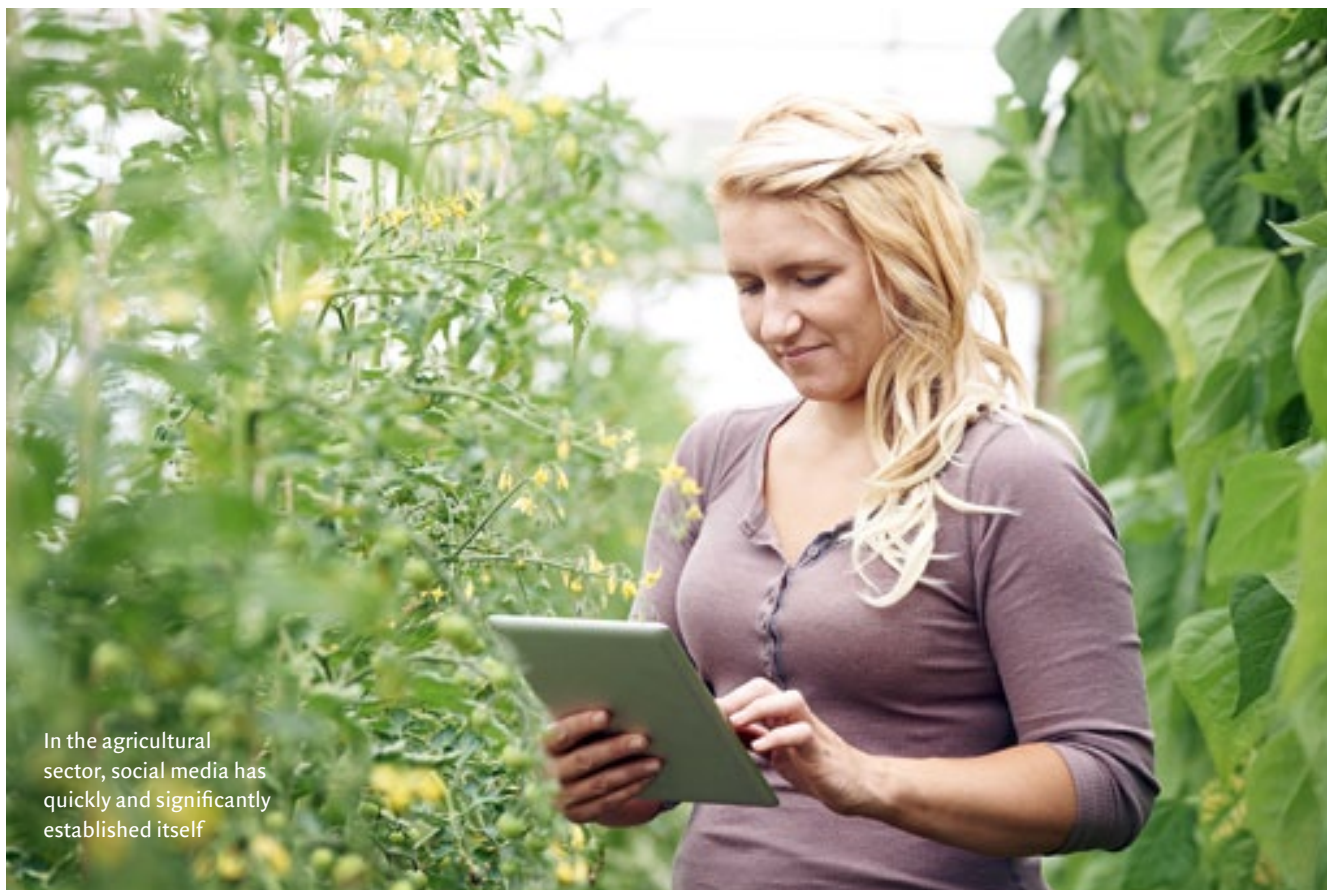
## Bejo Zaden: ‘Twitter attracts the attention of the trade press’

Bejo started using social media about three years ago, tell Jurgen van Baar and Daniëlle Bruin. Together they manage (with the help of the Hootsuite programme) the social media accounts of Bejo. Van Baar: “We use social media primarily for spreading news about, for example, products or scholarships. We used to also do that before via email, but social media is much faster. Moreover, we receive increasing customer responses to those messages.”

The use of social media within Bejo is therefore growing, and continues to grow, also in the many branches abroad. Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn are the most commonly used platforms. “Those are established channels, also in our industry. We currently have no

plans for other channels, but we are keeping an eye on the new channels and trends. Hence, we are looking to see if and how we can use Pinterest. That is a very visual medium, and therefore suitable, for example, for pictures of recipes of our concepts and hence for reaching consumers.”

Van Baar and Bruin are the driving forces at Bejo when it comes to social media. Many colleagues first waited to see the outcome, but now also the Bejo representatives are tweeting. And they are enthusiastic. Bruin: “One is naturally more active than the other. But they see, for example, that tweeting can deliver much more. And so the trade press regularly picks up a message from our representatives.”



In the agricultural sector, social media has quickly and significantly established itself

**Bayer CropScience Vegetable Seeds: 'Through social media, we reach a greater potential'**

"With social media, you reach the sphere of influence of your customers", says Uwe Dijkshoorn of Bayer CropScience Vegetable Seeds. Traditional communication methods can be plainly directed: with a good mailing list you can send each customer exactly the right message. That is different with social media, because your potential reach is very much greater. For example, with a message on Twitter or Facebook you not only reach customers, but also educators, consultants and companies who are not yet customers, says Dijkshoorn. "Through LinkedIn you

reach other connections again. Our business page is followed by business services and especially the unemployed." Bayer CropScience Vegetable Seeds is active on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. "With regard to the selection of social media, we follow our customers. Visibility with that target audience is an important aim. Furthermore, we hope to direct CropScience people to the Nunhems websites for further traffic. It is therefore a strategic interaction between social media and traditional communications. Most of

the questions we receive do come via the websites." "Thus social media offers communication opportunities and you must translate these in your internal organization", says Dijkshoorn. "With social media, you become much more transparent. Take Facebook: if someone posts a message about your business, everyone can see it. That is why the use of social media has to be well organized. And you have to make employees aware that messages on social media will not disappear. What you post, stays there."

**HZPC: 'Our new website will become a digital crossroads'**

"Social media cannot be ignored", says Annemarie Blitterswijk of HZPC. "Because people look for you on Facebook or search your name on Twitter. Then it is better to be there, if only to prevent anyone else from opening an account with your company name." That sounds as if the use of social media is an enforced choice, but for now it is an important part of the communication strategy of HZPC focused on the new digital possibilities. "We share a lot of content via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, such as articles from our digital magazine Inzpire.

We want to be as widely visible to our target groups. We particularly use LinkedIn to share vacancies and to interest potential employees in our business." HZPC is currently working on a new website. It follows the same vein as social media. Blitterswijk: "The new site will become a real digital crossroads. It will be very visual, with lots of photos and infographics, and shorter texts. Interesting content which is easily shared via social media. Thereby we spread our message wide and generate traffic back to our website again." All those investments need to be recovered.

"The trouble with a lot of communication methods is that the investment rarely translates back into direct sales. However, it has everything to do with building your brand, even in a business-to-business environment. This also applies to social media. But with social media, it is possible to measure your reach and better direct your communication. You notice much earlier, for example, when your target audience is interested in a certain product. Through social media you can work on your communication strategy much more consciously."

.....  
**Beautiful #Barenbrug grass on a beautiful day @reddevils training pitch**

is why we want to be there. We want to take part in the interaction and show that we are developing innovative products for the agricultural sector.”

### **Transparent and authentic**

But using social media takes time, lots of time. Even a big company like Monsanto must therefore make choices. “With social media, you have to respond

quickly to what is happening. The time aspect is crucial. Hence, [discover.monsanto.com](http://discover.monsanto.com) for Europe is only available in French. Organizing the same for other languages would take too much time.”

But time is not the only reason why the use of social media can be complicated, admits Buckingham. In social media anyone can say anything about you. And what is sensible in such a situation? Doing nothing is not an option, as was discovered by computer manufacturer Dell in 2005. The company ignored a critical blog by Jeff Jarvis. It should not have done that. Critical Dell consumers then riled one another. Soon after, stock prices fell by about half and Dell had to drastically adapt its communication strategy.

Responding to critical messages on social media is the best option, Buckingham from Monsanto also recognizes. “In many cases, someone has the wrong impression about what we are doing, and we can demonstrate what is really going on. But if one of our staff gets involved in such a discussion, then he or she must make clear that they are a Monsanto employee. That is why, on my own Twitter account, it also clearly shows that I work for Monsanto. You have to be transparent. Moreover, there are also consumers and customers who support us. They often participate in such discussions. We do not ask them to do that: they do so spontaneously. And that is a good thing. Because the most important thing in social media is that the message is authentic.”

50

### **Barenbrug: ‘We portray ourselves as experts in the area of grass’**

“The content that you post on social media must be real, authentic. We have 110 years of expertise in grass, we are big in grass, we are grass. So we have a clear proposal, which is the starting point of everything that we do on social media”, says Paul van den Berg of Barenbrug. “We are active on Twitter, YouTube and Facebook. Social media is an integral part of our communications strategy.”

About 80% of sales at Barenbrug comes from the sale of grass seeds. The most important customer groups are dairy farmers, as well as managers of golf courses, sports fields and public green

spaces. Those different target audiences go well together on social media, says Van den Berg. “If you are seen as an expert in one sector, it helps in other sectors upon which you are focussing. And we get no complaints from, for example, Twitter followers that a message was not meant for them.” Barenbrug has a corporate account on Twitter. That account is managed by a social media manager, but in addition there are about twenty employees ‘from the shop floor’ who tweet with a personal Barenbrug account. “We have provided those colleagues with training, but do not force them to tweet.”



*Bringing delicious strawberries at home*



Vleetweg 12  
1619 PR Andijk  
Holland  
T.: +31 228 515280  
[www.abz-strawberry.com](http://www.abz-strawberry.com)



**HOLLAND STRAWBERRY HOUSE**