Headline: Farmers innovate, adapt as industry changes

By: Grace Vance

At six years old, Dustin Stanton knew he wanted to get into the egg business. Growing up on his family's farm inspired him to pursue a career in agriculture, but he didn't know how to start.

That is, not until his uncle bought him and his brother Austin six chicks. The brothers began selling their eggs to people at their church. Later on in high school, they joined Future Farmers of America, an agricultural youth program, that helped them develop the skills needed for the industry.

Flash forward 13 years, and today they sell to 60 outlets spread across mid-Missouri from Columbia to Centralia, where their operation is located. The brothers began with 500 chickens when they started their business in 2007, but that number has now increased to over 7,000 chickens, yielding about 6,000 eggs per day. This makes Stanton Brothers Eggs the largest free-range egg farm in mid-Missouri. But not every farmer makes enough to pay the mortgage.

"We are probably a little unique in the fact that we do this full time," Stanton said. "A lot of folks do farm, and they have a second career as well to make it all work. And there's nothing at all wrong with that. That's just not something that we had to do."

Much of his inspiration to get into the egg business comes from his family lineage. The Stanton's have been farming on the same property in Centralia since 1845. But his decision to continue farming might not remain as common in the coming years as young farmers struggle to enter the high-cost industry where the average cost of an acre of land in Missouri was $3,385 in 2017. The price has only increased in the past 58 years; in 1959 the average cost of an acre of land was $112.

"There are farmers all over that are trying to find unique ways to get their next generation back," Stanton said. "We do have to think outside the box. It's not possible for every single person to farm the same way, that's just not the way it works. So each farm has to be able to adapt to the environment they're in."

On the Stanton Brothers farm, their business includes growing the milo feed for the chickens, washing the eggs, boxing them, marketing the product then delivering to customers. While Stanton focuses the most on sales, marketing and delivering, he said he and his brother work together across the various production points.

This form of vertically integrated business, where the Stanton's produce everything they need for their product on the farm, is becoming the new normal for some farmers who are having to take care of the marketing in addition to the production of their product.

But overseeing all aspects of an operation can be difficult. Mark and Susie Mahnken of Legacy Beef deal with almost all of the production, administrative work and marketing involved in their business aside from a few part-time workers who assist them.

Susie Mahnken helps run their website and knows how hard it can be to market products online. Their previous website was costing them over $1,000 a year with little sales until a company called Barn2Door reached out to them to upgrade their e-commerce and allow customers to shop through their email newsletter.

“We launched our new website [this year.] It has paid for itself already with this COVID-19 popping up,” she said. “We have gotten so much more business in the last 30 days, 45 days from that website than we ever did in a year of our other websites.”

Marketing is just one way farmers are adapting to a changing industry. MU agriculture professor Leon Schumacher said technology is altering how farmers operate their land.

“We have a lot of new equipment right now that really is making agriculture much easier to manage,” he said. “The smart farm kinds of concepts that are stepping into the rural areas [are] really just now happening. But there's so many different things that even a person who works on a farm could manage with their cell phone.”

The opportunities that technology brings the farming industry is also influencing what educators teach the next generation of farmers. This technology requires training, which is why MU’s agricultural program has added three courses that explain the new technologies entering the industry like smart plugs and smart switches and how students can use and optimize them in the field.

But a college degree wasn’t always a factor for farmers. Young farmers or those who are starting out in the industry are 35% more likely than their older counterparts to have a four-year college degree, according to a 2009 report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). These young farmers are more educated than their ancestors, with sixty-nine percent of them earning college degrees according to the USDA’s 2017 Census of Agriculture.

Schumacher said farmers today have to use more skill sets than previous farmers to be competitive in the market.

“[Technology] is going to have impacts such that some of the people that are working right now, they may need to be retraining for something that’s going to start to be implemented just five years from now,” Schumacher said. “By 2025 we could have a significant number of individuals, not just in agriculture, [that need to be retrained] as we move forward in the technical revolution that we’re in the middle of.”

While the swift changes in the industry can make farmers feel like they are walking on unsteady ground, those like Stanton are optimistic about the next generation’s ability to innovate.

“On the same road we're on here, I can think of four other families that have the next generation coming back. And each of them are very unique in the way they're doing it,” Stanton said. “It's not easy. That's the truth. It would be much easier for me to go get a job that’s 40 hours and do that with a guaranteed paycheck. That's just not the life that I want to leave.”

For now, Stanton and his brother Austin are working to adapt to the changing landscape of farming, one egg at a time.