

Social Media on the Farm: A Comparative Analysis of the Digital
Marketing of Select Small Businesses in Agriculture

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ABSTRACT

SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE FARM: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF
THE DIGITAL MARKETING PRACTICES OF SELECT
SMALL BUSINESSES IN AGRICULTURE

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Social media has become a crucial tool in the marketing world and can help companies of all sizes grow in a variety of different ways. Specifically looking at small business farms, social media is extremely important in allowing transparency and showing the consumers how their food is raised. The purpose of this study was to examine the social media and online marketing strategies of selected meat processing small businesses. A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms. The research was conducted utilizing information from both farms' websites and Instagram pages. A comparative analysis was performed using a tool created by the researcher. The results showed that both farms are successful in reaching their target audience and keeping them engaged. The researcher advised that both companies should communicate more with their followers and post content that resonates with customers.

Keywords: social media marketing, small business, agriculture, digital marketing, agriculture marketing.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT	ii
TABLE OF CONTENTS	iii
Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE	1
Background of Study	1
Review of Literature	2
Purpose of the Study	8
Research Questions	8
Chapter 2 METHODS	9
Description of Organizations	9
Description of Instrument	10
Description of Procedures	10
Chapter 3 PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS	12
Social Media Content	12
Activity and Consumer Engagement	13
Relationship Between Farmer and Consumer	14
Chapter 4 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS	16
Discussion	16
Conclusions	19
Recommendations	20
REFERENCES	21
APPENDIXES	24

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Background of Study

Natural eating: it is something everyone is familiar with, but is not practiced in households as frequently as it was in the past. Today's world food market has become extremely globalized and processed, so much so that communities are unable to connect with their food and appreciate it anymore. In fact, as Holden (2017) noted, "Today, many Americans only experience food as an industrial product that doesn't look much like the original animal or plant" (p. 1). However, in recent years, social media has made it possible for companies to be more transparent with their customer base and allow consumers to see where their food is coming from. Specifically, the coronavirus outbreak has caused a new type of farming lifestyle content to become increasingly popular. It has encouraged people to stay home more and live simpler lives. Social media, specifically Instagram, has become an outlet for buyers to see where their food is sourced and raised.

Instagram, as well as other social media outlets, is allowing marketing to come more from an individual than from large institutions. Kim and Kim (2021) studied the growth in influencer marketing and found that there is strong correlation between the influencer's expertise, authenticity, and homophily, leading to trust and thus causing loyalty to the influencer, positive product attitude, and purchase intention (p. 228). Today, trust and influence exist more within personal relationships and genuine connection. Social platforms act as a solid base for companies to build their brand from.

Consequently, this improves the efficiency of which products are sold and increases profit.

Social media has a large influence on the food industry because of the clarity and honesty that is provided to the consumers of a business. Exposure to the private side of a business allows for a relationship to be built as well as a deeper understanding of what goes into the farming and raising of plants and animals. With that being said, it is critical that small businesses have a presence on social media in order to increase their customer base. The purpose of this study was to examine the social media and online marketing strategies of selected meat processing small businesses. A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms.

Review of Literature

Research for this review of literature was conducted at Robert E. Kennedy Library on the campus of California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. In addition to books and other resources, the following online databases were utilized: ABI/INFORM Complete, Business Source Premier, Science Direct, and Google Scholar. This review of literature includes the following subsections: social media marketing, customer engagement and communication in small businesses, and the incorporation of marketing technology into agriculture-based companies.

Marketing through social media is an effective and low-cost option that should be utilized by businesses of all sizes. Son and Niehm (2021) state that social media marketing varies from traditional practices because in the past marketing has relied heavily on local and regional markets. This causes businesses to be susceptible to

economic vulnerability. However, social media allows businesses to get past geographical constraints and reach more consumers (Son & Niehm). Additionally, building trust and transparency in a company is all about building relationships with clients, Black (2019) indicates that, “Social media is an extension of these relationships; it's a strategy that can simultaneously improve retention and attract new business” (p. 11). With that being said, social media allows for a completely new connection to be made with consumers. Adding on to that, Son and Niehm found that it also “enables two-way communication to respond to customers, allowing them to better address customer interests and questions about their products and offerings” (p. 628). Because of social media, purchasers can quickly get questions answered as well as have their opinions heard.

When it comes to making purchase decisions, social media has a huge influence on consumer purchase trends. Consumers are now making purchases based on influence rather than traditional marketing techniques and campaigns. Through their research, Kumar and Greene (2017) found that people are changing the way they are influenced to buy goods:

With the advent of social media, media fragmentation has made customers less prone to making decisions based on classic purchase funnel but rather they are more likely to make purchase decisions based on their own opinions, motivated by information from social media rather than from firm-initiated marketing. (p. 268)

This correlates with what was mentioned before about social media allowing for brands to become ‘humanized.’ Gensler et al. (2013) concludes in their research that

“Humanizing of brands generates more favorable consumer attitudes and thus improves brand performance” (p. 250). It is desirable for consumers to be able to be passionate about a brand, rather than use products that are inanimate. When beginning to market through social media, businesses should be clear about goals and objectives and create a strategic plan based off that.

Small businesses have the potential and opportunity to establish these long-lasting relationships with consumers. Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) explain that social media marketing is increasingly valuable to small businesses because, “provides a platform that has the potential to expose small businesses to numerous potential customers and to nurture their existing customer base in an inexpensive and effective manner” (p. 188). Allowing customers to feel like they are more involved in the company will build brand loyalty and increase sales. When looking at the change in customers attitudes, Brodie et al. (2013) brings up the importance of emotional gratification that consumers receive through social media; “The gratification participants feel from engaging in the community stems from a sense of belonging to the group, thus highlighting the importance of the social aspect of consumer engagement” (p. 110). The consumer engagement process can and should be highly collaborative and experiential. Brodie et al. concludes that their findings, “show that the consumer engagement process is initiated largely by consumers for information. Further, the consumer engagement process is highly interactive, experiential, and based on a number of sub-processes, including: learning, sharing, advocating, socializing, and co-developing” (p. 112). The findings from their work can be found below in Figure 1.

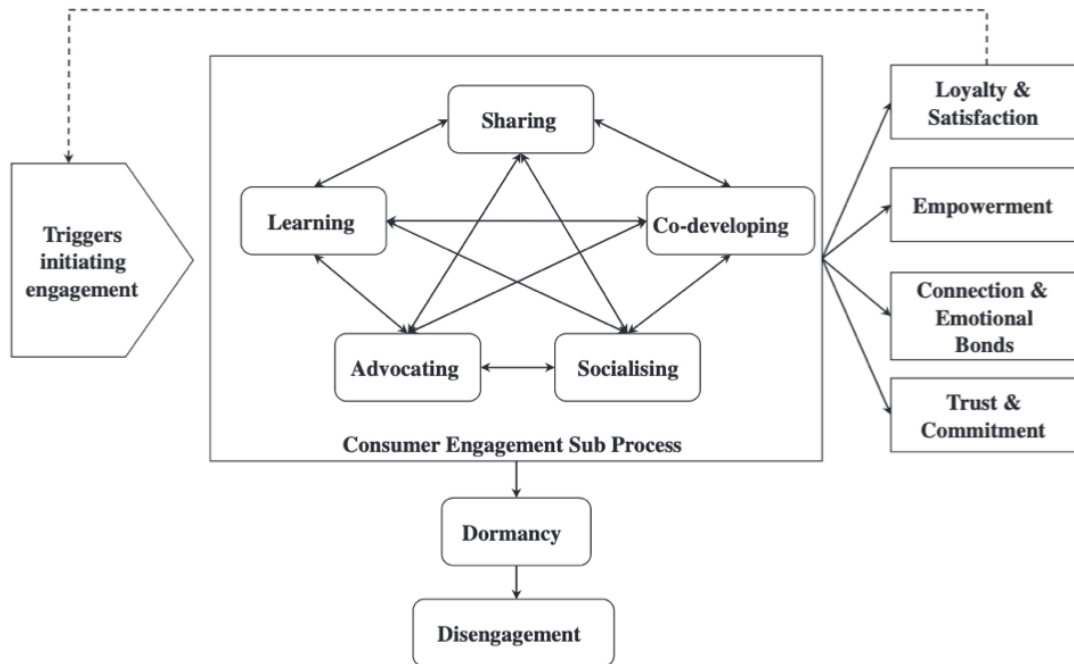


Fig. 2. Consumer engagement process in a virtual brand community.

Figure 1: Consumer engagement in a virtual brand community (Brodie et al., 2013)

Social media marketing is extremely beneficial to small businesses because of the fact that it helps to gain brand awareness. Schaupp and Bélanger (2014) bring up another point that “engaging in social media efforts can help generate exposure and increase traffic for the small business at a fraction of the cost of traditional marketing approaches” (p. 188). Digital marketing gets businesses out there for people to see. He et al. (2017) found, “The biggest challenge for small business owners is to reach customers effectively with limited resources. Since small businesses often face resource constraints, the use of social media can be an attractive tool to enhance marketing and customer outreach” (p. 150). Creating an online group gives individuals a purpose in the company. In fact, Kumar and Greene (2017) express that, “Research has found that brand community

participation leads to positive brand outcomes, such as increase in customer profitability and stronger brand engagement, loyalty, and purchase intentions” (p. 273).

As social media continues to change the way businesses communicate with customers, agriculture cannot be secluded from this change. Effective agricultural marketing can not only attract more customers, but it can also boost sales and increase profit. Not only that, but marketing to consumers through social media allows an inside look at how their food is being produced. Morris and Penri (2017) discovered, “Consumers are becoming far more conscious of where and how their food is produced. Social media allows them to connect to the producer and increase traceability and trust” (p. 1036). As mentioned before, now more than ever people are becoming engaged with how their food is made and where it is sourced. Aaditi (2020) builds off of that argument and states that, “When it comes to food, buyers often look for transparency i.e. businesses that are honest about their practice. Social media is a great way to provide consumers with more knowledge about what occurs in your work regularly” (p. 51). Allowing people to connect and engage with their food is becoming more and more important in today's world.

Not only does social media allow for the communication between producer and consumer, but it is also beneficial for communication within the industry. Stanley (2013) studied the benefits that social media can have on agricultural companies:

The value of social media for the agricultural industry lies in the value of social capital. It brings the farmer, industry, and consumer closer together so that there is more transparency, engagement, trust, and authenticity in the supply chain.

Financial returns are often an indirect result of improved social capital. Social

Media enables farmers to be part of the conversation surrounding controversial and emotional issues having to do with farming practices E.g. animal welfare, genetic modification and environmental issues. People will be talking about our industry whether we are involved or not. (pp. 1-2)

Stanley goes on to argue that social media allows farmers, ranchers, and others in the agricultural industry to be more in touch with customer needs and viewpoints. Individuals prioritize having clarity in the foods they are putting in their bodies and want to insure the morality behind it. Stanley also mentions that not only is social media great for its marketing ability, but it also allows farmers to have a voice on controversial topics. Through social media, discussion of industry issues can be widely discussed between farmers, agribusinesses, and consumers. As buyers become more in touch and interested in where their food is coming from, they will become part of the conversation.

People will be talking about farming practices and the agricultural business, it is only the difference if the producers will have a voice or not.

As well as its benefit of introducing goods to consumers, social media is also favorable in bringing together people within the industry. Stanley (2013) explains that “Marketing using social platforms can enable agribusinesses to connect with a growing farming demographic online by providing content that is of value” (p. 2). Communication tools can be used in various different forms through social media, it is not just limited to two-way communication with the consumer. Benefits from people within the agricultural industry helping one another through digital media include bringing change, sparking creativity, problem solving, and overall improving the food that is distributed to the public.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the social media and online marketing strategies of selected meat processing small businesses. A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms.

Research Questions

This study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What social media platforms are currently being utilized by the two farms?
2. What type of content is being posted on the social media platforms of both farms?
3. What is the digital relationship between the farms and their customer base?
4. How effective are the social media platforms currently being utilized by the two farms?
5. How effective is the content being posted on the social media platforms of both farms?
6. How effective is the digital relationship between the farms and their customer base?

Chapter 2

METHODS

The purpose of this study was to examine the social media and online marketing strategies of selected meat processing small businesses. A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms. This chapter includes the following sections: description of organizations, description of instrument, and description of procedures.

Description of Organizations

A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms. Ballerina Farm (2022) is a family-owned small business based out of Kamas, Utah. The couple, Hannah and Daniel, were both raised in the city and discovered their passion for raising animals after observing the nurturing practices while they lived abroad in Brazil. They decided to bring these practices back to the states, bought a farm, and have become wildly successful in selling various products. They now teach their children how to run the farm, as well as share and educate others on homestead practices through various social media sites (Ballerina Farm).

Five Marys Farms (2021) is also a family-owned small business, but on a broader scale. Mary and Brian found a need in the system for locally farmed fresh meat when they were searching for ingredients for their restaurant. When they found that nobody local could fulfill their needs - they decided to do it themselves. Both having a background in agriculture, the two of them and their five children became full time cattle

ranchers. They dedicated their lives to shipping meats directly to customers that value well-raised and well-sourced meats, as well as serving it in their restaurants (Five Marys Farms).

Description of Instrument

The instrument utilized in this study was a best practices guide developed by the researcher (see Appendix A). It was designed to analyze the social media marketing strategies utilized by the two family-owned small businesses: Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms. The instrument created consists of six main categories, including: number of followers, average number of posts per month, average engagement on posts, time of day posts are made, company interaction through posts, and website linking to social media.

A pilot study was conducted on a similar small business, Turner Farm, to determine the effectiveness of the instrument. Succeeding the pilot, the language was changed to better fit the questions being asked, and question six was modified to assess the companies' websites as well. Additionally, the instrument was altered to collect an appropriate amount of both qualitative and quantitative data. Doing this pilot allowed the researcher to understand what goes into creating content for said companies on a deeper level.

Description of Procedures

A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms. The instrument utilized in this study was a best practices guide developed by the

researcher. For the purposes of this study, the researcher obtained data from various social media sites run by both small business farms.

The procedure began with an analysis of the homepage of both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms Instagram pages. Next, the researcher looked even further into the data analytics of posts. This is seen in questions two and three of the instrument, asking specifically about average number of posts per month and average engagement on posts. Next, the researcher examined what time of day both companies typically post their content and if that influences the engagement. The last step of the process is to look at if and how both companies interact and respond to customers through Instagram posts. Finally, both the websites and the Instagram pages for both farms were examined to see if they reflected the same. Through this process, analysis was conducted mainly through the Instagram pages of both companies, as well as both of their website homepages. In addition to the homepages of both small businesses, articles were also used from the following: Wall Street Journal, Utah Farm Bureau, and Forbes.

Chapter 3

PRESENTATION OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the social media and online marketing strategies of selected meat processing small businesses. A comparative analysis was conducted on Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farm. This chapter includes the following sections: social media content, activity and consumer engagement, and relationship between farmer and consumer.

Social Media Content

Both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms utilize numerous social media accounts including Facebook and TikTok, however, what they are most known for is their influence on Instagram. Five Marys Farms has a total of 221,000 followers on Instagram, while Ballerina Farm has 452,000 followers. Both companies are very active on social media platforms and can even go as far as being referred to as influencers, or 'farm-fluencers.' The type of farming-lifestyle content that the two post encourage people to live more simple lives.

The average amount of posts on Instagram per month for Ballerina Farm is 5.9 posts, while Five Marys Farms shares much more with an average of 27.2 posts per month. With that being said, both accounts are equally active on their Instagram stories, and go live with their followers frequently. Where the two companies differ from one another, is the type of content that is posted. Five Marys Farms is very branded and uses the same marketing tactics across all platforms of their company. Ballerina Farm, on the

other hand, is much more casual with their posts and has less consistency in posting in terms of the aesthetic of their page.

In regards to how the two companies advertise their Instagram sites, in which they market through, the two differ. Five Marys Farms has many divisions throughout the company that exposes customers to their social media presence, these include the Five Marys restaurants, cookbooks, their blog, homeschooling guides, and more. Additionally, they have their Instagram and Facebook handles throughout their entire website.

Ballerina Farm, on the other hand, does not have their social media listed on their website, and instead they have become 'influencers' which has caused magazines to write articles about them to get their name out there. In terms of the content posted by the two small businesses, they are very similar. They both post everyday activities, family life, and how they are farming and raising food. There truly are no days off while living on a farm, and the social media platforms of both companies definitely show their audience that.

Activity and Consumer Engagement

Both farms are very active about posting their everyday activities. Ballerina Farm has an average of 26 stories posted per day, while Five Marys Farms typically posts 32 stories daily. The daily stories and posts done by both companies consist of life on the farm, their children's milestones, how the food they sell is raised, and recipes. Ballerina Farm sells their sourdough starter through their website, and because of that, Hannah, owner of Ballerina Farm, makes multiple loaves per week and posts the process.

Conversely, Five Marys Farms does not do as much baking, but rather has many different

branches to the company, as mentioned before, that they show to customers through their stories. Food prep is something that both business owners have in common. They both give tutorials through their stories on how to cook their meat products, as well as what sides and more to pair it with.

When looking at the engagement that the two companies receive through Instagram, the researcher is not able to see the views from an outside point of view, but engagement can be measured by the amount of comments posts receive. Looking at the ten most recent posts, Ballerina Farm received a total of 11,471 comments through all the posts, making that an average of 1,147.1 comments per post. Five Marys Farms received 1,331 comments total with their last ten posts, making that an average of 133.1 comments per post. Looking even further, the majority of these comments were reactions, and there were minimal questions being asked. Because of that, it can be inferred that more questions are asked through direct message.

Relationship Between Farmer and Consumer

Previously the researcher looked at how many comments both companies received on posts. The researcher analyzed further to look at how much both companies responded to comments and communicated with consumers. Before, it could be seen that Ballerina Farm had a much higher engagement rate than Five Marys Farms, however, when looking at the same ten posts, research shows that Five Marys Farms communicates with their following more. Out of the ten posts looked at before, Ballerina Farm had 17 total responses, making that an average of 1.7 responses per post. On the other hand, Five Marys Farms had a total of 35 replies throughout the ten posts, making their average 3.5

responses per post. With that being said, both accounts ‘like’ every comment that they receive on their posts, giving recognition to the individual.

Additionally, Instagram polls have become increasingly popular in recent years and helps boost communication between farmers and consumers. Both companies have taken full advantage of that and get their following involved in giveaways and drawings. Not only do Instagram polls make social media more personal, but they also give businesses real time data from their consumers. Better understanding of the customers wants and needs are critical in tailoring products that fit the criteria, and can help small businesses make more perceptive decisions.

Chapter 4

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Social media marketing is becoming increasingly important for businesses, particularly small businesses, to take advantage of. Marketing through social media allows for brands to build off of authenticity and form a relationship with their consumers. This conclusion chapter includes the following: a discussion of the findings, limitations of the research, conclusions based on research questions, and recommendations for the future.

Discussion

Instagram is currently being utilized by both small business farmers in a successful manner. Using this online form of marketing, both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms have been able to build a very strong and loyal customer following. Kumar and Greene (2017) found through their research that people are becoming influenced to buy goods through digital media, rather than the classic purchase funnel. They state that in today's world, people are more motivated by personal information rather than firm-initiated marketing tactics. Both farms are very active on this social media platform and are constantly keeping followers up to date on what is happening on the two farms. Effective posting strategies allow for a connection to be made with consumers as well as bring in new customers. Additionally, posting on Instagram brings awareness to how food is raised and produced, and makes it a more transparent process. Knowing where the food that is consumed is coming from is becoming increasingly important. Both Five

Marys Farms and Ballerina Farm should continue to post regularly in order to keep their audiences engaged. A suggestion from the researcher would be to get buyers involved more through polls and online giveaways. Giveaways are a great way to have your posts shared, as well as gain new followers.

The social media content that is posted on the Instagram accounts of both farms has a very old-fashioned feel. They incorporate homestead practices into their everyday life, and practice living off of the minimum - a very simple life. Their content is consistent while also remaining true to their individual values and true to both of their tasteful appearances. As Aaditi (2020) studied, buyers look for transparency and honesty when looking into the products they are purchasing, specifically in food. Social media is a great outlet to show consumers the work that goes into their food, and both farms have their own unique way of portraying that to their audience. Five Marys Farms is very successful in creating congruent content that is aesthetically pleasing to their audience. Ballerina Farm, on the other hand, could improve the creativity of their page by using the same filters throughout their feed. In addition to the raising of the animals, both accounts post cooking tutorials using their own meat products. Five Marys Farms is more active in posting their nightly roast dinners, while Ballerina Farm posts more homestead practices and sourdough baking. While it is important to share personal aspects with followers, it is important not to overshare. In terms of content, the researcher recommends that Ballerina Farm post more cooking videos using their cuts of meat, and for Five Marys Farms it is recommended that they share more of their products and less of their children's lives. Additionally, it is recommended that Ballerina Farm works on enhancing the aesthetic of their Instagram page.

The relationship between farmer and consumer is one that originated from the desire of consumers to know the source of their food. Stanley (2013) found that social media brings the farmer, consumer, and industry closer together to allow for more authenticity, transparency, and engagement in business logistics. Not only does two-way communication help the consumer make purchasing choices, but it also helps the farmers to be more in touch with the customers' needs. Both Five Marys Farms and Ballerina Farm are effective in communicating to their customer base and demonstrating to consumers how the animals are raised. With that being said, there is room for improvement in responding and communicating with their followers. While both companies 'liked' and acknowledged all comments, both had a small response rate. It is recommended that both companies increase their response rates and answer questions that are asked from their following.

Through the research process there were a number of limitations that occurred. Due to the time frame of this research study, research was only done on the latest ten posts. On top of that, research was only conducted on five days of Instagram stories. Additionally, while all of the data found for the research study was taken from scholarly databases, all of the sources used were online sources. This could be considered limited access because there could be a range of new information that is not yet available online. Another bias to consider is that similar to the two small business farms, the researcher also has a family-owned cattle business. The researcher recognized these biases and did everything they could to avoid them. Despite the limitations, the comparative analysis provides clear insight into social media marketing as well as the best strategies to be utilized by agricultural small businesses.

Overall, social media is a functional and useful tool for marketing and gaining positive recognition. Reaching a market through social media allows for the consumer to experience the company and see what goes on behind the scenes in a unique and personal manner. In the agricultural world specifically, it allows for consumers to see how their food is being raised and processed and allows for a more authentic customer experience. Additionally, it also gives farmers within the industry the opportunity to learn and help one another succeed. Social media is becoming increasingly useful in the marketing industry, and it is important for businesses, small businesses especially, to get behind the trend.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms both use Instagram as their main form of communication with consumers.
2. Both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms post a variety of content on their Instagram pages including daily life, cooking tutorials, and raising their animals.
3. Both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms communicate with their consumers and have a strong digital relationship.
4. Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms are both effective in utilizing Instagram as their main social media platform, but no other social media platforms are utilized.

5. While Ballerina Farm is effective at keeping a balance of personal life and business, Five Marys Farms gives too much attention to family life and not enough to meat processing.
6. Both Ballerina Farm and Five Marys Farms are very effective at engaging followers through the content they post.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Social media should be more widely used as a marketing tool for agricultural small businesses.
2. Five Marys Farms should post more content based around raising animals, and less about personal day-to-day activities.
3. Both Five Marys Farms and Ballerina Farm should be more consistent about replying to comments.
4. Both Five Marys Farms and Ballerina Farm should get consumers involved through Instagram polls and online giveaways.
5. Ballerina Farm should post more cooking videos using their cuts of meat.
6. Ballerina Farm should improve their aesthetic of photos and videos on their feed.
7. Future research should study the engagement rates for a longer period of time and examine a higher number of posts to get more exact data.

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APPENDIXES

Appendix A

Instrument

INSTRUMENT

	Amount	Description
1. Number of Followers		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		
2. Average Number of posts per month		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		
3. Average engagement on posts		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		
4. Time of day posts are made		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		
5. Does the company interact and respond to customers through Instagram posts?		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		
6. Is there a link to their social media from the company website?		
Ballerina Farm		
Five Marys Farms		