Utilizing Basic Digital Photography Techniques on the Farm[1]

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Introduction

With the average American consumer two to three generations removed from the farm, the phrase "perception is reality" certainly applies to the agriculture industry. Less than 2% of Americans are directly involved with production agriculture (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005), resulting in a disconnect between the general public and the agricultural community. For an overwhelming majority of the population, exposure to agricultural production might come from the media in the simple form of a photograph. In the "perception is reality" environment and without many consumers having firsthand experience in agriculture, misperceptions can result in negative public opinion of agriculture. However, agriculturists can utilize digital photography techniques on the farm to connect the public with correct and transparent information about agriculture.

Taking digital photographs on the farm does not have to be a cumbersome process. A simple digital camera or cell phone camera can often produce adequate-quality photographs. Bulky or expensive equipment is not necessary. This publication focuses on plant and livestock photography and caption writing and outlines tips for taking digital photographs on the farm using a basic digital or cell phone camera.

Basic Photography Techniques

Several basic photography principles can be applied to a farm setting, whether photographing plants or animals. For example, angles can create interest in a photograph by portraying an object or scene from an unusual view, such as above or below the object (Telg, 2010a). Using the *rule of thirds* to compose and frame a photograph highlights action or the major components of a photo. The rule of thirds involves imagining "dividing an image into thirds horizontally and vertically so that you have nine parts" (Telg, 2010a, p. 2). Another photography principle is the use of lines to draw the viewer's eye. "Lines can be the shape of a path, a line of trees, a fence, or any feature in an image" (Telg, 2010a, p. 2). Different types of lines can be used to convey messages and add interest to a photograph. Diagonal lines can suggest depth or action. Vertical lines can convey power, strength, or even growth. Horizontal lines can convey stability or rest and can easily follow the rule of thirds. Converging lines can be used to draw the viewer's eye to a particular point in the photograph (Telg, 2010a).

Plant or Crop Photography

Plants and field crops are often grown in monoculture systems where the same plant is grown in continuous rows or segments. Plants or field crops can be photographed from a variety of angles, from the base of the plant to the tractor seat view (Figure 1).

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Figure 1. Using creative angles, such as this low-angle shot, can add interest to plant photographs.
Credits: Adrienne Boyette

Rows, horizons, stalks, and tree trunks can all be used as lines to create interest or serve as guidelines for the rule of thirds (Figures 2 and 3).

Figure 2. Diagonal lines can add depth and perspective to any agriculture-related photograph, such as this photo of row crops in a greenhouse.
Credits: Adrienne Boyette

Figure 3. Diagonal lines are used to draw the viewer's eye through the photograph.
Credits: Erica Der

Photos can be taken at a close distance or from far away. When photographing plants, keep the position of the sun in mind to reduce the tendency to capture undesirable shadows. If capturing images of plants or crops from a distance, remember to include a caption or other means of identifying the subject in the photo. In addition, plants can be photographed at different life stages. Although the flowering stage of many crops might be brief, it is an opportunity to compose plant photographs with more color and texture. Also, many consumers only see the finished product and may not understand the different stages of plant growth. For example, a field of drying soybeans might be perceived as a crop left to waste instead of an integral part of the harvesting process. Therefore, it is imperative to include descriptions in order to accurately portray the subject of the photograph.

Animal or Livestock Photography

Photographing farm animals or livestock is an opportunity to portray animal agriculture positively or, if done incorrectly, to generate consumer misperceptions. Portrayal of animal welfare should be considered when photographing animals on the farm. When photographing livestock in their natural environment, such as cattle in a pasture, grooming the animal is not as much of a priority as it is when photographing a show bull after a grand champion drive. However, when photographing livestock in their natural environment, it is important to portray a healthy living environment. For example, if a cattle operation includes wooded areas for cattle to rest with little grass, a photograph of those cattle could portray an undesirable grazing environment when compared to cattle in a lush, open pasture. Cattle ranchers in Florida might know the

benefits of both wooded areas and open pasture to an operation, but consumers may not have an understanding of those environments to interpret the photograph (Figure 4).

Figure 4. When photographing livestock in their natural environment, it is important that the environment be perceived as healthy and desirable.
Credits: Jillian Etress and Auburn University Dairy

Patience is key when photographing farm animals. Remember to move slowly, take multiple photographs, and enlist help to position the animal. Cattle should be photographed uphill, with the ears forward and head up, and from a side view (The North American Piedmontese Cattle Association, 2011) (Figure 5).

Figure 5. This photograph shows how to correctly position cattle for a photograph with the head up and ears forward.
Credits: Crystalle Bonidy

For all livestock, show the animal as it is without doctoring the photo with editing software; choose a clean, clutter-free background; pose the animal appropriately; and try to use a flash (Telg, 2010a). When photographing animals in action shots, give the animal plenty of room in the camera viewfinder and shoot from a variety of angles to compose an interesting image (Telg, 2010a).

Photo Captions

When writing photo captions, use complete sentences, include the first and last names of people in the photo, and describe the action that is taking place. Even if the photograph accompanies text that describes the action in the photo, a caption should still be included. A well-composed and captioned photograph can motivate the viewer to read the accompanying text. When writing captions for agricultural images, be aware of and refrain from using technical industry jargon. Captions should be clear, concise, and serve as an opportunity to further educate the reader.

Literature Cited and Additional Information

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