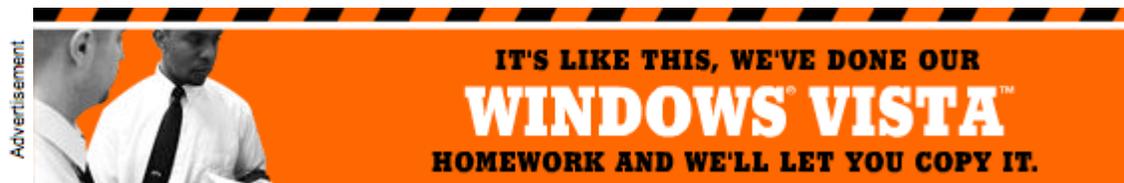


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# Online forums replacing coffee shops for tip-seeking farmers

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By David Kohl, AP

By James Hannah, The Associated Press

MARTINSVILLE, Ohio — Tucked away in the den of his 127-year-old farmhouse, Ed Winkle huddles over his computer. The screen's soft glow lights up his eyeglasses, reflecting messages about tractors, corn hybrids and crop insurance.

Winkle is checking the latest postings on his favorite Internet farm forum. Advice from fellow farmers around the country has enabled him to increase his corn and soybean production, better market his crops, learn how to rebuild engines and get good tires for his tractor.

Online message boards and chat rooms are replacing rural coffee shops and feed mills as places for farmers to talk farming and trade tips as more of rural America goes online.

"You get the best thinkers in agriculture," Winkle said of the forums. "You're mixing such a diverse group of people — from different areas, from different backgrounds, different experiences, different ways of farming."

Fifty-one percent of U.S. farms have Internet access, according to a July 2005 report by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, up from 48% in 2003. More than two-thirds of them, however, still use dial-up modems to connect.

The popularity of online farm forums has grown as well, said Mack Strickland, an agricultural engineer at Purdue University and farm-computer expert. Some forums claim to have as many as 30,000 registered users.

The Internet division of Farm Journal Media, [www.agweb.com](http://www.agweb.com), says user traffic doubled between October 2005 and October 2006, with the forums on the site enjoying similar growth. Traffic on the Des Moines-based [www.agriculture.com](http://www.agriculture.com) has increased 20% to 25% over the past year, said editor John Walter. Both are free sites supported by ads.

Enthusiasts say the forums have improved farm production and saved farmers precious dollars by helping them avoid costly mistakes in planting, fertilizing, equipment buys and maintenance. And forums have enabled farmers

— many of them miles from their nearest neighbor — to educate each other and build community.

"We all like to talk to folks like ourselves who have the same problems," said Stan Ernst, a marketing instructor at Ohio State University's department of agricultural economics. "We have so much riding on many of our decisions economically that you've got to find people with experience."

A farmer can spend as much as \$160,000 on a combine, for example. If it breaks down during a critical harvest time, that could mean the difference between a profit and a loss.

Walter said the average visitor to [www.agriculture.com](http://www.agriculture.com) spends 11 minutes at a time on the site.

"It's enough time to have a cup of coffee and a conversation and learn something," he said. "It's just rearranged who their neighbors are in a sense. You can't help but think that has changed farming to some degree."

Rural America has lagged behind the cities in Internet usage — especially broadband — because wiring the population-rich cities is more profitable and wiring the countryside more expensive due to long distances and natural barriers.

Now, farmers and existing rural businesses are becoming more reliant on the Internet to be competitive, and rural communities are becoming more aggressive in seeking Internet access. They see it as a way to attract white-collar jobs, and urban dwellers who have moved to the country are demanding it.

Paul Butler, who grows corn and soybeans on 260 acres in Macon, Ill., returned to farming four years ago after 25 years in the computer business. He doubts he would have made it without online advice from fellow farmers.

"I would have made a lot of expensive mistakes," said Butler, 39, who has a broadband connection. "Purchasing seed is a pretty complicated decision. It was nice to have 20 unbiased people that weren't selling seed that could give me an opinion on it."

Eric Neer, 24, of Davenport, Iowa, discovered farm forums from fellow students when he was in college.

Although he seldom posts a question, Neer — who works for a farm equipment manufacturer — devours the information he sees on precision farming, using the forums to shop for equipment and information about tractors and combines that are steered by computers linked to global positioning satellites.

Machinery — the universal language of farmers — is a hot topic in farm forums. So is when best to take crops to market to get the best price. Sometimes the talk veers away from pure farming.

In a recent exchange on [www.newagtalk.com](http://www.newagtalk.com), a popular farm forum, an Illinois farmer complained that the starter on his pickup was acting up. A fellow farmer replied that the electric solenoid atop the starter was probably worn out and the contact sticking in the closed position.

"I would put a whole new starter on it," he wrote. "Fix it now before it ruins the flywheel teeth."

An Ohio farmer wondered if he should replace his fuel-oil furnace with a geothermal heating system. The idea got high marks from a farmer in Indiana who said a geothermal system leaves no smell or residue and makes less noise. Then he offered tips on insulation and heat distribution.

Farmers have to decide themselves whether the advice they get is sound. Agriculture.com's Walter said he tries to screen out the hokum, blowhards and occasional shyster. Purdue's Strickland said some users give opinions not based on fact or research.

Winkle, 57, became a believer when a tip from an Iowa farmer prompted him to change his no-till farming technique. Winkle increased his yield by about 30%.

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During the winter, he spends about two hours a day wading through the forums from his farm, about 40 miles northeast of Cincinnati. Since April, he has posted 1,738 messages on one forum alone.

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Some farmers still rely on the neighbor they know.

"You can get some good ideas from people in other states, but they're dealing with different circumstances," said Jim Meimer, who raises corn, soybeans and wheat on 900 acres.

Meimer, 28, goes online to get market data but prefers to get advice from friends and neighbors. He often sees them at the feed store and fertilizer plant when he goes into nearby Mount Gilead, Ohio, to pay bills.

Glen Feichtner, 48, who raises 300 head of cattle near New Washington, Ohio, prefers to get his tips from fellow farmers at the stockyard and grain elevator because he knows they have been successful.

"I get face-to-face interaction," he said. "I know these people. I know their story."

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