



Ellen Schlechter

- 20-years-old
- Orient, S.D.
- Founder and co-owner of The Calving Book App
- Sophomore at South Dakota State University majoring in agricultural business and business economics with marketing minors

Background: Schlechter's family operates a diversified farm business in north-central South Dakota near Orient. Her father and two uncles form one partnership, while her brother and two cousins form another. Together, the family runs 700 cow/calf pairs while farming wheat, corn and soybeans along with forage crops like oats. They also operate hog barns and a fertilizer business.

Family: Parents—Terry and Mary; siblings—John (22) and Grace (17)

Business Philosophy: "Do what needs done and do it well," Schlechter says. "I didn't set out at 14-years-old to launch a business, but our family needed a solution, and I was able to provide it. Luckily, it's useful to other people too!"

Rule to Follow: Schlechter recalls a speaker in one of her classes talking about time management versus priority management. "His talk stuck with me. We're never going to have enough time, so you have to be clear on your priorities and manage them well."

Creating in the CLOUD

By Amy Blum

"Necessity is the mother of invention." ~ Plato, ancient Greek philosopher

The Schlechter family is like many other South Dakota farm and ranch families. Diversification allows multiple generations opportunity. Children are expected to help with farm and ranch duties. And, for Pete's sake, when calving season rolls around, don't lose the calving book!

Enter Ellen Schlechter of Orient, S.D.

About six years ago, Schlechter's dad and one of her cousins became frustrated with the family's constantly missing calving book. The commercial, multi-generational operators had up to nine people using the same paper book for calving records. Unfortunately, the book had a way of rarely being where it was supposed to be, leaving whomever was checking pastures without a way to record data.

"Dad and Xavier [her cousin] spent about a year searching for an online solution. They couldn't find anything to suit our needs, and they went from frustrated to mad. That's when I got told to fix it," Schlechter recalls.

At 14-years-old with no coding experience, Schlechter was tasked to figure out a solution to the family's age-old challenge – create an online record-keeping system easily used by multiple people and in real-time.

"I've been known as the technology person around our farm, but I didn't have any idea where to start," the now 20-year-old sophomore at South Dakota State University says. "I started by giving everyone access to an Excel spreadsheet. That lasted one season! It was too cumbersome and still only a spreadsheet."

Schlechter found herself searching topics like "how to make an app." While she learned some basic coding, her searches weren't yielding results. Then, she stumbled upon an online ad for app creation.

"I guess it's one time when an online ad actually worked," Schlechter laughs. "On July 6, 2014, I started developing. On Nov. 1st as a sophomore in high school, I launched the first version of The Calving Book App."

By Christmas Eve, Schlechter's phone was blowing up as people across the country discovered her newly created Facebook page.

"We knew the app was going to work for us, so we thought maybe it would work for someone else," she says. "Xavier and I became business partners on The Calving Book, and we've spent the past four years marketing and improving the original version."

With more than 10,000 accounts created, The Calving Book has received steady feedback. Schlechter says that feedback drives improvements and updates.

"Our app is industry-driven, so user feedback absolutely fuels change," she says. "I want to take this app as far as we can by expanding and growing to fit even more markets. Right now, we know it works great for commercial producers like us, but we're seeing more growth and customization in purebred operations. This remains an exciting venture."

Currently, The Calving Book App is available on both Apple and Android devices. It allows multiple users to update the same calving book while providing ample customizations for individual operations. The app is available with a free trial period; after that, users can choose one of two annual subscription options.

"Xavier and I work well as a team. He handles sales and some marketing, which helps my schedule a lot, especially now that he's back home as a partner with my brother and another cousin," Schlechter says.

Balancing a full plate isn't new to the agriculture business/business economics double major. Even as an active high school student, she helped on the family farm. College didn't change her involvement; in fact, age and experience simply gave her bigger roles in family business.

"I still help with calving, planting and harvesting," Schlechter says. "My family also has a fertilizer business, so I handle a lot of the office work. Spring can definitely get tricky, but so far, my professors and our clients have all been very understanding."

Though Schlechter doesn't know where her future will take her, she knows she has many options. She also knows The Calving Book App will be part of her future.

"I'm driven because I have to be! People rely on this app now. It has become something transformative for the cattle producers who use it. I can't leave our users or my family in the dark now," Schlechter says.

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