

## **SOCIAL MEDIA DIRECTIONS: A LOOK AT NEW TOOLS FOR AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATORS AND HOW THEY ARE REPLACING EXISTING SYSTEMS**

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### **Abstract**

This morning I'm going to share knowledge we've gained about blogging and the various social channels like Facebook and Twitter and also try to draw comparisons between standard, long-used methods of communications and the newer tools available now.

This knowledge comes from experiences in both our own business and in several instances where we've informally consulted with Extension groups on these topics.

I use the term "informally consulted" because I'm reluctant to say that we're in the consulting business with any of this. But somebody recently defined a consultant as a person who has made all the possible mistakes in a narrowly defined subject area.

From that perspective, the consultant label fits. If the cheapest mistakes to learn from are somebody else's, you're in the right room.

Like many of our friends in Extension, our group has been grappling with all these social channels and tools and trying to find where they may fit with our objectives. We've tried a number of approaches, had success with some and dropped others.

Image: A Different Model.

One of the more interesting things we've learned about social media is that it frees Extension professionals from what I'd call a "top-down model."

By top-down, I mean that everything is housed on the main campus, and that's where plans are formulated and put into place. People on the main campus – often far removed from the field – also controlled what went on the web and when it appeared. Content often had to be approved by other parties or even committees before IT departments would even put it on their job list.

All that leads to delays and frustration.

That's the top-down scenario.

What we have now – with blogs, Facebook and similar channels – is a new paradigm. And it's not a bottom-up system, either.

What we have now is a universe where everybody is communicating with everybody else. That's really the essence of social media and social networking.

You become both the consumer of information and, if you so choose, the publisher, broadcaster and librarian of your own content.

Everything moves in real time.

Social channels like Facebook and Twitter make the content available to anyone who believes that you're worth following.

Search engines potentially make the content available to everyone else.

Image: Pyramid.

Let's take a look at some of the tools, how they affect you and how various components might fit together for you.

We'll start with this pyramid...

We go into far more detail about the pyramid approach on our related website, AgCom101.Com. But let's take a quick look at it here, then you can pull it up later for further review.

It shows you three types of elements, those that are:

Existing or easily available. They're marked in blue.

Required in the plan, probably not in place yet but relatively easy to implement. Those levels are in red.

Optional and extra. These can be useful tools but may not serve a purpose for everyone and/or they're expensive to implement. Those are in gray.

The closer to the bottom, the more important each component is.

At the bottom, marked in blue, you'll find content – or as we listed it here, “Something to say.” Depending on your job, you already may be cranking out newsletters, advisories, recs or meeting announcements.

Next up is a place to put that content – in this case, a blog. For about \$200 a year, you can set up a very functional blog with a commercial hosting service. Think of a blog as a poor man's web site combined with a data base.

We recommend that blogs be built around the WordPress platform. It offers web design features and functionality that would have cost tens of thousands of dollars to put into place a decade ago. To put WordPress in focus, newspapers like the New York Times use it to build out their websites. It forms the foundation of 14% of the top one million web sites in the world.

Above that we have a couple of push components – ways to alert your potential community that you have posted new content on the blog.

The first push component focuses on email – developing an email list, which you may already have, and then configuring a simple email newsletter that sends new content links to your list.

The second push component involves Facebook, Twitter and similar channels. At this level, you're developing a following. Through social channels, these people will be automatically notified when new content hits your blog. It's a form of free distribution, with the bonus that some people may share your content with others in their social networks. Kind of like a chain letter without the death threats.

Finally, the extras.

Podcasts and videos are great ways to communicate information if done right, and some people may want to give these tools a try. But we really discourage anyone from getting too deep into audio and video before putting blogs and push processes in place.

Webinars allow you to provide distance training opportunities. This is probably a function best used at the state level.

Apps. The whole app concept is sexy and seductive. With an app, you plant your programming or content on smartphones and tablets. It's like you gain this beachhead on somebody else's screen. However, that comes at a price. Development costs range from something under \$1,000 for simple apps to well into five-figure sums for anything complicated. We've been somewhat involved with the development of a fairly holistic rice production app, and the price tag has been estimated at \$20,000.

Image: Logos for Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn

Okay, let's look at that fourth level from the bottom – social channels like Facebook and Twitter. Also in that batch we'll include LinkedIn.

Our best advice: put your initial emphasis on Facebook. That's not to say you shouldn't become involved with Twitter and LinkedIn, but we think the best use of your time would initially be in Facebook.

Image: Subscriber Numbers

When people subscribe to one of our crop and pest reports, they do so through our on-line subscription form. One section in it asks about which of the social networks these new subscribers use.

In mid December when I first started setting up this presentation, I pulled the statistics for the last 1,677 people to subscribe to our reports. Of those 1,677 people:

- 413 (24.6%) indicated that they had signed up on Facebook.
- 136 (8%) reported that they were on LinkedIn.
- 84 (5%) had Twitter accounts.

In our signup form, we also ask subscribers for their occupation. When we compared these people with their occupations, a higher portion of ag industry workers had accounts on LinkedIn, with Extension people also somewhat more involved with LinkedIn.

LinkedIn is considered a good place to make contacts that might lead to the next job, which probably accounts for that blip.

Obviously, an even smaller cluster of people had Twitter accounts.

Facebook clearly was the predominate social networking site among our readers. Our readership is mainly composed of farmers, ag consultants, dealer reps and Extension workers. If that's your audience, too, then you should expect similar percentages.

Again, all this supports our advice to concentrate on Facebook.

Image: A Facebook Strategy.

Steps to take on Facebook...

Gain familiarity with Facebook if you haven't already done so. Sign up for an account.

Then build a base of Facebook friends among farmers and people in allied occupations. There's a search function that helps you do that.

Your ultimate objective is to turn your base of Facebook friends into an initial following for a Facebook fan page. A fan page is like your own home page on Facebook, with an extra advantage. When you post an item on the fan page – like, for example, a field day reminder – the notice automatically turns up on the Facebook pages of all your fans.

This is free distribution. You can even set up your blog so that new items posted to it flow automatically to both your Facebook fan page and to a Twitter feed. See AgCom101 for information relating to that.

Going Mobile...

Running parallel to all of this is the fact that your audience also is doing more of its web browsing, searches and email on a handheld device. They're also using smartphones for Facebook and Twitter to some extent.

How does this shift to smartpones matter?

If your internet communications strategy is built around sending PDF newsletters to your email list, you're losing a little more traction every month.

Small screens aren't friendly to PDF documents, especially when they're more than a page or two in length. People grow tired of all that scrolling.

Plus, your audience by its very nature tends to be in rural areas with less-than-ideal cell service. If a farmer only has two or three bars of service, he'll eventually learn not to try to download these documents. It simply takes too long and in many cases the download will time out before the document fully appears.

He may have every intention of revisiting your message when he gets back to his desk. But by then it will be buried under more email and he'll be dealing with other issues.

Let's look just a little deeper at this move to mobile viewing...

Image: Trend lines [http://www.mequoda.com/articles/new-media-trends/web-usage-prediction-when-mobile-and-desktop-collide/?mqsc=E2970176&utm\\_source=daily&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=mss#.Tvz3Z2Vq1vA](http://www.mequoda.com/articles/new-media-trends/web-usage-prediction-when-mobile-and-desktop-collide/?mqsc=E2970176&utm_source=daily&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=mss#.Tvz3Z2Vq1vA)

One Wall Street analyst, Mary Meeker with Morgan Stanley, follows internet trends, and she projects that the level of web viewing on portable devices worldwide will overtake viewing on desktop and notebook computers at some point next year. The blue line represents mobile devices, the orange line is viewing on desktop and notebook screens. The orange trend line is starting to flatten while the blue line is climbing.

Image: Resolution table.

In our own operation, we track the percentage of people browsing our web site with a smartphone. We do this by monitoring the screen resolutions of the devices that interact with our site. Phones have smaller screen sizes, so they're easy to pick out.

This table shows the top 35 screen resolutions for a 4,000-visit sampling during one period in mid December. This data is tracked through an independent service called SiteMeter.

Image: Resolutions highlight.

Now, here's the same table with the smartphone activity highlighted. That block at the top right corner represents the screen resolution for iPhones and many of the newer Android phones. At that moment, it was in third place at 8%. During last year's harvest, we saw it hit second place at times, with 10% of the total web traffic.

We hit periods last year when total smartphone viewing across all resolutions hit 15%, and we expect in 2012 to see it top 20% at times.

Overall, our web activity through smartphones is three times higher than it was in 2009.

Image: MM pie chart.

Also, we track the number of people who open our email newsletters on a portable device, either a smart phone or a pad computer. This one shows the computer-versus-handheld open percentages for our last Midsouth cotton report in 2011. For that issue, 31% of the people who opened the newsletter did so on a purely mobile device.

Depending on the report and the given week, this number was as high as 34% in 2011. Some reports have a somewhat lower percentage of mobile viewing, but the overall percentage doubled across all of our newsletters between the beginning of our 2010 publishing cycle and the end of 2011.

Think about it...how different would our email list really be from the one you might be using?

More than one Extension worker has told me that his farmers aren't getting into smartphones.

I think the further implication was that people over 60 probably won't adopt the technology. In fact, Americans between the ages of 55 and 64 are adopting smartphones at a faster rate than any other demographic group, based on industry studies.

I can remember in the late 1990s when people predicted that women would never use the internet much. Similar predictions were made about minorities, people who never attended college and – yes, you guessed it – people 60 and older.

All those predictions were wrong.

The fact is, most of this technology eventually goes mainstream. People begin to see it as a normal part of life. It hits a critical mass.

Everytime one of your farmers buys a replacement phone or renews his contract, the odds favor him moving to a smartphone. And he will become more dependent on it. It's a great efficiency to check your email on the go so it's not piled up back at the house.

Image: Search Engines.

Let's look at one more factor that is changing the way content now flows to the public...the search engine effect.

There's a saying from the Old West that comes to mind...

"God made men, but Sam Colt made the equal."

Meaning, the Colt .45 meant that big men didn't automatically have an advantage over little ones.

Here's a new term for you to learn: search engine optimization (SEO for short).

This involves placing things on the web in such a way that they gain good rankings with search engines for specific subject areas, geographic positioning and search terms.

SEO is a very broad topic that we can't delve too deeply in today.

But WordPress sites and blogs in general are well suited for search engine visibility.

A good SEO approach really levels the playing field. Done right, you can gain rankings on key terms that are close to or even higher than similar content found on university, company or association servers.

SEO is a topic we've already addressed on AgCom101, and it likely will be a common subject going forward.

With a good SEO approach, your site will show up in searches from many parts of the nation and even the world. You may ask yourself, "So what?"

The fact is, if you're not doing a good job of optimizing search referrals worldwide, you're not doing a good job of building traffic from people closer to home who you do want to reach.

What we're finding now is that search engine referrals make up an increasingly higher portion of overall web traffic. People no longer go to sites because they're pretty or necessarily even because they have nice functionality.

Increasingly, they go to web sites because they were referred there by Google, Yahoo or Bing.

The more items you post on a blog within fairly narrow fields of interest, the more new visitors you'll likely draw. The longer you do this, the higher you'll rank in those subject areas.

Image: The Long Tail Effect

SEO analysts often refer to this as the Long Tail Effect (LTE). Let me show you one metric tracked by an independent service and the numbers it has generated for the two team blogs we set up last year for the University of Arkansas and Mississippi State University.

The graphs measure the number of people who came to the site at least once during a giving month. These are referred to as unique visitors.

If they visited a site once, that counts as a one in the total.

If they visited the site 10 times, that person still counts as a one in the total.

In other words, how many different people visited the site at least once in a given month.

The charts I'm about to show you came from a service called Compete.Com, which uses various web traffic measurements to rank sites according the various metrics.

Image: Arkansas graph.

This is the Arkansas graph. You can see unique visits trending upward as the tail grows longer.

Like any ag site, you'll find seasonal variations in web traffic, hence larger numbers during certain months.

Image: Mississippi graph.

Here is the Mississippi site. It launched a month earlier than the Arkansas site, so its tail is somewhat longer and it now has a more pronounced upward trend.

With both sites, the numbers are clearly higher in November – the last month shown – than they were in the spring once the sites had gained a bit of footing. A lot of that strength and upward trend represents an increase in search engine referrals.

If we visited this data in a year, I think both states would still show a continued upward trend if posting continues on a regular basis. We've certainly seen visit stats increase on our own site as our rankings improved with search engines. With every new post, the tails grow a little longer.

Image: How often to post?

I'm often asked by people, "If I have a blog, how often should I post to it?"

The standard answer from SEO authorities is at least once a week because that proves to the search engines that the site is active.

A better answer might be in the form of a question: "How much traffic and influence do you want to have?"

Granted, some effort is involved.

None of this – blogs, Facebook, Twitter and the like – should be considered an end in itself. It's more like being on a journey. You're moving ahead, sharing information through one or more channels, staying in touch, gaining followers, building visibility.

Putting together a blog and posting to it now and then won't make much difference. Facebook and Twitter also require some degree of involvement.

For the time you put into it, you do get something back.

I'll leave it to the other panelists to detail what they've gained with all this.

On a broader basis, blogs and social channels allow you to compete on a more level playing field with everyone else who's vying for your clientele's attention.

Even if you don't always realize it, you're competing with industry, Extension services in other states and farm magazines. At times, you may even be competing with people at your own institution.

You're competing for the farmer's attention and consideration.

On some levels, you may even be competing for funding.

And with all this, you're trying to prove to everyone in agriculture that Extension remains a viable concept.

Image: Iteration, iteration, iteration.

One thing you'll have to embrace is the process of iteration.

Iteration is a word I don't recall hearing until maybe three years ago.

It means trying new things in small steps, evaluating performance and results, then taking action -- either accepting, modifying or rejecting the components you put into play. From there, you look for new things to try and evaluate.

This doesn't lend itself to institutional thinking. Institutions build on that top-down model. They rely on committees to formulate plans, chisel them in stone and then hand them down to people in the field.

Developing any kind of approach to social media and networking demands iteration. As I said in the beginning, our own company has tried some social components that didn't fit, didn't work or didn't justify the time spent implementing them.

You make mistakes, you learn from them and you build from that.

That pyramid took shape partly from mistakes we've made and through iteration.

My best advice – go to AgCom101 and review the pyramid plan, then determine what you can put into play before the new season starts. If you can't move into Facebook yet, at least develop the blog, pull together an email list and then start sending out a quick newsletter with links to your content on the blog.

If you've got a PDF newsletter, kill it off. The sooner the better.

If you're in a position to build a team blog, avoid the committee approach. Instead, find a couple of compatible colleagues who have crops or specialties that fit with the audience you're hoping to reach. Go with a somewhat board URL – the web address – that gives you the flexibility to bring other crops or disciplines under the tent.

Start all this as a proof-of-concept platform and build out from there. Add more people to the team as you make progress, expand into Facebook, post audio and video podcasts to the blog if anyone feels moved to produce them.

It won't all happen at once. These things evolve over months and years, even.

The great thing about social media is that you can try plenty of things on the cheap with a relatively low learning curve at the start. New tools and components will come along. Try them out, too.

In short: iterate, iterate, iterate.