The Social Media Presence of Water Conservation Organizations in the Ogallala Aquifer Region

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Introduction/Need for Research

Water is the most essential nutrient for life and the production of food and fiber. An estimated $20 billion worth of the world's food and fiber is produced in the eight states that span from Texas to South Dakota, making up the High Plains region in the United States (Little, 2009).

Agriculture in the High Plains is reliant on water from the Ogallala aquifer and its agriculture receipts represent at least one fifth of the total annual United States' agricultural harvest (Little, 2009). The High Plains economy is dependent on the Ogallala aquifer for crop irrigation, livestock production and meat processing plants. The necessary and intense use of this water supply combined with the slow recharge rate (Marsh, Peterson, & Williams, 2003) has created the need to place a great emphasis on conserving the water available in the Ogallala aquifer.

Water conservation groups exist to encourage sustainable water management practices. While they use a variety of communication efforts to achieve their objectives, more research is needed to understand how they use social networking sites. Social networking sites are partially responsible for promoting interactive, personal and two-way communication among associations and its publics. "Within the sphere of the proliferating social media activities, social networking sites (SNSs) are viewed as the main drivers of the digital media revolution," (Men & Tsai, 2015, p. 395). The purpose of this study was to explore the social media presence of water conservation groups located within the Ogallala aquifer.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is based on social marketing. Social marketing refers to the "efforts focused on influencing behaviors that will improve health, prevent injuries, protect the environment, and contribute to communities," (Kotler & Lee, 2008, p. 7). Social marketing involves utilizing marketing techniques to develop, communicate and disseminate information to encourage a behavioral change that will benefit society (Kotler & Lee, 2008). In order for these conservation groups to effectively use social marketing and instill a change in the way their audiences use and conserve water, communication, including online communication, is key.

Methodology

This study used an environmental scan to identify the current social media presence of water conservation associations located within the Ogallala aquifer region. To identify the organizations to include in the sample, a Google search was conducted with the following keywords: water conservation, water conservation boards, water conservation associations, water conservation alliances, [State] Department of Agriculture, and [State] Water Development Board. We also searched the United States Department of Agriculture for relevant organizations. From this search, 14 U.S. water conservation groups were identified.

To ensure all water conservation groups that exist in the Ogallala aquifer region were identified, an additional Google search was conducted with the following keywords: Ogallala aquifer water conservation, Ogallala aquifer water conservation boards, Ogallala aquifer water conservation

associations, Wyoming water conservation, Kansas water conservation and Oklahoma conservation. From this search, an additional three water conservation groups were located. Each organization website was then evaluated to determine if any social media links were present. If social media sites were not mentioned, a search for the organization was completed on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Google+, YouTube, LinkedIn, and Flicker.

Results/Findings

Of the 17 groups, 14 (82.4%) had at least one social media outlet and 3 (17.6%) had no social media presence. Table 1 provides the frequency for various social media outlets. Of those that had social media, 13 (92.3%) listed their social media presence on their website and 1 (7.1%) did not have any links from the organization website to its three social media accounts. The number of social media outlets used varied from zero to five with a mean of 2.35 (SD= 1.80). Four organizations only had one social media outlet.

Table 1
Frequency of social media outlets used by water conservation organizations in the Ogallala aquifer region

Social Media Platform	*n*	%
Twitter	12	70.6
Facebook	10	58.8
You Tube	5	29.4
LinkedIn	4	23.5
Google+	3	17.6
Pinterest	2	11.8
Flickr	2	11.8
Blog	2	11.8

Note: Percentages do not equal 100% because organizations could use more than one social media outlet.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Of the 17 water conservation groups that were studied, 14 are currently using social media. The majority of the organizations used Twitter and Facebook, while other platforms were present, but to a lesser extent. Of the organizations that had social media, all except one cross-promoted their social media accounts with their websites, which improves the visibility of these communication outlets. On average, organizations were using more than one social media platform, but four did only have a presence on one social networking site. This might limit their ability to engage audiences in their social marketing efforts. These organizations should select social media outlets that best reach their audience segments and help accomplish recognized objectives.

Additional research needs to be conducted to more closely examine the content provided on these social media outlets. Future research could explore what relationship may exist between the types of content provided and impacts on social media engagement from audience members in the form of likes, shares, and comments.

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