

The Online Communications Plan: Communicating Agricultural Sciences to a Lay Audience

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Today, the average consumer is at least three generations removed from agriculture (Ishmael, 2013). This generational gap has caused consumers to want to learn more about their food, how it is produced, and where it is grown (Smith, 2014). To satisfy this need for knowledge, consumers have turned to social media to help them make decisions on products they purchase and the agricultural ideals they support.

Social media can be defined as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow for the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Moore, Meyers, Irlbeck, & Burris, 2015). Unlike traditional media sources, web-based media allow consumers to engage in the discussion at a higher perceived level of interactivity (Moore et al., 2015). This higher level of consumer interaction with the agricultural industry makes it important now, more than ever, to create an effective level of communication between agriculturalists and consumers (Telg & Irani, 2012).

To foster this more effective communication, it is important to create curriculum to prepare students to utilize online mediums to reach the modern day consumer. Academic programs must be structured to prepare students to communicate in a variety of ways, including online communication (Corder & Irlbeck, 2016). To be effective in disseminating information to the consumer, this undergraduate scientific writing course implemented a communication plan that included how to properly reach consumers through social media outlets, infographics, and guest blogs based off of their side of a controversial issue. These mediums are important to teach future agriculturalists because collaborative projects utilizing social media have given people the power to spread knowledge and messages, and advocate for a cause in a rapid manner that one person could not achieve alone (Moore et al., 2015). Utilizing a proper online communication plan in college courses will aid in effective information dissemination to today's consumers.

How it Works/Methods/Steps

The online communications plan has successfully been used in ACOM 2302 at Texas Tech University for two semesters. This course is designed for students enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources who are not agricultural communications majors. At the completion of a non-biased research paper covering a controversial topic related to agriculture and natural resources, students enrolled in the undergraduate scientific writing course were assigned to develop an online communications plan to deliver their chosen side of the controversial issue to a lay audience. The online communications plan included three components: a guest blog post, a social media post, and an infographic.

Students identified an existing blog that currently delivers information about their chosen controversial topic. Students were then assigned to write a guest blog post for this outlet that included links for the reader to gain more information about the topic as well as pictures that complimented the writing within the blog post. Students also selected from a variety of social media platforms to develop a social media post promoting their blog post. These social media posts included a 140-character minimum synopsis of their topic to motivate the reader to click the provided link to view the blog post. Additionally, students were allowed to include videos or

pictures to promote their blog post as they saw fit. Some of the platforms that students had to choose from, such as Instagram and Vine, require a photo or video. The final component of the online communications plan included designing an infographic using a free, online design program to visually communicate their chosen controversial topic to the public. While no component of the online communications plan was required to be shared online, students were challenged to take the scientific information from their research paper and transform it into sharable online formats that a lay audience could understand.

Results to Date/Implications

At the conclusion of the assignment, all students ($n = 78$) completed a questionnaire as a class assignment. Participants were asked to respond on a 5-point Likert-type scale (5 = Strongly Agree to 1 = Strongly Disagree). Students agreed that blogging allowed them to tell a story about agriculture to a public audience ($M = 3.97$, $SD = .99$), the students had the necessary tools to create a conversational piece about agriculture or natural resources ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .99$), and they felt confident that they could develop a blog in the future after completing the class ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 1.00$). Students also agreed that visual imagery is necessary to communicate about agriculture ($M = 4.33$, $SD = .96$), social media allow agriculturists to communicate about agriculture and natural resources ($M = 4.42$, $SD = .91$), and they were provided with the necessary tools to communicate through social media in ACOM 2302 ($M = 4.01$, $SD = 1.08$). However, students reported they did not understand how to use the infographic design program ($M = 2.43$, $SD = 1.04$). The majority of students spent either 30 minutes to an hour ($n = 33$) or over an hour ($n = 33$) creating their infographic. More than half (57.1%) of the students reported using Easel.ly to create their infographic. Students also reported that they did not have an adequate understanding of or skills to complete the communication plan ($M = 2.30$, $SD = .93$). Students reported that they did not feel prepared to advocate for their controversial topic ($M = 2.17$, $SD = .91$). Additionally, students reported not feeling like they were any better prepared to share agriculture's story regarding their selected topic through social media ($M = 2.66$, $SD = .83$). Students saw the value in using online media to communicate about agriculture; however, they felt unprepared to do so in and outside of the classroom.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Currently, instructors of the course plan to continue using this assignment to better develop the communications skills of students who are not agricultural communications majors. These students may need further guidance in planning and implementing their blog posts including better understanding how to use lay terminology. Further, the instructors plan to include more in-class instruction for designing the infographics. Students seemed to struggle with getting their ideas into the design.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are currently no costs associated with this assignment. Students enrolled in this course utilized their own computer throughout the course as it is writing intensive. The guest blog posts and social media posts are completed in a word processing program such as Microsoft Word®. The infographics are designed using any free, online design program including Easel.ly, Piktochart, and Canva that allow the students to download their design for submission or sharing online.

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