

**Sustainable Social Media**

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### **Introduction/Need for Research**

The sustainable agriculture movement can trace its roots to the farmer-scientist groups of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Harwood, 1990) and has evolved along with the technological advances of global agriculture industry. The concept of sustainable agriculture production is of particular importance today as the proportion of the world's people considered hungry has decreased, despite a doubling of the population over the past 50 years (World Bank, 2009; FAO, 2015).

Millions of people, each day, interact using social media platforms (Meredith, 2012), which have become some of the most frequently utilized applications on the Internet (Ramanadhan, Mendez, Rao, & Viswanath, 2013). Organizations use social media to connect with diverse audiences to build relationships and share information (Animal Agriculture Alliance, n.d.). Social media has become an optimal choice for organizations to reduce marketing costs while reaching a wider audience to promote new ideas (Kirtis & Karahan, 2011).

While the general public still has faith in farmers, some are still wary of modern agricultural practices (Animal Agriculture Alliance, n.d.). Implementing social media in the marketing strategy of sustainable agriculture organizations (SAOs) is an opportunity for these entities to 'advocate' to the general public (Animal Agriculture Alliance). Communication to stakeholders is most effective when strategies are based on research and choice of channels however, many organizations lack the necessary skills and expertise to be efficient information managers and thus, more research is needed to determine the most effective models to reach target audiences (Andres & Woodard, 2013). The purpose of this study was to explore the social media presence of SAOs in the western region of the United States. Guided by King, Ford, Barksdale, and Meyers (2016) the research questions for this study were:

RQ1. Which social media platforms are SAOs using?

RQ2. Are SAOs listing their social media presence on their websites?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) situational theory of public relations. The goal of public relations is to identify significant audiences, determine effective communication messages, and select the most effective delivery methods (Hamilton, 1992). The theory posits that communication behaviors of individuals are either active or passive (Grunig, 1989a), where active communicators are more likely to have attitudes about a situation (Grunig, 1989b) and expend effort to locate and consume information (Grunig, 1989a) to do something about the situation (Grunig, 1989b). On the other hand, passive communicators produce little effort to seek information however, if the situation is involving, the individual will passively process it (Hamilton). The theory, as noted by Hamilton (1992), is a powerful tool to predict communication behavior among various audiences.

### **Methodology**

To identify SAOs in the western region, the researchers consulted a list of sustainable agriculture organizations provided by the National Center for Appropriate Technology (NCAT) (Schahczenski, 2015). Only organizations with an existing social media presence of at least an organizational Twitter handle and Facebook page were included in the study. This resulted in a

total study population of 50 organizations. Each organization's website, Twitter handle, and Facebook page were evaluated to determine additional social media links were present.

### Results/Findings

Of the 50 organizations in the western region, 43 (86%) had at least one social media outlet in addition to Facebook and Twitter. Table 1 provides a frequency for various social media outlets. Of those that had additional social media, all (100%) listed their social media presence on their website. The number of social media outlets used, not including Facebook and Twitter, varied from zero to four with a mode of 1.0 and a mean of 1.93 (SD = 0.93).

Table 1

*Frequency of social media platforms used to by sustainable agriculture organizations in the western region*

Social Media Platform	<i>n</i>	%
YouTube	24	48.0
Instagram	21	42.0
Pinterest	12	24.0
LinkedIn	11	22.0
Google+	6	12.0
RSS	3	6.0
Flickr	2	4.0
Vimeo	2	4.0
Tumblr	1	2.0
SlideShare	1	2.0

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

### Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

Nearly 90% of the organizations studied are currently using social media in addition to Facebook and Twitter. YouTube and Instagram were the most commonly used social media outlets with over 40% of the organizations using one or both; other platforms were present, but to a lesser extent. All organizations cross-promoted their social media accounts on their websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles. The organizations, on average, were using multiple social media platforms, but seven did not have a social media presence outside of Facebook and Twitter. This poses a challenge when attempting to engage audiences in social marketing efforts. These organizations should research the value of including additional social media platforms to their marketing plan.

Sharing sustainable agriculture practices via social media increases the visibility of the positive attributes of the agriculture industry. Future research should examine what relationship may exist between the types of content provided on social media and impacts on the general public's perceptions and awareness of contemporary sustainable agriculture practices.

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