

**Using Instagram Hashtags to Promote Agricultural Communications Students'
Photography**

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Introduction/Need for Idea or Research

Photography skills (Morgan, 2012; Terry & Bailey-Evans, 1995) and the ability to communicate through online media (Corder & Irlbeck, 2016) are needed competencies of agricultural communications students. Instagram has become an important self-presentation medium that allows users to communicate their experiences through both their choice of subject and different options to manipulate and present their images (Lee, Lee, Moon, & Sung, 2015). Photography is included in the undergraduate agricultural communications curriculum at Texas Tech University. As aspiring communicators, it is important agricultural communications students have an avenue to promote their work. To give students an outlet for posting and promoting their images from the course, the instructor created an assignment requiring students to develop an online portfolio via Instagram utilizing a course-specific hashtag. The assignment required students to develop 10 to 12 posts with images they produced during the course utilizing the hashtag provided by the instructor. The purpose of this idea was to identify the benefits of utilizing Instagram hashtags as an avenue to promote student work and the course itself.

How it Works

Instagram is a mobile photography app with a digital community of more than 600 million users (Instagram, 2017, para. 1). With that many individuals utilizing the digital photography sharing app, the opportunity to share and promote one's images is apparent. In addition to posting images on a profile, users have the ability to add a hashtag within the caption. When hashtags are added to a publicly-posted Instagram image, the post will be visible on the corresponding hashtag page. Any Instagram user can then view the image on the hashtag page. Instagram can provide a valuable tool when engaging and connecting with undergraduates in the teaching and learning process (Salomon, 2013). As a class assignment, students were challenged to promote themselves via an online portfolio on Instagram. Students used their personal Instagram account or they created a new one to post 10 to 12 of their best images from the course. Students were tasked with writing a relevant caption to engage their audience and enhance the storytelling ability of each image. The course hashtag was also required to be posted with each image. The hashtag remained the same for each semester. The students' accounts must be public, or they must allow the instructor to follow them. If the students fail to do one of these two things, the posts will not be visible to the instructor for grading. Each student's collection of posts on Instagram were graded using a rubric that evaluated the quality of the overall composition, clarity (exposure, depth of field, focus), creativity (variety of subjects), artistic expression, and adherence to assignment guidelines of the posts. Students were required to shoot the images posted to Instagram using their DSLR cameras. This required students to download their images from their DSLR camera and export them to Flickr so the images could be accessed on their mobile device for posting.

Results to Date/Implications

The students enrolled in the photography course during the spring and summer semesters in 2016 and 2017 completed the Instagram assignment. To date, the course hashtag has been used on 783 posts. The top nine posts, as indicated by Instagram, range from 29 to 170 likes and up to seven comments per image. Those results are drawn from students who used their personal Instagram account for the assignment. Students who chose to create a new profile received very little engagement. Many of those images received zero likes or comments.

As a result of engagement and sharing of students' Instagram posts, including shares on other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas Tech University created a slideshow on the college website to showcase the students' work. Additional interest in the students' photography from the course was received from the Lubbock community with the suggestion of displaying their work during the city's monthly art trail. Overall, the implementation of this assignment made the students' work and the agricultural communications photography course visible to a wide range of audiences via Instagram.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The use of Instagram provided an outlet for students to promote the work they completed during the agricultural communications photography course. The hashtag gave audiences an avenue to view all images captured by students in not only the current course but also courses prior. This method allowed students to build a digital social portfolio of their work for potential employers to view. The hashtags were also valuable in generating interest in the course among other students in the agricultural communications program at Texas Tech University. The course now reaches capacity each semester.

The course instructor will continue utilizing the assignment in the future. Although the idea creates a valuable avenue for students to promote themselves, some students shied away from using their personal account to post their images. While many different reasons were noted for the apprehension of using personal Instagram accounts for the course, some students suggested they feared their peers would unfollow them or they did not want the instructor to see their personal account. Photography course instructors should spell out the advantages of students using their personal accounts in order to promote their images and develop their personal brand. Established accounts already have followers and provide opportunities for students to receive more engagement on posts. Instructors should also emphasize that students' Instagram profiles must be public for all users to view the posts. If students wish to keep their profile private, the instructor and the student must follow each other on Instagram.

Cost/Resources Needed

Instagram is a free photo sharing app available to all students who have access to a smartphone, tablet, or computer. The app can also be viewed from a web browser. The instructor and students all need Instagram accounts.

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