Recruiting for Water College: Identifying Agricultural Producers' Communication Preferences and Influencers

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Introduction/Need for Research

The Texas Alliance for Water Conservation (TAWC) is a nonprofit organization composed of producers, universities, extension agents, and other agricultural and academic stakeholders. The purpose of the TAWC is to educate West Texas producers about the importance of water conservation and how to better manage their water in order to help preserve the Ogallala Aquifer, which is depleting at a rapid rate (TAWC, 2016). In order to encourage behavior change within these producers, the TAWC hosts educational activities, such as Water College, which allow producers to learn about new water-saving technologies and water conserving production practices. Water College provides producers the chance to learn about new precision agriculture technologies, different production, and more. Some farmers have failed to implement new water resource management techniques in part because they likely do not understand the consequences of their current farming practices and may not be aware of the short-term and long-term benefits of water conservation techniques (American Farmland Trust, 2013). Previous research indicates farmers' social networks play a key factor in dictating whether or not a farmer adopts a new practice (Prokopy, Towery, & Babin, 2014). Few studies have investigated effective communication strategies for associations and professionals involved in water concerns (VanDyke & Callison, *in press*). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to determine 1) which media communication channels farmers used to find out about the event and 2) the primary influencers (if any) that influenced producers' decision to attend the event.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on both diffusion of innovations and opinion leadership. Diffusions of innovations is the sharing of concepts, information, ideas, and practices within a social system, where the sharing moves from source to adopter via communication and influence (Rogers, 2003). "Better availability and more effective dissemination of conservation and sustainable agriculture information is essential to overcoming the information barrier and speeding adoption," (Presley, 2014). Opinion leadership is a theory that explains ideas go from mass media to opinion leaders, who then share information with the general public (Park, 2013). Opinion leadership can be linked to participation in social activities and affiliations with organizations (Song, Cho & Kim, 2017). "There are opinion leaders or influentials within each peer group who serve as pacesetters or tastemakers for the group, determining the adoption of each innovation for the group" (Turnbull & Meenaghan, 1980, p. 4). The term opinion leader is often given to individuals who serve as key influencers and who work in a position to either encourage or hinder the acceptance and adoption of a new product or innovation (Turnbull & Meenaghan, 1980).

Methodology

This study used a descriptive survey research design. Data were collected via a questionnaire that was passed out at the 2018 TAWC Water College and voluntarily completed by participants. The researcher developed the instrument based on questionnaires used at previous Water Colleges. Academic and industry experts reviewed the survey to ensure face and content validity. The population for this specific study was participants at the 2018 TAWC Water College. There were 244 participants and 49 completed the questionnaire. Two items on the questionnaire were analyzed for this poster narrative: 1) communication channels used to learn about Water College,

and 2) what extent certain individuals had an influence on their attendance at Water College. The communication channel question was answered by checking off boxes next to the specific communication channel they used to find out about the event. The influencer question was answered using a 4-point Likert-type scale where 1= *Not at all, 2= Very Little, 3= Somewhat,* and 4=*To a great extent*. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS® version 12.1 for Mac.

Results/Findings

In terms of communication channels, participants could select multiple communication channels they utilized to find out about Water College. In total, 46 participants selected the communication channels they used, with 18 of those participants indicating they used more than one channel. Twenty-five percent of respondents selected word of mouth; 14.3% selected "save the date" cards; 13.1% selected AgriLife Extension; 11.9% selected the TAWC's website; 7.1% selected radio ads; 6% selected TAWC Facebook posts; 4.8% selected newspaper articles; 4.8% selected letter invites. Communication at outreach events and TAWC Twitter posts were selected by only one respondent each. Other forms of communication participants wrote in as to how they heard about Water College were their commodity organization's newsletters, LinkedIn, and Texas Tech University. After answering how they heard about Water College, producers were asked to indicate if anyone had influenced their decision to physically attend the event. In regard to the influencers who encouraged producers' attendance at Water College, 47 participants indicated an influencer group influenced their attendance at Water College *to a great extent.* Producers identified someone at their work organization, a TAWC staff member, a family member, an extension agent, their local water district, their neighbor, a crop commodity group, a crop consultant, and an agricultural lender as their main source of influence.

Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate West Texas agricultural producers rely on a blend of online, print, and interpersonal forms of communication. Even though producers utilize a variety of communication channels, word of mouth seems how initially producers find out about events in comparison to social media or print materials. This study also found producers are influenced by an array of individuals, ranging from industry professionals to family members. It is crucial to consider who farmers talk to and respect as farmers' social networks play key roles in the adoption process in the diffusion of innovations (Prokopy et al., 2014). Recognizing preferred communication channels and what communication channels are being utilized, can help spread awareness about educational events. While magazines, newspapers, and radio are usually the prominent communication channels in the agriculture industry, it is important to notice digital communication is increasing in usage (Walter, 2017). By knowing how producers find out about events and who the influences them to attend, the TAWC can better disseminate marketing materials in a more strategic matter to ensure a variety of producers not only hear about the event, but are influenced by the right opinion leaders in their network to attend educational events. It should also be noted that these results are not generalizable.

Recommendations

Recommendations for future communication for events include dispersing information about the event to an array of different agricultural businesses, cooperatives, and professionals as they can serve as influencers for producers and can encourage attendance. Recommendations also include allowing producers to fill in their own response to questions to account for channels/influencers.

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