Research Poster Submission

RESEARCH

Communication Patterns of Arkansas High School Educators

Shaylee E. Wallace, Jessica L. Wesson, Casandra Cox, K. Jill Rucker & Jefferson D. Miller

University of Arkansas

1120 W. Maple St.

Fayetteville, AR 72701

kjrucker@uark.edu

Communication Patterns of Arkansas High School Educators

Introduction/need for research

As the distance between producer and consumer widens, strategic communication will be key in the success of the agricultural industry (Doerfert, 2011). As technology is implemented into everyday use, such changes have been witnessed in the communication strategies of both agriculturalists and educators. These two occupations might seem unrelated to some; however, high school agricultural educators are in a unique position as they fill both the role of educator and communicator, all while striving to prepare their students with vital career skills for success after graduation (The National Council for Agricultural Education, 2018). Educators have been challenged to equip students with skills not only for job fulfillment, but also for effective communication with diverse audiences and about complex issues in agriculture (Roberts, et al., 2016). The American Association for Agricultural Education's (AAAE) current National Research Agenda research priority areas (RPAs) explore what effective methods prepare individuals to address diverse audiences and complex problems involving agriculture and natural resources. RPA 2 addresses new technology including educational programming, distance education technology, FFA and diversity and social media (Roberts, et al., 2016). Research regarding educators' use of communication channels and resources is 10 – 20 years old. Therefore, the objective of this study was to determine the various communication channels currently utilized by agricultural educators in Arkansas and their audiences.

Conceptual or theoretical framework

Research involving Roger's diffusion of innovation theory examines how practices, ideas or beliefs are spread and adopted among groups of people. The theory goes beyond adoption of ideology and centers on the conditions and circumstances that increase or decrease the likelihood of an innovation being put into practice (Rogers, 2003). The mechanism of diffusion is the process through which innovation is communicated over time via specific channels to a social system. As a social system recognizes decisions are not made authoritatively, collectively, or via group think, each individual must make his/her own decision regarding the innovation (Buć & Divjak, 2015). With the varying communication channels, audiences have numerous ways to receive information, and effective communication requires engagement, confidence, and established relationships with an audience (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009). The need for connection in communication has led to the implementation of diffusion of innovation and opinion leaders, who have been recognized as essential in the solution to communicating with audiences about innovations. The opinion leader's ability to receive and then share information with their various publics of influence helps connect reliable sources with audiences (Nisbet & Scheufele, 2009).

Methodology

The purpose of this study was to determine communication channels used by Arkansas agricultural educators to understand how they communicate with constituents about agriculture and their FFA programs. This study followed a quantitative research design consisting of a researcher developed survey dispersed electronically via email list by the Arkansas Department of Higher Education. The instrument was reviewed by experts in the agricultural communications field and FFA state officer team members, who were most familiar with chapter communication channels. Participants for this study were identified using the Arkansas agricultural education directory, which includes contact information for all current agricultural educators in the state. Of the 288 teachers listed in the directory, five educators had non-functioning emails, with a failed delivery status. The researcher sent the survey to the 283 instructors with functioning emails, with a response rate of 40%. Of the 114 teachers who responded 93 completed the entire survey instrument. Survey

participants were contacted in three rounds of recruitment emails. Emails were sent every seven days until no significant response was received to warrant further contact of participants (Millar & Dillman, 2011). Data was collected using Qualtrics and descriptive statistical analysis was conducted using SAS© 9.4.

Results/findings

Communication channels are defined as the media/medium through which a message is sent such as email, social media, news station, etc. (Telg & Irani, 2012). Participants (n=93) were asked what forms of communication channels they had access to and used to communicate with audiences. Participants responded that 84.9% (f=79) had access to a local newspaper, and 66.7% (f=62) utilized their local newspaper as a communication channel. Local radio stations were available to 67.7% (f=63) of participants, and 27.9 (f=26) participants utilized their local radio stations as a communication channel. Lastly, 25.8% (f=24) had access to a local television station, with 4.3% (f=4) utilizing their local television station as a communication channel. Participants (n=93) were then asked what forms of social media they utilized. They responded 91.4% (f=85) used Facebook, 47.3% (f=44) used Instagram, 11.8% (f=11) used Twitter, 4.3% (f=4) used YouTube, 5.4% (f=5) used Snapchat, 1.1% (f=1) used LinkedIn, and 1.1% (f=1) used a blog. Results indicate educators use consistent communication channels for their audiences. Of the audiences identified alumni/boosters and Arkansas State FFA staff are engaged with less than the other audiences. Parents, administration and students/members are the primary audiences educators engage with.

Conclusions/ recommendations

As the literature reflected, communication has largely shifted from print to digital, television still ranks first as the leading news source for adults, followed by radio and social media, with newspapers dropping below social media in 2018 (Shearer). The results reflected this shift as educators largely utilize social media for their communication efforts. While educators do still utilize traditional media (television, radio and newspapers) not all educators indicated they had access to these communication channels. Educators also indicated they largely use email and text to communicate with their audiences, but still Facebook was the largest used platform with all audiences. Further research should be done to investigate the relationship between access to communication channels, and preferred communication channels for use, as well as the comparison between direct, private communication channels, and social media communication channels.

Educators indicated the least amount of communication (throughout all platforms) with their communities, alumni/boosters and State FFA directors. Their communication efforts are largely aimed at parents, students/members and other education counterparts. The results do not indicate investment in local engagement programs as outlined by the National FFA (2020). The results also pull away from the competencies for agricultural educators including community engagement, maintaining an effective public relations program and working closely with alumni and advisory groups (Roberts et. Al, 2007).

The researcher recommends further exploration of necessary competencies of agricultural educators in relation to communication efforts. The new research could then be used to identify more specifically which competencies Arkansas agricultural educators are not meeting, and provide resources and training for those specific areas.

These results serve as awareness of the need for reaching educators on the platforms they use. It also provides an indicator of where professional development in digital learning and communications is needed. Future work to improve adoption of innovations are the initial steps in the conceptual model of diffusion of innovation in higher education (Buć & Divjak, 2015). The results of this study imply Arkansas agricultural educators need further preparation to engage and utilize communication channels to improve communication with constituents.

References

Buć, S., & Divjak, B. (2015). Innovation diffusion model in higher education: Case study. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED562467.pdf

Doerfert, D. L. (Ed.) (2011). *National research agenda: American Association for Agricultural Education's research priority areas for 2011-2015.* Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University, Department of Agricultural Education and Communications. Retrieved from http://aaaeonline.org/files/research_agenda/AAE_National_Research_Agenda_(2011-15).pdf

Millar, M. M., & Dillman, D. A. (2011). Improving response to web and mixed-mode surveys. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 75*(2), 249-269. doi:10.1093/poq/nfr003

Nisbet, M. C., & Scheufele, D. A. (2009). Whats next for science communication? Promising directions and lingering distractions. *American Journal of Botany,96*(10), 1767-1778. doi:10.3732/ajb.0900041

Orr, G. (2003, March 18). Diffusion of innovations. Retrieved from https://web.stanford.edu/class/symbsys205/Diffusion of Innovations.htm

Perrin, A. & Anderson, M. (2019). Share of U.S. adults using social media, including Facebook, is mostly unchanged since 2018. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018/

Roberts, T. G., Harder, A. & Brashears, M. T. (Eds). (2016). American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020. Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.

Rogers, E. (2003). The Diffusion of Innovations. 5th ed. New York: The Free Press.

Shearer, E. (2018, December 10). Social media outpaces print newspapers in the U.S. as a news source. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank /2018/12/10/social-media-outpaces-print-newspapers-in-the-u-s-as-a-news-source/

Telg, R., & Irani, T. A. (2012). *Agricultural communications in action a hands-on approach*. Clifton Park, NY: Delmar.

The National Council for Agricultural Education. (2018, August 27). Agricultural education. Retrieved from https://thecouncil.ffa.org/ageducation/