

A Little Birdie Told Me About Agriculture: Best Practices and Future Uses of Twitter in Agricultural Communications

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Abstract

Social media sites, such as Twitter, are impacting the ways businesses, organizations, and individuals use technology to connect with their audiences. Twitter enables users to connect with others through 140-character messages called “tweets” that answer the question, “What’s happening?” Twitter use has increased exponentially to more than five million active users but has a dropout rate of more than 50%. Numerous agricultural organizations have embraced the use of Twitter to promote their products and agriculture as a whole and to interact with audiences in a new way. This article addresses current Twitter use trends within agriculture and offers advice for practitioners.

Introduction

The evolution of interactive, social, and self-publishing media on the Web has irrevocably changed the way we communicate. The presence of Web 2.0 technologies, such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, and social media sites including MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter, has impacted the use of technology among businesses, organizations, and individuals. In most cases, Web 2.0 technologies are free, easy to use, and rewarding for those who wisely make use of their potential (Paulson, 2009). The purpose of this professional article is to address the trend of social media use in agriculture, with particular emphasis on Twitter.

Like any new innovation, social media has taken some time to adopt and diffuse through a system. Some insecurities in using social media do exist; however, problems in adopting social media, some argue, are cultural and not technological (Brenner, 2009). Although mainstream media will continue to be important for the dissemination of information, marketers and public relations practitioners are now able to select from a number of Web 2.0 communication channels. “The ‘new influencers’ are beginning to tear at the fabric of marketing as it has existed for 100 years, giving rise to a new style of marketing that is characterized by conversation and community” (Society for New Communications Research, 2008, p.11). This new style of marketing is being approached both hesitantly and optimistically. Marketers are wary of losing control of their messages, but excited about using these tools to encourage direct conversations with target audience members (Society for New Communications Research).

Many public relations practitioners have recognized the transformative effect Web 2.0 technologies like blogging and social media have had on their industry. Wright and Hinson (2009) found that 73% of public relations practitioners believe blogging and social media have changed the way their organizations communicate by facilitating more two-way communication with publics without the

traditional gatekeepers intercepting and adjusting or blocking the original message. Pavlik (2007) contended that, in public relations, much of the change seen with the advent of Web 2.0 technology is in message control, because the public can now “communicate directly online and the organization can be left out of the conversation entirely” (Pavlik, p. 10).

Some might believe farmers in particular are behind the technology curve for Web use, but the increase in Internet access in the home and use of Internet-enabled phones have allowed farmers greater access to online social networks (Sutter, 2009). The use of social media in agriculture and among farmers provides for more opportunities than checking the weather and knowing when to sell grain. “A growing number of farmers and others in agriculture who are using social media tools to communicate with each other, send out information and educate the public about agriculture” (Rodriguez, 2009a, para. 3). Hoffman (2009) said that farmers and ranchers “are using social media to build bridges of understanding with consumers” (para. 3), and Twitter is one type of social media agricultural communicators are beginning to embrace.

Overview of Twitter

What is Twitter?

Twitter is a form of microblogging, a relatively new form of blogging in which people write brief text updates fewer than 200 characters in length. Compared to regular blogging, microblogging fulfills a need for faster communication. Twitter allows users to write microblogs known as “tweets” of 140 characters or less (Java, Finin, Song, & Tseng, 2007). Not only is Twitter a form of microblogging, it has set the standard for the craft (Comm, 2009). Twitter specifically serves as a mass instant messaging platform that allows people to message from their phones, the Twitter website, or through other Twitter-related applications, to friends and family who can be constantly updated on their whereabouts (Paulson, 2009).

Twitter users sign up for a user name on the site, which gives them a unique identifier, when they develop their profiles. Relationships on Twitter are developed when users “follow” one another. People who follow each other have a two-way relationship; one-way relationships are also possible when one person follows another person’s tweets, but he or she is not followed in return (Java et al., 2007). Twitter goes beyond connecting friends and people who know one another in the physical world. Whether people use it to maintain friendships and conversations, report news, drive traffic to another website, or share links and information, they are prompted to answer the question “What’s happening?” to fulfill their purpose. Figure 1 displays a screenshot for a Twitter account with key features of the interface identified.

Java et al. (2007) identified several main user intentions and categories of users on Twitter. First, users intend to use Twitter to take part in the daily chatter of the site, which is the most common use of the network. The daily chatter consists of people sharing what they are doing throughout the day. The second main user intention is participating in conversations by replying to one another’s posts. Twitter is not just a billboard for making announcements; it provides a way of holding conversations with people who matter (Comm, 2009). A third main intention is sharing information and links to outside information, which often includes sharing links to other websites. Finally, the fourth main intention is reporting the news. Many users report the latest news, weather, or comment about current events on Twitter (Java et al.). Aside from the text tweets, Twitter also allows its users to post and share photos, which could be another user intention for the site (Comm, 2009). Uploading and sharing photos in Twitter is another way for users to create new discussion points and to show people, rather than tell them, what they’ve been doing. Users who upload and tweet about photos often

use a third-party application such as Twitpic (<http://twitpic.com>), TweetPhoto (<http://tweetphoto.com>), and yfrog (<http://www.yfrog.com>).

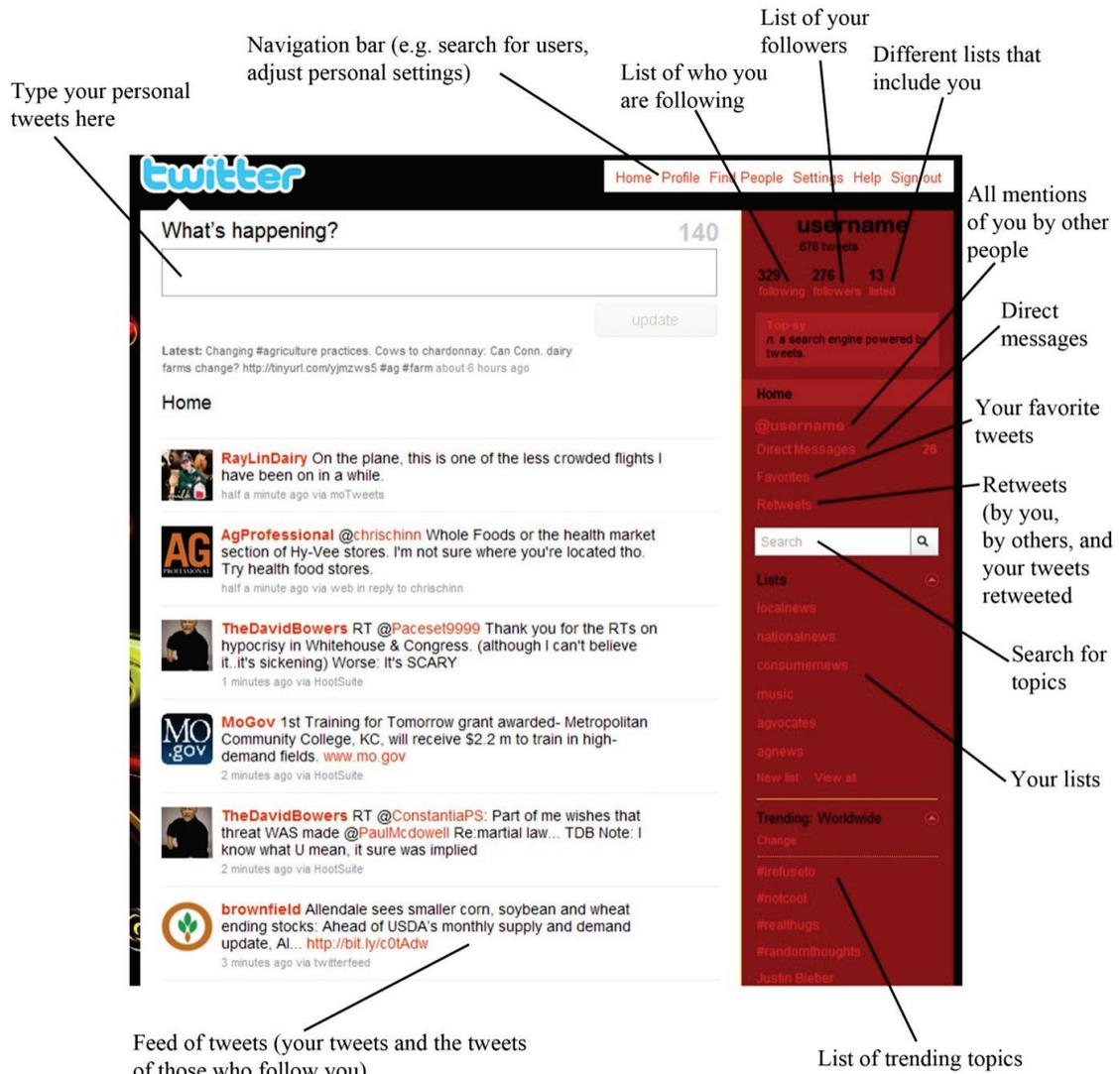


Figure 1. Key Features of a Twitter Homepage.

Who Uses Twitter?

Since its development in 2006, Twitter has grown immensely in use. It had approximately 18 million adult users in September 2009 and is predicted to reach 26 million adult users in 2010 (eMarketer, 2009). Twitter contrasts from other social networking applications in that younger users are not driving the popularity of the site. Twitter's popularity has been driven by an older generation—not teenagers. Although Twitter's creators originally believed the site would provide a way for people to stay in touch, it has become more of a tool to broadcast ideas and questions to the outside world or to market a product—a need few teenagers have (Miller, 2009).

The Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 19% of American adults (Fox, Zickuhr, & Smith, 2009) and 8% of teens ages 12-17 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010) use Twitter or another form of social media to provide status updates or view the status updates of others. The majority of the adult users are ages 18-24; the age breakdown can be seen in Figure 2.

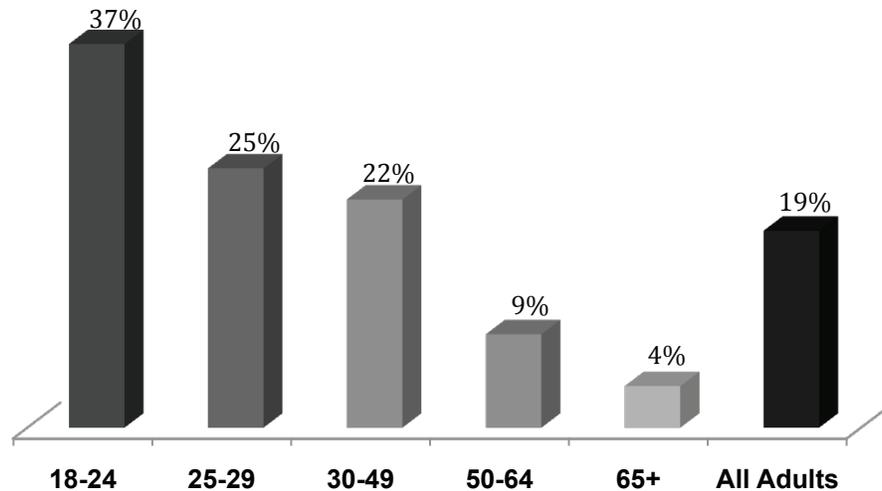


Figure 2. Percent of online adults who use Twitter or another status-updating website. (Lenhart et al., 2010)

Despite the apparent popularity of the site based on the large amount of traffic and growth, Zarrella (2009) analyzed 4.5 million Twitter accounts to find that 56% of users are not following anyone and 55% of users have never tweeted. Martin (2009) found that 60% of users who open a Twitter account do not return to the account within the next month. Although it is unclear why most Twitter users decide not to keep their accounts active, some people have offered suggestions about the trend. St. John (2009) reported that creating entertaining, informative, and interesting tweets requires time, even though the messages are short. Also, getting and maintaining an audience of followers poses a challenge for users. Parrack (2009) said some people decide not to use Twitter because they do not understand what it is, what it does, or how to use it.

A single user of Twitter might have multiple intentions or might even serve different roles in different communities, but Java et al. (2007) reported that Twitter users often fall into three main categories: information sources, friends, and information seekers. Information sources often have multiple followers, as they normally provide valuable updates of high interest. At the time of this report, most relationships on Twitter fell into the “friends” category, which includes a user’s follower base of family, friends, co-workers, and acquaintances with whom he or she tries to maintain a connection and relationship. Finally, information seekers are those who post rarely but follow regularly to keep up with the world.

Twitter’s Value to Agriculture

Agricultural communicators might start out in the friend and/or information seeker categories but should branch out into the information source category. Whether it’s putting a face on the agricultural producer, marketing and branding, covering agricultural news, dispelling myths about

agriculture, conversing with ag- and non-ag publics, monitoring public opinions, or participating in risk and crisis communications, Twitter has value for agriculture (Payn-Knoper, 2009).

Uses for Individuals in Agriculture

Applying the main intentions Twitter users have (Java et al., 2007) to agriculture, farmers and producers could post information to help the public understand the day-to-day happenings on a farm, answer a follower's questions regarding agricultural practices, provide their perspective on current issues facing the industry, link to other recommended websites, or complete all of the identified intentions for using Twitter. For example, Twitter user "at_the_farm" tweets about agriculture and living on a row crop and livestock farm. On the user's profile page reads the bio: "My passion is agriculture, No farmers No food! My husband, kids, & I row crop, raise cattle, grow pigs, & sell seed. Want to know more about farm life, just ask" (at_the_farm, 2010). Twitter allows a follower to connect with the person he or she is following because of the regular updates of that person's life (Comm, 2009). The information provided by agriculturalists could help others gain a better understanding of how food and fiber is produced, dispel myths about agricultural practices, and combat negative publicity in the event of an agricultural crisis.

Uses for Individuals in Agriculture Organizations and Businesses

Aside from the farmers themselves, agricultural groups are also taking action on Twitter. American Farm Bureau has been active in using social media like Twitter, and while Ohio Farm Bureau only announced its presence on Twitter in June 2009, it surpassed the national organization by 100 followers by October after seeing an increase in activity due to a proposed state amendment that would create a board to regulate livestock care (Vaughn, 2009). User "FollowFarmer" maintains a database of agricultural organizations and agriculturalists on Twitter, which currently lists more than 800 Twitter accounts. This number only accounts for those users who directly contact "FollowFarmer" to be included in the list, so by no means is it exhaustive. Many agricultural commodity organizations, such as the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA), U.S. Grains Council, and the Pork Checkoff, have used Twitter as a marketing tool. Even agricultural news organizations, including Farm Journal Media, Drovers magazine, and Brownfield have Twitter accounts. Many agencies of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) also use Twitter to relay agricultural information. Although it may be too early to assess the impact on public opinion as a result of agriculture's use of social media, the effort to use the technology shows no signs of slowing (Rodriguez, 2009b).

More connections can be established now among businesses, organizations, and their customers than before the advent of Twitter. A growing number of company executives are unblocking social networking in the workplace because of potential business benefits and to utilize a free communications resource (Brenner, 2009). Twitter can be used to encourage dialogue among the staff and team of a business or organization (Comm, 2009). Kraft Foods Company is using social media to make more people aware of its efforts in providing meals for U.S. families and raising approximately \$100 million every year for community organizations. To make others aware of its service efforts, Kraft developed a video about its goals and volunteer projects, and in October 2009, asked all its employees to post the video on their personal social networking sites (York, 2009).

Uses for Risk and Crisis Communication

Crisis communication using social media is another area emerging on Twitter. Coombs (2008) stated that crisis managers must now think about how blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, and videos are be-

ing used to accelerate and combat a crisis situation. He said crisis managers can use social media tools to search for warning signs of an emerging crisis and monitor crisis response and post-crisis phases to check how any crisis management efforts are being received.

The agricultural industry could benefit from using social media, particularly Twitter, in relieving crisis situations. The nationwide salmonella outbreak in 2009 that resulted from peanuts processed at a Georgia plant prompted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to inform the public about recalled products containing the processed peanuts. While the FDA must act and provide prompt information in any food-related contamination, this particular case led the FDA to use Twitter to announce the recalls. This was a smart move considering how many people are using Twitter, including workers at newspapers, television stations, and other media outlets who could continue relaying the important information from the FDA (Eye on FDA, 2009). In addition, Twitter and other social media sites have also been used to fight negative publicity in agriculture that has been brought on by individuals and groups such as the Human Society of the United States (HSUS) and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), which have used the Internet to portray farmers in a negative light (Rodriguez, 2009b).

Potential Downfalls

The very nature of Twitter makes the site an attractive venue for spammers. Moon (2009) identified three types of spammers within the Twitter community: twitomericals, straight cons, and clueless cons. Twitomericals are likened to television infomercials. Businesses create accounts to promote their products, then “over-tweet” to followers about the products. Straight cons are described as those who use overt attempts to contribute funds to non-legitimate sources, such as in get-rich-quick schemes. Clueless cons, like straight cons, try to entice people to invest in their businesses, but unlike straight cons they often lack the basic business vocabulary to make the spam appear legitimate. Clueless cons often mix spam tweets with legitimate tweets.

Issues with spam have not gone unnoticed by Twitter. On October 13, 2009, Twitter announced a new feature to attempt to slow the proliferation of spam within the Twitter community. By clicking a button, users can flag an account as spam. The questionable account is then blocked from tweeting to or following the reporting user and is investigated by Twitter’s Trust and Safety Team (Twitter, 2009).

Individuals impersonating others also pose a threat to the utility of Twitter. Numerous high-profile celebrities have faced problems with individuals setting up Twitter accounts using celebrities’ names (Rao, 2009). To combat this problem, Twitter initiated a *verified accounts* feature. A Twitter user facing identity imposters is invited to submit his or her account for verification by Twitter. Verified accounts are labeled with badge on the user’s profile page (Twitter, n.d.).

Spam and imposters aside, the sheer number of legitimate tweets often makes managing a Twitter account difficult. Catone (2009) identified 20 filters, or ways to manage tweets and followers. Twitter offers a *favorites* feature that allows users to tag their favorite tweets. Tweets tagged by more than one user as favorites are often of interest.

Twitter users also occasionally face technical problems from the Twitter site itself. When overloaded, the Twitter site displays a now infamous “fail whale” image for a brief time until resources become available to complete the process. To stay abreast of technical issues on the site, Twitter users can follow user “twitter” or check the Twitter status page at <http://status.twitter.com>. The Twitter site is continually updated to improve reliability, but problems occasionally arise (McFedries, 2009).

Advice for Using Twitter

Gaining Followership

When setting up a Twitter account, a user must first recognize his or her purpose for the account. Whether the account is for business or pleasure, the name of the account and type of tweets should match the intentions of the user (Paulson, 2009). A person's username on Twitter must be closely associated to him or her and easy to remember (Comm, 2009). After a username is created and profile is established, a user should look up established friends, contacts, and organizations through searching for specific names or keywords. Table 1 provides a list of recommended users to follow in agriculture and a brief description of what that person or organization does.

Table 1
Recommended Twitter Users to Follow Who Tweet About Agriculture

Username	Brief Description
AgriBlogger	Professional agriblogger, farm podcaster, and President of ZimmComm New Media.
AgNews	National and Midwest agricultural news.
animalag	Animal Agriculture Alliance represents multiple animal agricultural companies, producers, and organizations and tweets about issues in livestock production.
cookcountyext	Illinois Cook County Extension office provides one example of how Extension can use Twitter.
FollowFarmer	Maintains a database of agricultural organizations and agriculturalists on Twitter.
mpaynknoper	Agricultural communications consultant; creator of #agchat.
OhioFarmBureau	A Farm Bureau leader in using Twitter and other social media tools to communicate agriculture.
RayLinDairy	Milk and food producer, social media "agvocate," animal welfare specialist.
USDA_AMS_NEWS	USDA Agricultural Marketing Service news.
USDAFoodSafety	USDA "Be Food Safe" campaign educating consumers about the importance of safe food handling and reducing the risk of foodborne illness.

Once a user adds a few contacts, he or she can look at who those contacts follow and consider following some contacts from those lists. Hopefully, these people will return the favor, and the user can begin developing his or her follower base. The most powerful way users can win followers on Twitter is to follow them themselves, and the most important thing to remember when doing anything on the Internet is to produce content that is interesting, fun, and valuable.

Tweeting Effectively and Efficiently

Another feature of Twitter is the use of “#hashtags,” which is an effective way to group events or topics and respond to tweets about events or group postings. A hashtag is a keyword, and when people search for a keyword, all tweets with the “#” ahead of it will pop up (Paulson, 2009). For example, tweets about H1N1 are typically tagged by experienced users or organization communicators with #h1n1. This helps organize tweets for users interested in following particular topics. In a tweet, the hashtag will turn into a clickable link. When users click on it, a Twitter page with a live feed of tweets tagged with the hashtag will appear. The use of hashtags on Twitter allows for information organization and makes topics more searchable, which contributes to the progress toward Web 3.0 (Cameron, 2009).

No matter who uses Twitter and his or her purpose for using the tool, as is true in any other communications field or use of media outlet, it takes some skill to get the message across effectively. Following the tips of experienced Twitter users can assist other users in meeting their messaging goals. In addition to allowing its users to choose favorite tweets, Twitter offers an option that gives users the ability to organize the accounts they follow into lists. With this function, a user can create lists for more specific areas of interest, go to the complete list of users he or she follows, and use a drop-down menu to assign each user to a created list. These added tools within Twitter help organize the chaos (Mansfield, 2009). Table 2 provides several agricultural related lists Twitter users can follow or use to find additional agricultural contacts.

Table 2
Agricultural Related Lists of Twitter Users

Listorious Name	Brief Description
Ag Journalism http://listorious.com/FollowFarmer/ag-journalism	118 agricultural journalists
American Farms and Ranches http://listorious.com/PoppyDavis/american-farms-ranches	329 farmers and ranchers
University Extension http://listorious.com/urbangarden/universityextension	74 university extension offices and agents
Voices in Agriculture http://listorious.com/PoppyDavis/voices-in-agriculture	497 agriculture-related businesses, organizations, government agencies, media, and pundits

From the standpoint of the public or target audience, Twitter users consider many factors in evaluating tweets from businesses and organizations. Recent usability research suggests one of the public's top annoyances with tweets from businesses is too-frequent updates that crowd out updates by friends. Other annoyances are aggressive selling of products, infrequent updates or management of communication, and poor choice of username and/or logo (Nielsen, 2009).

Shorthand is often necessary to help people write tight and concise posts that stay within the 140-character (including spaces) limit. Users can shorten posts by using shorthand symbols, such as “=” and “&”, and numerals instead of words for numbers. Users should also consider shortening links using <http://tinyurl.com> and other link-condensing websites (Grammar Girl, n.d.). Many third-party applications (see Table 3) are used to access Twitter (e.g., TweetDeck and Tweetie for the iPhone, Echofon for Firefox), and shorten URLs on the fly when they are typed or copy-pasted into a tweet. These third-party applications also organize Twitter friends into groups, highlight tweets of interest, remove tweets of limited interest to the user, and highlight tweets with links. These services are all designed to filter tweets to make following multiple users easier.

Interacting with Users and Monitoring Tweets

Simply putting “@” in front of a person's username means the user is replying *publicly* to a tweet posted by that person or is simply mentioning him or her in a tweet. For example, if a user found a Web page that may be of particular interest to a follower, that user might tweet: “@username would like this article <http://tinyurl.com/yhte5mc>.” This is similar to posting a note on a friend's Facebook wall in that these replies are public. On the other hand, direct messages allow for personal, private, one-on-one communication between two users. This function is akin to sending a message through Facebook in that it is private; however, through Twitter, it is still limited to 140 characters. If a user wants to repost another person's tweet, this function is called “re-tweeting,” which can be achieved by placing a “RT” with the tweet and attributing the tweet to its author or simply selecting “Retweet” as an option within each posted tweet. Twitter users should strive to create valuable tweets that are re-tweetable (Mansfield, 2009).

Third-party applications (see Table 3) can also help in creating specific feeds based on hashtags that the user would like to continually monitor. Keywords can be monitored and searched for using Twitter's search engine on the home page (<http://www.twitter.com>), and these do not have to be hashtags with the # symbol in front of the word. Keyword tracking is a particularly useful tool for public relations practitioners in a time of crisis or in any kind of issue management.

Specifically in the agricultural industry, users with an interest in agriculture and food-related issues can tune in to a live chat on Twitter every Tuesday from 8 to 10 p.m. (Eastern Time) and discuss current topics on the “#agchat” or “#foodchat” feed. These chats provide users with a forum to share advice, insights, and opinions.

Twibes, or groups created by users of Twitter, allow for like-minded people to join in conversation about different topics. The twibe for agriculture (located by accessing <http://www.twibes.com/group/Agriculture>) provides a forum for taking part in the agchat discussions each week. A feed that pulls all “#agchat” tweets can also be accessed at <http://twubs.com/agchat>.

Table 3

Where to Find Free Twitter Third-Party Applications to Help With Efficiency

Application	Brief Description
Analytic Apps http://twitter.pbworks.com/AnalyticsApps	List of paid and free analytic tools to measure your Twitter feed's impact. Some, like http://objectivemarketer.com , include free 30-day trials.
Cloudberry TweetIE for Internet Explorer http://tweetie.cloudberrylab.com	Internet Explorer add-on that allows users to tweet and view tweets through their browser without going to http://twitter.com .
Echofon for Firefox http://echofon.com/twitter/firefox	Firefox add-on that allows users to tweet and view tweets through their browser without going to http://twitter.com .
Hoot Suite http://www.hootsuite.com	Allows users to manage multiple Twitter accounts, organize twitter feeds they follow into tabbed lists, set up keyword tracking, view statistics, and run analytics all from one online (or installed software) user interface.
Mashups http://mashable.com/2009/07/03/twitter-filter	A social media guide that provides tips for filtering tweets.
Twitpic http://www.twitpic.com	Allows users to login with their Twitter username and password, upload their photos, and prompt their followers to view the photos by sending a link to them in a text tweet.
Selective Twitter Status http://apps.facebook.com/selectivetwitter	Allows users to selectively update their Facebook status through Twitter. This is a Facebook application that works with a Twitter account.
TinyURL http://tinyurl.com	Condenses URLs into shortened hyperlinks so that they do not take up as many of the 140 characters.
TweetDeck http://www.tweetdeck.com	Similar to HootSuite, except the software needs to run on a computer. Also a good application for iPhone users (search through iPhone "Apps" store).
Twitterfeed http://twitterfeed.com	Automatically tweets a link to blog posts as they are created.
Twubs http://twubs.com	Twubs are Twitter groups based on content aggregated from #hashtags.
Unofficial Twitter Wiki http://twitter.pbworks.com/Apps	Categorized descriptions of hundreds of third-party applications compatible with Twitter.

Evaluating Impact

Finally, as with any new type of outreach, evaluating Twitter's value to an organization is paramount to adjusting the organization's communication strategies. As mentioned earlier in the article, Twitter is a public relations tool, and as such, its potential value may be viewed as elusive when compared to standard business interpretations of return on investment. However, the features of Twitter add more tangible measures with which to glean impact and value. Because it is online, several Web analytical tools (see Table 3) can collect data about how far tweets travel (from followers to their social networks via re-tweets); number of interactions with customers, audiences, or stakeholders; how followership changes over time; and the salience of a brand or organization's key issues in the "Twitterverse," just to point out a few. A defined social media strategy should include measures of success for Twitter, and analytic applications, whether paid or free, are useful for demonstrating impact (Duncan, n.d.).

Quick Tips for Twitter Use

- Develop a social media strategy that includes specifics for Twitter. For a general guide, see Morgan (2009) and Williams (2009) for a detailed template.
- Be clear about the purpose of your Twitter account and select a username that is both descriptive and memorable.
- Use a simple logo or image that is easily identifiable for the Twitter account. Test it by having someone look at it for a couple of seconds to see if he or she can easily identify it.
- Beware of spoof accounts if your organization or business is well known. Consider creating accounts using alternate forms of the organization's name (e.g., acronyms, full names) if only to redirect people to the official Twitter page. Also check for verified accounts (<http://twitter.com/help/verified>).
- Create a unique Twitter background using Photoshop (guidelines available on <http://twitterbacks.com>), <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/twitterbacks>, or <http://www.twitterbacks.com>.
- Search for people to follow to quickly build your list of followers. Use the "favorites" and "lists" features in Twitter to organize who you follow.
- Do not overload your audience with annoying messages. Make your tweets interesting and usable to improve the likelihood they will be re-tweeted. Consider using some basic principles of psychology to improve your engagements (see Sexton, 2010).
- Include hashtags in your tweets so they can be easily searched by others looking for a similar topic.
- Using hashtags, re-tweeting, and mentioning users (@username) helps users gain followership. See Tables 1 and 2 for people or organizations in agriculture to follow.
- Explore third-party applications to help manage and filter tweets (see Table 3).
- Measure the return on investment using Twitter analytical tools (<http://twitter.pbworks.com/AnalyticsApps> or <http://www.hootsuite.com>) that measure re-tweets, mentions, followers, and several other indicators of impact.

Discussion/Conclusions

Social media use requires both creativity and strategy to develop an accurate and effective message. Although learning the Twitter applications and features can take time, Twitter is still a fun, valuable tool that is helping to strengthen online communication (Mansfield, 2009). Twitter has many features, but the idea behind it is simplistic, and Comm (2009) argued that simplicity has contributed to a large part of its success. “On Twitter, people are happy to let everyone know what they had for lunch, but that’s not because Twitter asked them to” (Comm, p. 29).

A lot of people, especially those more familiar with Facebook status updates, see Twitter as nothing more than mundane status updates of people’s lives. Common criticism, especially from newcomers, sounds a little like this: “Why should I care about what some schmoe had for breakfast?” Actually, updates like that are highly appealing to marketers looking for ways to help potential customers discover their products or publicize their brand to their networks through these seemingly “mundane” updates. The idea that Twitter provides only pointless personal details is a limited perspective. Twitter was built on the idea of providing real-time updates, which is transferable to situations like the jet landing on the Hudson River, members of Congress tweeting about a legislative proposal, or live coverage of a speaker at a research or trade conference. Twitter has recognized this shift in how social media is used and changed the question above the box to post a tweet from “What are you doing?” to “What’s happening?” to reflect the transition in its use.

Based on research and industry perspectives, Twitter will continue its explosive growth over the next year before it begins to level out. Businesses and organizations will use it to inform and listen to their audiences. The listening aspect will increase so that organizations and businesses can better predict their audience members’ needs. Twitter will play a major role in crisis communication to provide information as quickly as possible because information travels faster through social networks. While Internet users currently utilize Web 2.0 technologies, Web 2.0 companies may find themselves transformed by another wave of Web innovators who are making use of Web 3.0—making information easier to read, understand, and process (Metz, 2007) and connecting people who share common interests (Cameron, 2009). With the use of hashtags and lists to better organize information, links, news, and conversations, Twitter is helping take social media into this new realm of semantic Web technology. Because Web 2.0 applications have allowed for more connections among people than ever before, they will continue to be used, but Web 3.0 will allow for a new generation of technology that manages data and ideas more efficiently (Hendler, 2009). While Twitter might be considered a step forward in the future of Web use, the transition to implement more Web 3.0-related products could be delayed until a stronger market forms for them (Hendler, 2008).

Agricultural communicators should develop a plan for social media that includes Twitter and how and why the organization will use it. Morgan (2009) provided a brief overview of how to implement a social media strategy, and Williams (2009) shared a detailed template for Twitter specifically. Tweeting and staying on top of the Twitterverse can be time consuming and brings up the important question: “Is this worth it?” Measuring the return on investment is critical to evaluate Twitter’s worth for an individual or organization, keeping in mind that it takes time to build a successful presence. While the value of Twitter may be viewed as more intangible compared to traditional business measures of success, Web analytics can provide a data-driven approach to measure its business value (Duncan, n.d.).

It is important to remember that not all audiences use Twitter, so organizations should supplement other social media tools (e.g., Facebook, YouTube) and traditional mediums. Twitter’s capabili-

ties as a public relations tool means agricultural communicators need to be using it to engage and monitor various publics and issues of interest to their organization. Furthermore, recognizing that Twitter is not a hypodermic needle to deliver information, but rather a tool with which to interact with publics, is critical, yet difficult.

“People and organizations are threatened by the idea of opening themselves up to being the non-experts, a mere part of the conversation (as opposed to the directors and choreographers of it), and to being the recipients of communications – not the source. What people and organizations who try to play in this new world with their old rules discover is that the networked world is also not a very forgiving place.” (Lefebvre, 2007, p. 38)

Agricultural communicators need to shift their thinking to recognize, as Lefebvre (2007) suggested, that the people formerly known as the audience might be better sources of information than those who are officially sanctioned. With tools like Twitter at their fingertips, people no longer want to be audiences, but instead, active participants in the conversation of agriculture. Public relations practitioners’ blogs and social media (Twitter would fall into both of those categories) have impacted the profession in that they have “made communications more instantaneous because they encourage organizations to respond more quickly to criticism” (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p. 16).

Agricultural communicators need to open themselves up to the idea of being a part of the conversation, not just the orchestrators of it. When used strategically, Twitter can be a tool that shapes communication strategies, and ultimately, how agriculture operates to remain a viable and publicly valued industry. When supplemented with traditional communication mediums, Twitter offers communicators the potential to reach new audiences (Wright & Hinson, 2009). However, the selection and use of communication technology must be done purposefully with full consideration given to audience member preferences and the capabilities of the tool. Twitter does have some downfalls that must be recognized and overcome. Additional research is still needed to measure the impact of Twitter as a communication outlet in agriculture. It would be interesting to research the characteristics of individuals who follow producers or agricultural organizations to determine if Twitter is indeed reaching new audiences and to see how it can be used to increase public engagement with agricultural issues.

This article is meant to be a starting point for agricultural communicators who are considering the use of Twitter in their communication efforts. When used effectively, Twitter provides agricultural communicators with another medium to tell the story of agriculture—140 characters at a time.

Keywords

Web 2.0, Web 3.0, social media, Twitter, public relations, crisis communications, agricultural communications

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