U.S. Agricultural Commodity Organizations' Use of Blogs as a Communications Tool

Madeline L. Moore, Courtney Meyers, Erica Irlbeck, and Scott Burris

Abstract

Current communications trends and social media have given individuals and organizations unprecedented opportunities to build relationships with audience members while introducing and encouraging new perspectives. One particular form of social media is blogging, which allows people to share a wider variety of information than other forms of social media. The purpose of this study was to explore how agricultural commodity organizations use blogs as a communication tool. The researchers purposively selected nine U.S. agricultural commodity groups that had an organizational blog and collected data through in-depth interviews. The findings indicated the organizations started blogging because blogs were the newest communication tool they could use to reach new and traditional audiences. The commodity organizations used some online analytics and mentions on other social media outlets to measure blog success, but they did not establish goals for their blog prior to the blog's launch. The findings offer an understanding of how agricultural commodity organizations are utilizing blogs, which provides insight for others in the agricultural industry who may decide to use this technology.

Key Words

Social media, online communication, farmers, ranchers

Introduction and Literature Review

Current communications trends and social media have changed how individuals interact and how they prefer to receive information. In the United States, adults are increasing adopting mobile technologies — 90% have a cell phone and 58% have a smartphone (Pew Research Center, 2014). More than half of online American adults (52%) use two or more social media sites (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Social media sites are varied, thus providing options for just about everyone to participate in online social media activities from professional networking and mass communication sites to real-time location specific communications (Kietzmann, Hermkens, Mc-Carthy, & Silvestre, 2011). The increasing use of mobile and social media technologies means more people are connected to each other and organizations at all times, which has significant implications on how organizations create and distribute online content (Vaynerchuk, 2013).

One particular form of social media is blogging, which allows people to connect with a community, as does all social media, but blogs have the opportunity to share a wider, more in-depth, variety of information than other forms of social media (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008). Pulizzi

(2014) described blogs as the "centers of social media solar systems" that allow businesses to engage in dialog with customers (p. 159). When compared to other social media platforms, blogs often are viewed as the most credible (Fieseler, Fleck, & Mekel, 2010) and their use within organizations is increasing in popularity (Waters, Ghosh, Griggs, & Searson, 2014).

Blogs are Web pages frequently modified with dated entries or posts listed in reverse chronological order. Posts are typically written in first person and encourage interaction through comments and social media sharing (Rettberg, 2013). Blogs allow members of virtual communities to post, comment, and share whatever information they want, which has "heralded a seismic shift in the way business is done" (Holtz & Havens, 2009, p. 19). Organizations use blogs to engage in dialogue and feedback with stakeholders (Yang & Lim, 2009), which improves perceptions of transparency and accountability (Holtz & Havens, 2009). Organizational blogging has been able to create an online community among various publics (Jackson, Yates, & Orlikowski, 2007). As a blogging community's strength grows, the ability of members of a community to seek more useful answers and more in-depth information gathering increases. Members of the audience who participate in the blog expand their level of knowledge sharing among the other members of the organization's blog (Jackson et al., 2007). Corporate blogging also can help achieve public relations and marketing related goals (Wyld, 2008).

The tone organizations use when blogging can impact the effectiveness of the information shared through the blogs (Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Levine, Locke, Searls, & Weinberger, 2001). Kelleher and Miller (2006) found organizational blogs that used a conversational tone throughout the postings appeared to be more effective in communicating than an organization's traditional newsletter-type material that was available online. Levine et al. (2001) found traditional corporate or organizational communication does not contain a human-like voice or tone. However, blogs allow for organizations to communicate with characteristics such as humor, admitting mistakes, treating others as humans, and providing links to competitors (Weinberger, 2002). Seltzer and Mitrook (2007) concluded blogs would be more beneficial in creating online relationships with publics as compared to traditional websites, but they indicated continual effort needs to be made to create and establish these relationships through this form of online communications.

Public relations practitioners have described blogs as a tool that can influence individuals and publics (Kent, 2008). Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, and Kim (2007) found practitioners who used blogs felt they had more power in the sense of expertise and prestige than those who were not blogging. Kent (2008) said the single greatest strength of blogs and the most important trait to public relations practitioners is the ability for publics to participate in the framing of online news and other information. The ability of blog authors to influence publics through social media and blogs is greater than other mediums because publics read blogs with developed opinions and prior knowledge (Kent, 2008).

Pawlick (2001) said agriculture and science information impacts people around the world, but traditional media outlets do not usually report on these developments. Those in charge of communicating scientific and applied research information through various media outlets have realized the need for agriculture to stay current and active with the latest advancements in communications technologies (Roth, Vogt, & Weinheimer, 2002; West, 2006). In fact, the continual improvements in the U.S. and international agricultural industries can be related to the ability to communicate those advancements effectively (Rhoades & Hall, 2007). As new technologies evolve, those within agriculture are dedicated to helping others utilize these technologies while sharing their discoveries to advance the industry as a whole. Improvements in communication practices could strengthen

relationships with various publics by bringing people together to become better educated on various aspects of the agricultural industry (Roth et al., 2002).

People involved in the agricultural industry want more options to share, discuss, and interact with each other ("Successful farming re-engineers," 2010). Those involved with agriculture are some of the most advanced users of communication technology (Williamson, 2012). Currently, agricultural-ists use social media tools, such as blogs, to share stories of production agriculture to educate and disprove misconceptions that public and policy makers may have about production agriculture (Live-stock Marketing Association, 2010; Williamson, 2012). Agricultural producers are continually being encouraged to use social media because the opportunities to interact with consumers and clients are endless (May, 2011; Williamson, 2012). Others use this technology to sell products, find or establish resources for solutions, promote their businesses, build a news network, and take the opportunity to interact with experts in the field (Agriculture.com, 2010). Some producers and industry experts have developed blogs and other forms of social media to combat misinformation (Anderson-Wilk, 2009; Truitt, 2010).

Within agriculture, industry organizations are using blogs to interact with consumers by shar-ing recipes, marketing campaigns, educational information, industry resources (My Checkoff News, 2009), and producer stories (California Agricultural Communications Coalition, 2010). Some orga-nizations have created blogging sites that allow for a personalized feel to an online forum (National Corn Growers Association, 2007). Industry groups also have launched blogs to have a place where producers can discuss industry trends in U.S. agriculture (United States Grain Council, 2009). Other organizations and individuals want to create a united front for agriculture, so they are working to cre-ate a community of "agvocates" through social media, which has been a focus of Syngenta's "Growing Digital" blog (Syngenta, 2011).

Despite the increase in blog popularity and use in agriculture, limited research has been con-ducted on blogs or blogging trends and practices in agricultural organizations or among individuals in the industry. Fannin and Chenault (2005) examined how blogs could be utilized in agriculture to attract and disseminate information to journalists and non-media consumers. Rhoades and Hall (2007) conducted the first agriculture-focused blog content analysis, which analyzed the characteris-tics of blogs in agriculture and what information the blogs contained pertaining to the industry. The content analysis found agricultural blogs at the time were very young, ranged in subject matter, and were not updated as often as other studies had found about blogs focused on other subjects. Another study related to blogs and agriculture focused on agricultural editors' and broadcasters' use of Web 2.0 and social media technologies (Rhoades & Aue, 2010). The researchers found those involved with agricultural communications understood the need to constantly adopt new technology but had a hard time maintaining a blog.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this study connected the theory of relationship management, interactivity theory, and contingency theory of accommodation. Other studies in public relations have used these theories in conjunction to research blogs, how people blog, and how stakeholders use websites (Grunig, 2009; Kelleher, 2008; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008; Rhoades & Hall, 2007; Sweetser & Metzgar, 2007). The theory of relationship management is used in many fields — public relations, interpersonal relations, family relations, organizational studies, group dynamics, and more — as a central concept of managing the relationships between organizations and key publics (Ledingham, 2000). The theory is built around Grunig and Hunt's (1984) definition of public rela-

tion and posits that effective public relations must nurture and maintain relationships with key publics rather than manipulating publics (Ledingham, 2000). The theory of interactivity states dialogue and interaction can develop between an organization and its publics (Scuncio, 2010). This theory has changed with the advent and growth of the Internet, as interaction with the other individuals or organizations through social media, websites, or blogs has become a common practice (Smuts, 2009). Establishing how interactivity actually happens is important for organizations or public relations professionals to understand when disseminating information via blogs (Kent, 2008; Smuts, 2009).

Contingency theory of accommodation focuses on the continuum from pure accommodation to pure advocacy (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999). The theory provides an explanation for the decisions public relations practitioners make in establishing and maintaining relationships between organizations and their publics (Cancel et al., 1999; Kelleher, 2008). In public relations, practitioners choose to represent an organization to its publics from a variety of positions, which can range from pure accommodation to pure advocacy (Cancel et al., 1999). Kelleher (2008) said this theory can be applied when practitioners are willing to enter into a dialogue with a public, rather than simply advocating. In studies that researched organizational use of blogging, this theory has been used to determine the voice and willingness of practitioners to participate in a dialogue with their publics (Kelleher, 2008).

Purpose/Research Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore why and how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations are using blogs as a communication tool to connect with target audiences. The following objectives were formed to achieve the research purpose:

1. Describe why U.S. agricultural commodity organizations established blogs.
2. Identify how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations manage their blog content.
3. Understand how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations use blogs as part of a strategic communication plan.

Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach consisting of in-depth interviews with blog authors of selected U.S. agricultural commodity groups. Qualitative research uses in-depth information from a small sample to understand how and why people think, behave, feel, develop meaning, and experience a situation (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). For this study, the researcher used a phenomenological approach to better understand how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations were using, experiencing, and engaging with blogs. Phenomenology methods are used to describe what or how people are experiencing something in "lived world, or the lived experience" (Morse & Richards, 2002, p. 45).

The researchers purposively selected U.S. agricultural commodity groups from two agricultural associations — the National Association of Farm Broadcasters (NAFB) and the American Agricultural Editors' Associations (AAEA). These associations both have members who represent a variety of agricultural industries, commodities, and audiences. The AAEA membership list contained three U.S. agricultural commodity organizations; the NAFB membership list had 15 U.S. agricultural commodity groups. Once the industry groups were identified, the organizations' websites were reviewed to identify the presence of an official organizational blog. All of the commodity organizations had blogs hosted on the website or hosted through an external website. The lead researcher then contacted each blog's administrator to seek participation in the study; nine agreed. These individuals

were purposively selected because they were employees of the commodity organization and were the primary individuals who handle the blog content and management.

A questioning guide was used to collect data to address the research objectives. The questions addressed the organization's motivation to start a blog; how the organization is utilizing the blog; the organization's opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of the use of the blog; and how the organization measured success of the blog. The researcher collected the qualitative data using in-depth telephone interviews between December 9, 2011, and January 5, 2012, with nine participants from across the United States. The respondents represented five crop, two food, and two livestock organizations. The telephone interviews were recorded with a digital recording device, and the lead researcher took additional notes to record additional thoughts and concepts. Each interview was conducted using the same questioning guide and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The recorded interviews were then transcribed into separate Microsoft Word files.

Participants were assigned pseudonyms prior to analyzing the data. After the lead researcher transcribed each interview, the results were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Using this method, the researcher looked for common themes, similarities, and differences. The data were analyzed in multiple steps. First, the lead researcher individually read the nine interviews. Then, using NVivo 8.0 to help store, manage, and code the data, the interview transcripts were coded into themes based on the researcher's interpretation and classification of the data. As themes emerged, they were compared to other data and categories to determine common relationships around the information collected. To establish trustworthiness, researchers employed Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The lead researcher also bracketed her own biases prior to data collection and analysis through the use of a subjectivity statement.

Findings

All participants were employees of an U.S. agricultural commodity organization. The commodity organizations represented in this study include both state and national commodity organizations. Table 1 provides the respondents' pseudonyms, a brief job description, the location of the organization's headquarters, the year the blog started, and the classification for the blog. Most of the participants had continuously worked on their organization's blog since the launch. All were the main editors of the blog or worked closely with another employee to edit the blog.

Table 1

Characteristics of Selected U.S. Agricultural Commodity Organization Representatives and Corresponding Blogs (N = 9)

Pseudonym	Job Description	Geographic Location	Blog Launch Year	Commodity Classification
Hannah	Communications coordinator	Southwest	2010	Crop
Katie	Member of marketing team	Midwest	2011	Food
Lindsay	Communication specialist	Midwest	2010	Food
Matt	Director of communications	Midwest	2012	Crop
Michelle	Communications manager	Midwest	2011	Crop
Shelia	Director of communications	Midwest	2010	Crop
Stacy	Online content manager	Midwest	2009	Livestock
Trent	Director of communications	Northeast	2010	Livestock
Tyler	Director of communications	Midwest	2006	Crop

Table 2 provides the emergent themes identified within each research objective.

Table 2

Summary of Emergent Themes Identified for Each Research Objective

Research Objective	Emergent Themes
1. Describe why U.S. agricultural commodity organizations established blogs.	1) to utilize the newest communication tool 2) to reach traditional and new audience segments.
2. Identify how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations manage their blog content.	1) hosting services for blogs 2) blog topics and posting frequency 3) encouraging participation from blog followers.
3. Understand how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations use blogs as part of a strategic communication plan.	1) measuring blog success 2) determining target publics and strategic planning.

RO 1: Describe why U.S. agricultural commodity organizations established blogs.

Data analysis identified two themes for this objective: 1) to utilize the newest communication tool and 2) to reach traditional and new audience segments.

To utilize the newest communication tool.

One of the primary responsibilities of U.S. agricultural commodity organizations is to communicate with their members and supporting publics. Participants said the decision to establish and use an organization blog was primarily because blogs were the newest form of communication. When his

organization's blog was started, Tyler said blogging was the up-and-coming communication trend. His organization wanted to find out what people were talking about.

> TYLER: We were looking for new ways to communicate with our members and the public other than just news stories and press releases. We wanted to find a way to put a more interesting spin on things that we are involved in and so we first began to experiment with blogging.

Participants said the blogs fit the commodity organizations' need for a communication tool that allowed them to post in-depth information and provided a way to save information for future use. Shelia said her organization's blog "creates an archive of information on our website." Another reason for establishing the blog was the ease of publishing information during international travel. Michelle said a blog allowed her organization to "communicate with the media, board members' families, and other farmers that might be interested in our organization's travels." Additionally, participants said their organization's blog was established to provide a constant stream of content from the organization to its membership. Blog followers can be alerted to the latest developments with an organization faster and easier with the blogging technology's ability to send instant emails and give readers the ability to choose which information they will read. Trent said, "We have tons of news that goes to our members through email, and instead of getting lost, the blog allows people to choose where their information is coming from."

The participants all said they wanted to embrace a new online communication tool to disseminate messages to their audience members. These messages included information about consumer and producer education, outreach, marketing, public relations, and media relations. Several of the participants said they wanted to start a dialogue on the blog about topics the organization had previously put in a printed publication.

> HANNAH: One of our biggest things that we have done to get a conversation started is to repurpose an article, and use it on our blog from our organization's newsletter or magazine. We then broadcast that on Twitter or Facebook and followers will click on those links and go back to our blog. It is a way to increase traffic back to our blog and website.

The participants said blogs were a form of social media that could work to promote a message for a specific purpose or cause. Katie said her organization desired an outlet that would help provide information to benefit the organization's reputation. She said, "We have found that through research, anytime that you can get a message out there and start a dialogue, you can create trust and share our organization's mission." One participant mentioned the blog was used to address misinformation during the 2009 H1N1 crisis that affected the United States when the casual use of the term "swine flu" created consumer confusion regarding the safety of pork products. Stacy said the blog was an excellent tool during the H1N1 crisis to reassure people that pork was safe. She said, "The blog is another resource we use to promote our product and ensure consumer confidence."

To reach traditional and new audience segments.
U.S. agricultural commodity organizations started blogging to communicate with producers, consumers, and media. Participants also said their organizations saw blogs as a way to contact different target audiences. Trent said, "We wanted to reach a younger audience." Katie said her organization's

blog was "directly targeted toward early adopters, people who are seeking information about food, and agricultural industries." Hannah said her organization used the blog "to target those who are more likely to gather news information from social media or a blog versus a newsletter that we mailed out."

One key audience segment the participants said their blogs help reach are members of the media. Reaching the media allows the organizations to provide information about events, education, and legislation. The participants said media representatives enjoy being able to read about an event or issue within a specific industry and have a story idea pitched to them. Trent, Shelia, and Michelle all said these story pitches would not have been as easily available or successful without their commodity organization's blog. Michelle said, "One of the purposes of our blog is to share information with various audiences, especially media. By giving the media information that they need, they can follow us and generate stories about our organization and our members." Shelia stated many major U.S. media outlets are keeping a watchful eye on her organization's blog and the added media attention has helped provide information about agriculture and her organization's work within the crop industry. Stacy said, "When major media is checking our blog for stories, I know they must be checking other organizational blogs, and this is helping American agriculture share its story."

RO2: Identify how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations manage their blog content.

Three themes emerged to address this research objective: 1) hosting services for blogs, 2) blog topics and posting frequency, and 3) encouraging participation from blog followers.

Hosting services for blogs.

The U.S. agricultural commodity organizations used either a pre-existing website or external blogging website to host the organizational blog. Externally, five commodity organizations used WordPress and two used Blogger. Participants said the external blogging websites offered the commodity organizations the opportunity to easily construct a blog that fit their initial and evolving needs as a communication tool.

> TRENT: I didn't see any reason to reinvent the wheel; there are free services that are easy to use. These major blogging sites have most of the quirks worked out of them. Instead of developing something internally where we would have to work out bugs, we decided that to take the easy path.

Two commodity organizations chose to host their blog through their organization's preexisting website because it was less of a hassle and worry than to have to direct potential readers to another website. They also said they enjoyed being able to link all of their organization's supplemental websites and blogs together under one umbrella website. Katie added her organization chose to keep the blog on their website so "people have a central location to search for information pertaining to the organization."

Blog topics and posting frequency.

Participants said blog topics were focused around the organization's commodity, but they also included supporting topics. To determine the subject matter for the blog posts, three organizations used a yearly calendar and based blog posts on national nutrition month, national dairy month, and major U.S. holidays, such as Easter and Thanksgiving. Katie said, "We follow the calendar year. At

Thanksgiving people talk about turkeys and ham, at Easter people talk about eggs, so we use those type of things as well to bring more consumer type things into the blog." While some organizations had a plan for the subject matter of the blog posts, other participants said the posts could vary if they supported the organization's commodity.

Participants said the blog's subject matter is a way for their organizations to draw media attention to a certain subject that is affecting the organization's membership and operations. For particular events or industry-related issues, blogs were used to gain attention from major media outlets. Many of the organizations' blogs also provided legislative and political information about industry issues that affect producers.

All the participants said their organizations enlisted the assistance of more than one person to write blog posts. One participant said her organization pays outside bloggers to produce content, while two organizations had volunteer bloggers. In both cases, the bloggers were allowed to determine their own blog posting content as long as is it related to the mission of the commodity organization and the target audience. Some of the organizations have goals of posting to their blogs three to five times a week, but participants said they are more concerned with producing quality content than meeting editorial calendar deadlines. Shelia said, "Blogging takes time. It is not a shortage of topics; it's just the time it takes to do it."

Encouraging participation from blog followers.
Participants said their commodity organizations have struggled to encourage comments and conversations from readers. Multiple organizations have tried to pose questions to start a conversation between blog followers and the blog author. Stacy said, "We do a couple of promotions that they have to sign up in the comments. It takes them one step further than just visiting or reading."

Some organizations used comments as a measurement of a successful post. Tyler said, "I wish readers would comment more. You can measure the success of a blog in some ways by number of comments that are posted." Hannah said the level of comments they receive on their national crop blog is related to a post's level of controversy. She explained: "Sometimes I am leery of the comments from the general public. We have not had any situations yet [in] dealing with individuals who may be offended or unhappy about a blog post."

Tyler said his organization has not figured out the perfect way to initiate a conversation with blog followers. Lindsay, Trent, and Katie all said they would like the blog followers to create a conversation among themselves without assistance from the organization's blog authors. Others said their organizations did not care if they received comments on the blog posts because they knew people were reading them.

Each organization had a different process for moderating comments on blog posts. Some organizations allowed every comment to be posted, while others thoroughly read the comments before they were allowed to be posted. Others removed comments if they contained profanity. Stacy said her organization had a strict set of organizational blogging policies and each comment was held to those policies. She said the comments her organization were most concerned about monitoring were from people who were concerned or frustrated and she said they aimed to help those people. Trent said his organization's policy to handle comments was not to remove comments from the blog unless they contained references to violent actions or profanities.

RO 3: Understand how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations use blogs as part of a strategic communication plan.

Two major themes were identified to address this objective: 1) measuring blog success and 2) determining target publics and strategic planning.

Measuring blog success.

Each organization considered success differently, but no organization had directly conducted research to determine the blog's success. The commodity groups used the built-in blogging analytics as the main way they monitored success of the blog, although some did use Google Analytics. Trent mentioned it was difficult to directly measure the success of his organization's blog, but "Google Analytics tells us a lot of information and from there, we can measure the amount of time a visitor stayed, how many times a blog is mentioned on Twitter or Facebook." Many commodity organizations also tracked how many times a blog post was retweeted on Twitter or shared on Facebook to help measure success.

Six of the participants considered a blog post successful if it received comments from readers because it indicated a higher level of interaction that could lead to a dialogue. Additionally, the participants said the media was an audience they wanted to reach with their blogs, and the mass media's level of attention to their blogs was used as a measurement of success. Trent mentioned that receiving phone calls from the media about a blog topic or post was a rewarding feeling: "Based upon the phone calls that we get for testimony and questions about issues that affect policy makers, we feel our blog is successful."

Determining target publics and strategic planning.

The participants shared varying opinions regarding if they had established a blog with specific publics in mind. Several of the organizations had not included social media communications in the organizational strategic communication plan; therefore, they had not been able to compare who they wanted to read their blog to who actually was. Lindsay said she was aware of how her organization was using social media to interact with Internet users, but she was unsure of who was really using their social media resources.

> LINDSAY: We are also using social media to engage with people about dairy; it's kind of a wide audience. Obviously, the dairy farmers use social media, but it's also the general consumer who eats dairy, health professionals; it's a wide range of people, but we haven't got down to specific audiences.

None of the organizations had directly conducted research to determine which publics or audiences were representative of blog followers other than through what information the blogging site provides for analytic support. Katie said, "It is the early adopters, just from our comments and things like that we can tell." Tyler said, "Our organization is not trying to target anyone in particular with this blog, it just gives people a look at what we are doing and what we are thinking."

Other organizations have a defined communications strategy and modes of communication with their target audiences, but they will use both traditional and online media to promote their blog content. Organizations that still focus on print media efforts to reach a predetermined audience will include blog information, or links for more information in print publications, with the hopes of directing print media readers to the blog to read other information. Hannah said her organization announces the blog in the weekly newsletter: "It's where we generate the majority of hits because the majority of members see an interesting title and they want to see what else the blog has to say

about it." Tyler said his organization promotes their blog through organizational presentations: "Any chance that we can get in front of a farm audience presentation; our blog is one thing that is listed as an address on the last PowerPoint slide. We talk about it a lot." Trent's organization uses instant email-blasts to the members to provide blog post updates. Others said they comment on specific blogs and are hyperlinked to other state, regional, or national blogs or websites that support the commodity.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

All the organizations represented in the study had established their blogs between 2006 and 2012. The participants in this study were very familiar with the blogging procedures for their organization, and most had been with the organization when the blogs were launched. The participants said their organizations started blogs to utilize the latest online communication tool and to reach traditional and new audience segments. The blogs allowed the organizations to share information about activities, travel, events, and news specific to their organization's purpose. In addition, the blogs allowed the organizations to interact with more audience members using this online format. Blogs offer a unique communications outlet to allow organizations and publics to interact, and relationships formed through blogs between the organization and publics can benefit both parties based on the information shared (Seltzer & Mitrook, 2007). This ability to establish and maintain relationships is paramount to the theory of relationship management (Ledingham, 2000). Eight organizations mentioned the ability to draw media attention from blog posts, which met the organizations' goal of creating awareness and promoting the organization. The participants said they felt a sense of accomplishment when the media used information provided in their organization's blog.

The organizations varied on how they designed and posted content to their blogs, with most using an external blog service such as WordPress and Blogger. The participants said they enjoyed receiving comments and participation from their readers, but they struggled to encourage reader feedback. Although most of the organizations did not follow a set schedule for blog post topics, they all emphasized the need to keep the information current and frequent. Using a set schedule for blog posting represents the organization's attempt to create relationships and maintain existing relationships based on consistency and accountability (Kelleher, 2008; Porter et al., 2007). The participants said their organizations focused their blog posts and other content matter to the subject of the commodity or other information that impacts the organization. According to the contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel et al., 1999), it appears the participants recognized the need to provide content that advocated their organization while also responding to readers' comments.

Yang and Lim (2009) found when blog content is written with a higher level of staged interactivity, the public judged the particular website to be more transparent and credible. It was rewarding to the blog authors when readers commented on blog posts or shared the link to the blog through email and social media. According to the theory of interactivity (Scuncio, 2010), understanding when and how this dialogue occurs between an organization and its publics can help public relations practitioners better share information through blogs (Kent, 2008; Smuts, 2009).

Only two of the nine organizations had written the blog into their organization's strategic communications plan. One aspect of strategic planning is to establish goals to measure success, which the organizations in the current study had not set prior to launching their blogs. Participants said their organizations do use the analytics from the blogging host websites or Google Analytics to track how many people are visiting their blogs. However, these analytics do not provide information about why certain people are visiting the blog or how it could be improved to better meet audience members'

needs. One measurement of blog success the commodity organizations used was the number of media mentions that resulted from blog content. Blogging can draw attention from mass media outlets, which allows the organizations to disseminate information about their organization, commodity, and production agriculture to an even broader audience.

Recommendations for practitioners are to examine the potential of a blog for their own organization or business. If a blog is established, the information shared should be relevant, current, frequent, and have a conversational tone that encourages interaction. Finally, organizations should establish goals to measure success or identify areas of improvement and include blogging in strategic communication plans.

This research provides a better understanding of how U.S. agricultural commodity organizations are utilizing blogs, but more research is needed to further explore and examine how this industry adopts and integrates social media into existing communication efforts. Content analysis of blog content would help identify how practitioners are connecting with their audiences and determine where the content falls on the continuum from advocacy to accommodation, as addressed in the contingency theory of accommodation (Cancel et al., 1999). Future research should focus on the audience members for these blogs to determine who is reading them and what they gain from that interaction. It also would be interesting to explore the analytics of blogs in terms of number of visits, comments, and social media mentions. This was not explored in the current study but would provide quantitative evidence of the activity generated through a blog.

One limitation of this study is that the data were collected in 2012. With the fast pace of online technology, this can seem dated within months. However, the study's findings provide a snapshot at one point in time of how these agricultural organizations were using blogs. Additional research is necessary to provide further descriptions of how this online technology is being integrated into an organization's communication mix. This study will provide a point of comparison to see how technology use changes in the future.

This study found blogs offer an effective and inexpensive communication outlet for organizations to reach individuals both in production agriculture and those who are not, such as consumers. Blogging does take time, energy, and effort; however, according to this research, the time spent developing relationships was a successful way to extend the reach of an agricultural organization's communication about agricultural events, news, issues, and crisis situations.

References

Anderson-Wilk, M. (2009). Changing the engines of change: Natural resource conservation in the era of social media. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, *64*(4), 129A-131A.

Agriculture.com. (2010, February, 2). 5 Ways to network. General format. Retrieved from http://www.agriculture.com/successful-farming/business/5-ways-to-network_121-ar6140Anderson-Wilk, M. (2009). Changing the engines of change: Natural resource conservation in the era of social media. *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*, *64*(4), 129A-131A

California Agricultural Communications Coalition. (2010, September 1). CA Ag coalition says" Like Farmville? Maybe it's time to know a real California farmer. General format. Retrieved from http://www.agprofessional.com/news/ca_ag_coalition_says_like_farmville_maybe_its_time_to_know_a_real_california_farmer_120028104.html

Cancel, A., Mitrook, M., & Cameron, G. (1999). Testing the contingency theory of accommodation in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *25*, 171–197.

Duggan, M., Ellison, N. B., Lampe, C., Lenhart, A., & Madden, M. (2015, January). *Social media update 2014.* Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014/

Fannin, B., & Chenault, E. (2005). Blogging agricultural news: A new technology to distribute news real-time. *Journal of Applied Communications*, *89*(2), 51-57.

Fieseler, C., Fleck, M., & Meckel, M. (2010). Corporate social responsibility in the blogosphere. *Journal of Business Ethics, 91*(4), 599-614.

Glaser, B. & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research.* Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Grunig, J. (2009). Paradigms of global public relations in an age of digitalization. *PRism*, *6*(2), 1-19.

Grunig, J., & Hunt, T. (1984). *Managing public relations.* New York: Holt, Rinehart, & Winston.

Holtz, S., & Havens, J. C. (2009). *Tactical transparency: How leaders can leverage social media to maximize value and build their brand.* Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Jackson, A., Yates, J., & Orlikowski, W. (2007, January). Corporate blogging: Building community through persistent digital talk. In *Proceedings of 40th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences*, Big Island, HI. doi:10.1109?HICSS.2007.155

Kelleher, T. (2008). Organizational contingencies, organizational blogs and public relations practitioner stance toward publics. *Public Relations Review, 34*(3), 300-302.

Kelleher, T., & Miller, B. (2006). Organizational blogs and the human voice: Relational strategies and relational outcomes. *Journal of Computer–Mediated Communication*, *11*(2), 395-414. doi:10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00019.x

Kent, M. (2008). Critical analysis of blogging in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *34*(1), 32-40. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2007.12.001

Kietzmann, J. H., Hermkens, K., McCarthy, I. P., & Silvestre, B. S. (2011). Social media? Get serious! Understanding the functional building blocks of social media. *Business Horizons, 54*, 241-251. doi:10.1016/j.bushor.2011.01.005

Ledingham, J. (2000). *Public relations as relationship management: A relational approach to the study and practice of public relations*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbraum Associates.

Levine, R., Locke, C., Searls, D., & Weinberger, D. (2001). *The cluetrain manifesto: The end of business as usual.* New York: Perseus Publishing.

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Livestock Marketing Association. (2010, May 4). Rural Wyoming citizens, agriculturalists tell their stories. Retrieved from http://beefmagazine.com/people/0504-wyoming-shares-ag-stories/index.html

May, J. (2011, March 3). Social media can be for you, too. Retrieved from http://beefmagazine.com/cowcalfweekly/0304-social-media-for-you/index.html

Morse, J. M., & Richards, L. (2002). *ReadMe first for a user's guide to qualitative methods.* London: Sage Publications.

My Checkoff News. (2009, April 22). Checkoff helps drive consumer interest in beef middle meats. Retrieved from http://beefmagazine.com/sectors/retail/0423-beef-middle-meats/index.html

National Corn Growers Association. (2007, August 6). NCGA launches new 'Corn Commentary' blog. Retrieved from http://www.agprofessional.com/news/ncga_launches_new_corn_commentary_blog_120125299.html

Pawlick, T.F. (2001). *The invisible farm.* Chicago, Ill.: Burnham.

Pew Research Center. (2014). *Mobile technology fact sheet.* Retrieved from http://www.pewinternet. org/fact-sheets/mobile-technology-fact-sheet/

Porter, L. V., Sweetser Trammell, K., Chung, D., & Kim, E. (2007). Blog power: Examining the effects of practitioner blog use on power in public relations. *Public Relations Review*, *33*(1), 92-95. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2006.11.018

Pulizzi, J. (2014). *Epic content marketing.* New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Rettberg, J. W. (2013). *Blogging* (2nd ed.). Malden, MA: Polity Press.

Rhoades, E., & Aue, K. (2010, February). *Social agriculture: Adoption of social media by agricultural editors and broadcasters.* Paper presented at the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Orlando, Florida

Rhoades, E. & Hall, K. (2007). The agricultural blogosphere: A snapshot of new agricultural communicators online. *Journal of Applied Communications*, *91*(3&4), 37-55.

Roth, C., Vogt, W., & Weinheimer, L. (2002). Joint effort boosts APS' benefits. *AgriMarketing, 40*(7), 4-5.

Scuncio, J. (2010). *A content analysis of consumer technology corporate blogs as interactive public relations tools.* (Senior project). California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

Seltzer, T., & Mitrook, M. A. (2007). Public relations the dialogic potential of weblogs in relationship building. *Public Relations Review*, *33*(1), 227-229.

Smuts, A. (2009). What is interactivity? *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *43*(4), 53-73. Retrieved from http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1948-7169.1997.tb00169.x/abstract

Successful farming re-engineers, re-launches Agriculture.com. (2010, August 6). Retrieved from http://www.agrimarketing.com/s/61937

Sweetser, K., & Metzgar, E. (2007). Communicating during crisis: Use of blogs as a relationship management tool. *Public Relations Review*, *33*(1), 340-342. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2007.05.016

Syngenta. (2011, August 18). Syngenta releases new blog to assist "agvocates" use social media. Retrieved from http://www.agprofessional.com/news/Syngenta-relesaes-new-blog-to-assist-agvocates-use-social-media-127998973.html

Thomas, E., & Magilvy, J. (2011). Qualitative rigor or research validity in qualitative research. *Journal for Specialists in Pediatric Nursing*, *16*(2), 151-155. doi:10.1111/j.1744-6155.2011.00283.x

Truitt, G. (2010, February 5). Social media: The new battleground for American agriculture. General format. Retrieved from http://beefmagazine.com/products/0215-social-media-agriculture-battleground/

United States Grain Council. (2009, May 6). Grain Group launches blog. General format. Retrieved from http://www.agprofessional.com/news/agpro-weekly/grain_group_launches_blog_121208333.html

Vaynerchuk, G. (2013). *Jab, jab, jab, right hook: How to tell your story in a noisy social world.* New York: Harper Collins.

Waters, R. D., Ghosh, P., Griggs, T. D., & Searson, E. M. (2014). The corporate side of the blogosphere: Examining the variations of design and engagement among *Fortune 500* blogs. *Journal of Promotion Management, 20*, 537-552.

Weinberger, D. (2002). *Small pieces loosely joined: A unified theory of the web.* Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books.

West, L. (2006). *Evaluation of the professional development status of agricultural media summit-sponsoring organizations' active members.* (Master's thesis, Texas Tech University). Retrieved

from http://thinktech.lib.ttu.edu/ttu-ir/bitstream/handle/2346/18867/West_Lindsay_Thesis.pdf?sequence=1

Williamson, A. (2012, January 21) Rancher blogs of home on the range. *The Topeka Captial-Journal-Online.* Retrieved from http://cjonline.com/news/2012-01-21/rancher-blogs-home-range

Wyld, D. (2008). Management 2.0: A primer on blogging for executives. *Management Research News, 31*(6), 448-483.

Yang, S., & Lim, J. (2009). The effects of blog-mediated public relations (BMPR) on relational trust. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, *21*(3), 341-359. doi:10.1080/10627260802640773