

Communication Preferences of Politically Active Agricultural Leaders

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Abstract

Agricultural associations and advocacy organizations have begun to use the Internet to establish more effective online grassroots help for lobbying efforts, yet little research has been conducted to ascertain communications technology preferences and willingness of members to use the Internet as a communications tool. To address this issue, a descriptive survey was mailed to a purposive sample ($N = 814$) of members holding leadership positions in the Florida Farm Bureau; 268 members responded to the survey, for an overall response rate of 33%. Respondents used communication technologies frequently, expressed competence in basic technology procedures, and actively communicated with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels. Respondents indicated that they preferred to receive and send information through the mail, and that they were most inclined to take a strong role in communicating with officials when policies negatively impacting agriculture were being considered. Respondents felt that e-mail would be an adequate substitute for some forms of communication but were less likely to say that e-mail would be a good substitute for more personal methods of communication, such as telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. These findings suggest that where it is important to communicate en masse rapidly, the online method may have advantages. However, a "one-way-fits-all" online method of communicating with elected officials may not be the most effective communication method; more personal ways of communicating, especially at the local and state levels, may still be best for some issues.

Background

Activism is an integral part of the American political process. In recent years, activists have begun using a new weapon in their communication arsenal to shape public opinion: the Internet. Electronic mail can be distributed cheaply and quickly to millions of subscribers. A Web site about a par-

ticular political issue can be accessed by Web users anywhere, anytime. Web site content can even be a cause for lawsuits. For example, in 2003, the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals sued KFC because of what PETA said were “deceptive statements on the KFC Web site” (CNN.com, 2003).

The Internet can be used to get out information to a larger number of individuals and sway opinion. People become affiliated with a group because they inherently support what the group does (Hinkle, Fox-Cardamonde, Haseleu, Brown, & Irwin, 1996). In a study of environmental activism and the Internet, Kutner argued that many believe the Internet has enabled grassroots environmental organizations to be more effective at accessing and disseminating information to constituent groups, as well as empowered marginalized segments of society. Yet, little research has been conducted in this area (Kutner, 2000).

Beyond activists, the political process itself is becoming more focused on the integration of the Internet. Legislators may receive hundreds, if not thousands, of e-mails from constituents when bills are debated in Congress or policy decisions are made (Paletz, 1999). For example, when NASA announced plans in January 2004 to cancel further servicing missions to the Hubble Space Telescope, the agency was flooded with e-mail. “It’s been overwhelming,” said Steve Beckwith, director of the Space Telescope Science Institute. “My e-mail is overflowing” (CNN.com, 2004). Boone, Tucker, and McClaskey’s (2002) study of U.S. congressional aides noted that aides “rely on a mix of new and traditional communication channels for receiving policy information” (p. 40), with the top three channels being personal contacts, electronic mail, and the Internet/Web. On-demand, anytime, anywhere information was important for the aides (Boone et al., 2002).

Because of the growing prevalence of “quick votes”—bills that come up on the floor of legislatures without much publicity or notice—in many governmental bodies, organizations interested in legislative matters are finding it necessary to communicate with their membership and return constituent responses to legislators quickly and efficiently (P. Cockrell, Florida Farm Bureau Federation executive director of Organization and Programs, personal communication, July 3, 2003). Many organizations, therefore, are looking to take advantage of the online communication process to establish more effective online grassroots help for lobbying efforts. For example, Florida Citrus Mutual, a cooperative of citrus growers, established an e-mail alert for its members, apprising them of legislative issues or controversial topics affecting the citrus industry (C. Pace, Florida Citrus Mutual public affairs manager, personal communication, August 11, 2003).

The Florida Farm Bureau Federation, with an estimated membership of more than 150,000, also is contemplating the online lobby environment (Cockrell, 2003). The American Farm Bureau, of which the Florida Farm Bureau is a part, "is an independent, non-governmental, voluntary organization governed by and representing farm and ranch families united for the purpose of analyzing their problems and formulating action to achieve educational improvement, economic opportunity and social advancement and, thereby, to promote the national well-being" (American Farm Bureau, 2004). The Florida Farm Bureau works to encourage the growth of the agricultural industry in the state, to protect working agricultural landscapes, and to help preserve the environment (Cockrell, 2003).

Previous research indicates that Farm Bureau members nationally have increasingly adopted the Internet as a communications tool in recent years. At its annual convention, the American Farm Bureau surveys its Young Farmers and Ranchers members, men and women ages 18 to 35, about issues—including technology use—impacting young agriculturalists. Results from these annual surveys of between 250 and 280 Young Farmers and Ranchers convention attendees indicate that Young Farmers and Ranchers' Internet use has increased from 10.5% of its membership in 1996 to 88.3% in 2003. Also during that time, the Young Farmers and Ranchers' use of e-mail has jumped from 9.3% in 1996 to 87.4% in 2003 (American Farm Bureau, 1996, March 29 and 2004, March 18).

Baker and Wilson (1998) examined Florida Farm Bureau county directors' use of computer technology. The researchers found that 45% of county directors were online. Approximately 56% of the county directors did not use the Internet, mainly because of lack of knowledge of how to use the Internet; however, 40% of nonusers planned to get Internet access within three years. No follow-up of Florida Farm Bureau members' communication technology use has been conducted until the study presented in this article.

One of the Florida Farm Bureau's functions is to engage legislators and policy makers about issues that impact agriculture throughout Florida. To enhance and update its grassroots-level lobbying efforts, the Florida Farm Bureau implemented a program called Farm Bureau's Agricultural Contact Team (FBACT). FBACT is set up to establish teams that have access to a restricted Web site that provides key information on upcoming votes and issues important to the Florida Farm Bureau. These members also can be sent "Action Alerts" via electronic mail, regarding upcoming votes. Farm Bureau members then can immediately respond to their legislators by e-mail.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if Florida Farm Bureau leaders have the technological capability and motivation to take part in an online lobbying program. The objectives were: 1) to identify participants' communication preferences (mail, telephone, fax, electronic mail); 2) to assess the level of political activity among Florida Farm Bureau leaders; 3) to determine participants' level of communication technology use; and 4) to determine the ability and willingness of Florida Farm Bureau's leaders to use the Internet as a communications tool. For this study, a politically active person is defined as someone who routinely contacts his or her local, state, or federal elected officials.

Theoretical Framework

Although exploratory in nature, this study was based on two theoretical models: the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) and the Technology Acceptance Model (Davis, 1989). The Theory of Planned Behavior was used as the basis for questions to describe the political activity of the group. The Technology Acceptance Model was used to describe the level of technology use of Florida Farm Bureau members.

According to the Theory of Planned Behavior, human behavior is guided by three considerations: behavioral beliefs, normative beliefs, and control beliefs (Ajzen, 2002a). Behavioral beliefs are beliefs about the likely or expected consequences of the behavior, expressed as attitudes toward the behavior or the degree to which performance of the behavior is valued. Normative beliefs are beliefs about the normative expectations of other people. Subjective norms are pressures to engage or not engage in a behavior and are produced by this particular set of beliefs (Ajzen, 2002b). Control beliefs are beliefs about the presence of factors that may further or hinder the performance of the behavior. Control beliefs translate into perceived behavioral control that refers to people's perceptions of their ability to perform a behavior (Ajzen, 2002a). These three beliefs formulate a person's intention to behave in a certain way.

Hinkle et al. (1996) studied what impacts the intention of group members to become active in a grassroots political campaign. Their research indicated that many grassroots organizations have little trouble finding people with attitudes that support their cause. The study suggested that people join the grassroots groups because their attitudes toward the behavior line up with the overarching subjective norms of the group. While most people have the ability and efficacy to actually become politically active, there are factors, such as lack of time and financial resources, contributing to their lack of

activity. It was expected this study would indicate that Florida Farm Bureau members have positive attitudes toward the behavior of being politically active, have normative influences that support the behavior, and feel a high degree of perceived behavioral control with regard to this behavior.

The Technology Acceptance Model states two perceptions can cause people to accept or reject information technology: an individual's perceived usefulness of the technology and the perceived ease of use (Davis, 1989). According to this model, a technology that a person perceives to be useful and easy to use has a high likelihood of being adopted. For this study, questions were asked of Florida Farm Bureau members to ascertain their perception about the usefulness and ease of use of technologies that may be used in the FBACT process. However, there are factors, other than perceived usefulness and ease of use, that can impact a person's intention to adopt a technology (Irani, 2000), such as the attitude people have toward using a technology and their degree of innovativeness. Therefore, it was necessary to assess Farm Bureau members' attitudes about the technology, as well as assess their degree of innovativeness.

Methodology

A 105-question survey was sent via mail to a purposive sample of persons (N = 814) holding leadership positions in the following Florida Farm Bureau organizations: state board, county boards, advisory committees, women's committees, and Young Farmers and Ranchers. The leaders were selected for this study because it was believed they would be more apt to communicate with their legislative representatives and serve as an opinion leader in their communities. Questionnaire items consisted of a series of multiple choice, fill-in-the-blank, and five-point Likert-type questions designed to assess communications preferences, contact with elected officials, communications technology use, and attitudes toward communications technology, as well as respondent demographics.

A panel of 20 experts, representing the Florida Farm Bureau and the University of Florida's Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, reviewed the survey for face and content validity. A reminder postcard was sent two weeks after the initial mailing, resulting in 268 surveys returned, for a 33% response rate.

Results

Demographics

The majority of respondents were male: 88.1% (n = 236); 9.9% (n = 26) were female. Most respondents were over the age of 46, with the age range almost evenly divided among 46-55-year olds (23.9%, n = 63), 56-65 (25.4%,

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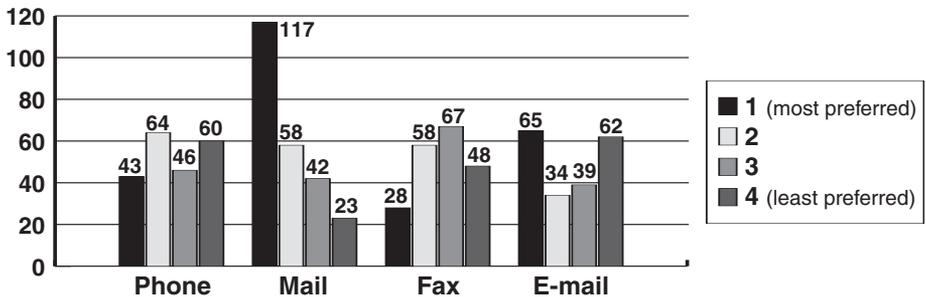
n = 67), and over 66 (23.5%, n = 62). Only 72 (27.3%) were 45 or younger. Almost nine in ten owned a farm (87%, n = 228), and most farmed full-time (62.6%, n = 139). The average time working in their current position was 23.3 years.

Respondents were not concentrated in one specific population area; 41.8% were from a rural area (population under 2,500), 31.2% from a small town (population under 25,000), and 27% from an urban area (population over 25,000). Most respondents had some college, an associate's degree, or a bachelor's degree (70.3%), with another 14.1% holding a graduate degree.

Respondents were asked with which segment of Florida agriculture they were most closely involved. Responses varied, but the major segments were livestock (57%, n = 147), citrus (23.9%, n = 62), nurseries (19%, n = 49), row crops (18.8%, n = 48), and vegetables (17.9%, n = 46).

Communication Preferences

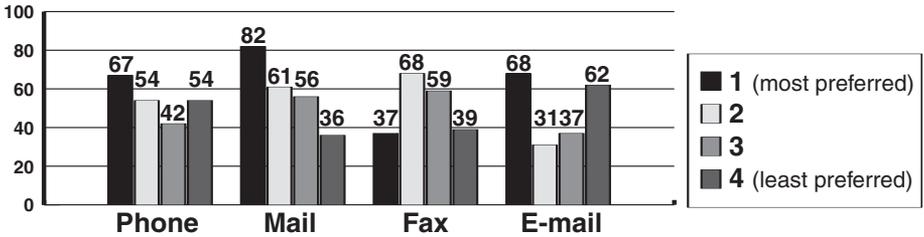
The 268 respondents were asked to rank-order how they would prefer to receive information via these four communication modes: telephone, postal mail, fax, or e-mail. Postal mail was the most preferred method identified. E-mail was evenly split between "most preferred" and "least preferred." (See Figure 1.)



1 = most preferred to 4 = least preferred

Figure 1. Florida Farm Bureau leaders' communication technology preferences to receive information (N = 268)

The respondents also were asked to rank-order their preference to send out information via the same communication modes. (See Figure 2.) The methods were much more evenly distributed, with postal mail slightly higher than the rest. Again, e-mail was almost evenly split between "most" and "least preferred."



1 = most preferred to 4 = least preferred

Figure 2. Florida Farm Bureau leaders' communication technology preferences to send information (N = 268)

Respondents indicated which communication mode they would prefer using to communicate with officials at the local, state, and national levels. With this question, "personal meeting" was added to the possible responses. At the local level, the majority of respondents preferred a telephone conversation with an official, followed by a personal meeting. At the state level, telephone was the preferred method, followed by mail and e-mail. At the national level, mail was the most preferred, followed almost evenly by telephone and e-mail.

Political Activism

The Farm Bureau leaders were asked if they had ever contacted local (county commissioner, city commissioner, mayor), state (representative, governor), and federal (representatives, president) officials about a particular policy or piece of legislation. The majority of respondents indicated they had contacted local officials (93.4%, n = 241), state officials (89.1%, n = 230), and national officials (76%, n = 196).

They also were asked which communication modes they used to contact the elected officials. Respondents could mark more than one communication method. At the local level, Farm Bureau leaders used personal meetings (72.6%, n = 175), telephone (71.4%, n = 172), postal mail/letters (30.3%, n = 73), e-mail (13.3%, n = 32), and fax (12.4%, n = 30). At the state level, these methods were used: telephone (62.2%, n = 143), personal meeting (55.7%, n = 128), postal mail/letters (50.9%, n = 117), e-mail (23.5%, n = 54), and fax (23%, n = 53). For officials at the federal level, these methods were used: postal mail/letters (60.7%, n = 119), telephone (53.1%, n = 104), personal meeting (37.9%, n = 74), e-mail (32.8%, n = 64), and fax (22.1%, n = 43).

Leaders indicated that contacting their elected officials was important. On a scale of one to five, with one being "very useful" and five being "not at

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Table 1. *Florida Farm Bureau leaders' Likelihood of Contacting State and National Leaders*

	Mean	n	SD
I would contact a state or national leader about legislation that has a direct negative impact on my community.	1.61	258	.7469
I would contact a state or national leader about legislation that has a direct negative impact on agriculture in Florida.	1.52	258	.7396
I would contact a state or national leader about legislation that has a direct negative impact on Florida farmers.	1.48	258	.6910
I would contact a state or national leader about legislation that has a direct negative impact on me.	1.42	258	.6693

1 = very likely to 5 = not at all likely

all useful," the mean responses of how useful they thought it was to contact their elected officials were as follows: local officials, $M = 1.39$; state officials, $M = 1.66$; and federal officials, $M = 2.00$. The leaders also were asked to indicate how likely they would be to contact state or national officials about pending legislation. Table 1 provides the leaders' responses.

Farm Bureau leaders indicated that communicating with elected officials was important. Leaders also believed they were qualified to communicate issues impacting Florida agriculture to their elected officials. (See Table 2.)

Computer Technology Use

More than three fourths of the leaders had a computer (85.8%, $n = 229$). They used computers for a variety of purposes, with the most popular reasons being Internet access (86.5%, $n = 199$), e-mail (83%, $n = 191$), financial record-keeping (59.6%, $n = 137$), spreadsheet and data management (54.8%, $n = 126$), recreation (40.9%, $n = 94$), and educational programs (35.2%, $n = 81$). Most did not have a personal or business Web site (70.3%, $n = 154$).

A total of 217 (81.9%) had access to the Internet. Most (65.9%, $n = 137$) had been using the Internet for more than three years. For those with Internet access, 93.1% ($n = 202$) used their computers to send and receive e-mail; 90.2% ($n = 194$) browsed the Web; 19.0% ($n = 40$) participated in newsgroups; and 7.2% ($n = 15$) participated in listservs. Seventy-seven percent ($n = 161$) received e-mail newsletters. Respondents were fairly avid e-mail users, with 53.1% ($n = 104$) checking e-mail once or more times daily, and another 27.6% ($n = 54$) checking e-mail several times per week. In a typical day, respondents spent the following amount of time on the Internet: 30

Table 2. *Florida Farm Bureau Leaders' Attitudes About Contacting Elected Officials*

	Mean	n	SD
It is not important for me to contact my elected officials about legislation impacting Florida agriculture.	3.55	255	.8763
Elected officials in general do not listen to what agriculturalists have to say.	2.84	252	.8619
Others in my profession contact their leaders about legislation that impacts them.	1.91	250	.7689
I am qualified to contact my elected officials about issues that impact Florida agriculture.	1.67	256	.6445
By contacting my representative, I can make a difference.	1.59	259	.6209
Grassroots lobbying efforts are effective.	1.34	257	.5536

1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree

minutes or less, 44.9% (n = 92); 30-60 minutes, 23.9% (n = 49); 1-2 hours, 19.5% (n = 40); and more than two hours, 11.7% (n = 24). For those who did not have access to the Internet, the majority (81.3%, n = 26) did not plan to ever get Internet access.

The primary reason respondents gave for using the Internet was to “use e-mail” (50.6%, n = 83), with “research” coming in a far second (14%, n = 23). “Market information” (9.8%, n = 16) and “monitor weather” (8.5%, n = 14) were third and fourth, respectively. Internet users accessed the Internet primarily at their home or home office (71.7%, n = 147), followed by “work or office away from home” (28.3%, n = 58).

Respondents indicated that Internet service providers were almost evenly divided among AOL (33.7%, n = 68), another national provider such as Juno, Earthlink, or MSN (27.7%, n = 56), or local provider (27.7%, n = 56). Twenty-two (8.2%) responded “other.” The majority used a dial-up modem connection (69.6%, n = 144), with the remainder using a DSL or cable modem connection.

Respondents were asked to indicate their proficiency in performing various online tasks. Responses tended to be either more neutral or more negative than positive regarding their opinions about how well they could perform these Internet-related functions. (See Table 3.)

Respondents had not been to Farm Bureau-related Web sites much in the past six months. The Florida Farm Bureau leaders had visited the Florida Farm Bureau’s site infrequently, with 54.1% (n = 113) not having visited the site at all in the past six months, and only 5.3% (n = 11) visiting it more than

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Table 3. *Florida Farm Bureau Leaders' Ability to Perform Online Tasks*

	Mean	n	SD
Sending and receiving e-mail	3.01	212	1.014
Opening e-mail file attachments	2.78	208	2.788
Downloading text files	2.60	204	1.111
Downloading Adobe PDF files	2.51	193	1.164
Downloading audio and video files	2.17	192	1.097
Using newsgroups	1.83	181	1.099
Using listservs	1.62	175	.9380
Using chat rooms	1.58	173	.9766

1 = poor to 4 = excellent

six times in six months. The American Farm Bureau's site fared worse, with 80.2% (n = 166) not visiting it in the past six months, and only 2.4% (n = 5) visiting it more than six times. Other Florida agriculture sites fared a little better. The University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences site was not visited by 90 Farm Bureau leaders (43.7%), but was visited six or more times by 17.5% (n = 36). The state's Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services was not visited by 88 leaders (42.7%) in six months; 24 (11.7%) visited the site six or more times in that timeframe.

Communication Technology Attitudes

Overall, the Farm Bureau leaders were positive about the use of communication technologies. Many attitudinal questions related to the use of e-mail as a tool to keep Farm Bureau leaders informed or to the use of e-mail as a substitute for postal mail, the telephone, or face-to-face meetings. With the exceptions of telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings, leaders believed e-mail was a fair substitute for communication methods and were positive about the use of e-mail. (See Table 4.)

Discussion and Conclusions

Respondents in this study were Florida Farm Bureau leaders, representing many Farm Bureau subgroups. Most were college-educated males, owned a farm, and raised livestock. Respondents used communication technologies frequently, expressed competence in basic technology procedures, and actively communicated with elected officials at the local, state, and federal levels. They preferred to receive and send information through the mail.

Table 4. *Florida Farm Bureau Leaders' Attitudes About Communication Technologies*

	Mean	n	SD
E-mail can be a good substitute for face-to-face meetings.	3.13	218	.9744
E-mail can be a good substitute for telephone conversations.	2.46	214	1.064
I would prefer receiving regular mail rather than e-mail.	2.43	226	1.167
The majority of farmers in Florida do not use e-mail.	2.34	194	.7599
Weekly e-mail alerts would be a good way for me to stay informed about an organization.	1.97	211	.9123
E-mail can be a good substitute for regular mail.	1.96	216	.9836
I feel comfortable sending and receiving e-mail.	1.82	214	1.005
Most public officials see electronic communication as a credible source of communication.	1.82	196	.7969
Most of the people in my profession see electronic communication as a credible source of communication.	1.78	206	.7415
E-mail makes communication easier.	1.78	217	.8774

1 = strongly agree to 4 = strongly disagree

In terms of their preference for sending and receiving information by e-mail, respondents were almost evenly split between e-mail being their “most” and “least preferred” communication method. This finding has interesting implications for the Florida Farm Bureau’s online communication program. Perhaps respondents have received too many spam messages, causing them to dislike sending and receiving e-mails. The Farm Bureau will need to monitor the number and frequency of its e-mail alerts so that volumes of messages do not bombard recipients.

In addition, for Farm Bureau’s Agricultural Contact Team to succeed, Florida Farm Bureau must ensure that the program stays as simple as possible initially. Respondents in this study indicated that although they use e-mail frequently, they are not adept in some online processes, such as downloading audio and video files and using chat rooms and listservs. A recommendation from this study would be to implement Internet training programs for Farm Bureau leaders.

Farm Bureau leaders indicated that e-mail would be an adequate substitute for some forms of communication. However, the leaders were less likely

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to say that e-mail would be a good substitute for more personal methods of communication, such as telephone conversations or face-to-face meetings. As evidenced by the ways the leaders communicated with elected officials, especially at the local and state levels where the leaders relied more heavily on personal communication methods, leaders may be less likely to adopt e-mail to communicate with officials in close proximity to themselves. The Farm Bureau leaders had used less personal methods of communication with federal elected officials in the past; therefore, e-mail may be a stronger communication possibility for federal officials. These findings indicate that a “one-way-fits-all” online method of communicating with elected officials may not be the most effective communication method; more personal ways of communicating, especially at the local and state levels, may still be best for some issues. However, for “quick votes” where it is important to communicate en masse rapidly, the online method has distinct advantages. As noted, Florida Farm Bureau already has implemented the Farm Bureau’s Agricultural Contact Team because of the need to get a grassroots effort on bills and policies moving quickly and efficiently.

This study indicates that Farm Bureau leaders actively contact politicians at all levels of government. The leaders also expressed their desire to take a strong role in communicating with officials when policies negatively impacting agriculture are being considered. This finding shows that to get agriculturalists involved politically, an issue must be framed that appeals to their sense of responsibility to their community, fellow farmers, and the agricultural industry, as a whole. Finally, results imply that although agricultural industries and rural areas may not have the political clout of high population centers behind them, as urban areas do, they can and do flex their political muscle in given circumstances.

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