



Effectiveness of Social Media in Agricultural Extension

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Global internet users grew by 8.6 percent over the past twelve months, with 350 million new users contributing to an overall total of 4.437 billion by the start of April 2019. The access to information is being an influential issue, and the ones with the contemporary information carry potential to grab the opportunities and benefits in our globalized society. The evolution of social media has changed the sphere of human lives and redefined the pattern and network of communication and interaction. With the increased use of social media, it is the subject of challenge for extension to stay relevant with the client in this digitalized era. As these media provide platform for the people with specific interests to connect and share knowledge and technologies through certain means such as developing groups or pages; it helps society to socialize, and the extension professionals need to consider this platform for the effective program implementation and analyze how these media can influence the outcome delivery to the client.

Key words: Agricultural extension, education, marketing, social media, SWOT

Introduction

Social media has been aptly called as one of the most participative extension tools of recent times. Social media tools range from Facebook, WhatsApp, WeChat, QQ, Twitter, Pinterest, Blogs, YouTube, Instagram, Wikis, Facebook Messenger, Snap chat etc., Out of these, under Indian context, Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube can be considered as three most popular social media tools. Though there are slight differences in approach of these three forms of social media. Merriam-Webster (2015) defines social media as forms of electronic communication through which users can create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content. Terry (2009) and, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) stated, basically social media comprise of digital technologies that facilitate communication of user generated content through continuous interaction. To sum it up, Suchiraditya & Saravanan (2016) defined social media as web based tools of electronic communication that allow users to interact, create, share, retrieve and exchange information and ideas in any form (text, pictures, video, etc.) that can be discussed upon, archived and used by anyone in virtual communities and networks.

Social media has revolutionized communication where by it has managed to surpass traditional gatekeepers in the traditional media; that is editors and other decision makers whose the agenda. Never the less, social media has not over thrown traditional media, but is complementing it in agenda setting. Traditional media has been the main medium for companies to reach their audiences and there has been a great deal of control which is avoided on social media. Social media is dominated by user generated content and is an evolutionary stimulus because users not organizations or the traditional news media now control the creation and distribution of information. Given the traditional or old media geographic and feedback limitations, Kuria (2014)^[1] further stressed that social media has allowed for the crossing of boundaries where by people of different geographical regions

locally and internationally have been able to exchange ideas on various forums. This has allowed for necessary conversations to take place.

Categories of Social Media

Social media can be categorized in the following ways:

1. Discussion forums/platforms, that is, Dgroups and Google Groups.
2. Voice over Internet applications, that is, Google Talk and Skype.
3. Audio sharing applications, that is, Podomatic
4. Sound Cloud.
5. Video sharing applications, that is, YouTube, Blip.tv, and Vimeo.
6. Micro-blogging applications, that is, Twitter, Friend Feed, and Tumblr.
7. Presentations, that is, author STREAM, Slid share, and Slidesix.
8. Social bookmarking applications, that is, Stumble Upon, Digg, and Delicious.
9. Academic social networking sites, that is,
10. Mendeley, Research Gate, and Method Space.
11. Online mapping tools, that is, Google Maps
12. Google Earth.
13. Online calendars, that is, Google Calendar, Yahoo Calendar, and 30Boxes.
14. Cloud storage applications, that is, Dropbox, iDrive, Microsoft, and SkyDrive.
15. Online collaboration applications, that is,
16. Google Docs and Wikis.
17. Photo sharing applications, that is, Flickr and
18. Picasa.
19. Blogging applications, that is, Blogger, Wordpress, and TypePad.

Role of Social Media in Farming

In the global context, the agriculture sector is being utilizing the social media for promotion of the relevant information and knowledge within the industry and developing the networks with other like-minded agricultural professionals. The social media channels have extended and strengthened the relationships of agriculture-based communities and helping the rural workers to comb at the feeling of isolation that arises due to their work. It has overcome the geographical boundaries, bringing together the farming communities of mutual interests. As of now, there is a large presence of blogs covering topics on agriculture, animal husbandry, health, education, and other subjects/ topics of common interest.

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Blogs are emerging as suitable platform for sharing information and creating awareness among different stakeholders by directly engaging them to generate and shape the content of the program. These media have been complementing the traditional media as viable source of information and facilitating the marketing of agriculture produces and their products using pictures, links, and videos. They provide users with opportunities to share and exchange information and discuss the burning issues in agriculture based on their knowledge and experience and draft the effective solutions for the faced problems, thus facilitating the marketing and network formation. Further more, these media are effective platforms for receiving the feedback and queries from the clientele.

Overview of Facebook

Facebook has been changing its look and content gradually with time since its formation. With continued increase in use and users and owing to its high popularity, it proves to be a significant social media tool for extension professionals for communication, education, marketing, and enhancing the effective learning methods. In our era of information, communication, and technology where internet is an effective means of generating the new connections and relations among people with similar interests, this widely used social media tool, that is, Facebook emerges as a cost-effective method for extension professionals to communicate with the clientele, empower the social connection, and

engage in long-term extension programs. It creates platform for the followers to engage with the extension professionals through react, comment, or message options which updates them with relevant information and about available programs frequently and secures the online connection in the real offline world. Park and Floyd mentioned that the one-third of the study participants stepped up from online discussions to direct interactions.

Relationship through Facebook

Allowing people to connect with others around the world, Facebook lays its emphasis on building and strengthening relationships. The use of Facebook is generally considered as the predictor of increased social capital, social capital being termed as “the benefits of networks built through experiences and interactions”. It helps in strengthening the extension outreach and in maintaining the informal networks, thus broadening the personal communications and interactions and strengthening the social capital. It also provides opportunity for the extension service to capitalize on Facebook and convert the online information gatherers to fully engaged volunteers and leaders. Facebook proves to be a significant tool for information dissemination to local community about extension programs and volunteer opportunities.

As the strong social connections are highly beneficial to the communities, Facebook allows the extension professionals to create, develop, and sustain the social relations and enlarges the network of volunteers and supporters of local program goals. Farrow and Yuan, in a survey of university alumni, pointed that communication and emotional connectivity was highly influenced and strengthened by Facebook communication, the result of which was seen behavioral by influencing the level of volunteering and charitable giving.

Use of Mobile Apps for Enhancing Social Media Applicability in Agriculture

The recent advancements in ICTs have benefitted the farmers in India with easy access to information regarding farming technologies, pest-disease attack and control, market situation and fluctuations, and weather forecasts. It has developed a network between the farmers and consumers saving both cost and time. Project for Agriculture Commercialization and Trade and Agriculture Management Information System, under the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MoAD), have been working together to enhance the accessibility of mobile phones and applications among farmers to create a platform for optimum social media use in farming community.

Different mobile apps and websites are created to link-up fellow farmers along with markets in a convenient way. Popular example is IFA Krishi, Nepal, which provides the information about agriculture in Nepali language being user- friendly for farmers. Contents are referred from local publications by subject experts and this app connects farmers beyond the network of middleman to obtain optimum price for their produce. Furthermore, information about fertilize use, pest-disease identification and control, market enquiry, and weather forecast are easily accessed by the farmers, and the app generates its content from the publications of authorized bodies such as NARC, Department of Agriculture, MoAD and market information and prices through major agriculture centers of Kathmandu making it reliable and credible. Still, reaching the farming community of rural premises whodonot own mobile phones is still a great challenge. The app developers state that the partnership with Center for Environmental and Agricultural Policy Research will help the promotion of app to farmers and farmers will be aware of the benefits of smartphones and the limitations of SMS-based system along with solving the challenges of digital literacy and web connectivity, which are commonly faced by farmers.

Conclusions

Extension professionals have greater ability of expanding the influence of their programming efforts through thoughtful use of Facebook, the impact being multi dimensional through educational information share, improvised communication establishment, and effective marketing of both extension and its programs. The online extension is not the substitute for offline contact, rather is the support for enhancing the connectivity between extension service

and clientele. The professionals could reach the wide range of audience from diverse geographical, economic, and social backgrounds and address their needs using Facebook which is a cost-effective free social media to reach new and traditional audiences in a relevant, accessible, and timely manner.

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