

Getting the Most out of Social Media: What Is Social Media?¹

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Introduction

This EDIS publication, which focuses on defining social media for agriculturalist and identifying the multiple platforms agriculturalist can use, is the first in a four-part series on getting the most out of social media usage. The series includes additional publications:

- *Creating a Social Media Plan*
- *How to Successfully Use Social Media*
- *Good Practices When Using Social Media*

History of Communication in Agriculture

Until the mid-19th century, the primary source of most agricultural information was shared from farmer to farmer. As time passed, information began to be spread via radio, mail, or the still traditional face-to-face interaction. Although these forms of communication are still relevant, the Internet became the primary source of information in the last portion of the 20th century and has had a significant impact on how agriculturalists receive and share information with consumers and other industry members. As such, social media platforms have paved the way for a new form of communication.

Social media has been defined by Telg and Irani as a form of new media that includes primarily Internet and

mobile-based tools that are used for sharing and discussing information using two-way communication (2012). These web-based activities usually integrate technology, telecommunications, and social interaction that allow agriculturalist and consumers alike to create and exchange information in a more interactive way than previously possible.



Figure 1. Examples of several social media platforms
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Why Use Social Media?

The Internet has paved the way for building relationships through the exchange of information in a way that has never been experienced before. With more than 44 percent of all U.S. consumers learning about brands through social media outlets (MarketingCharts, 2012), consumers value

1. This document is AEC558, one of a series of the Agricultural Education and Communication Department, UF/IFAS Extension. Original publication date August 2015. Visit the EDIS website at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
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products that are not only convenient and healthy, but also products they associate with the individuals who have raised, picked, and packaged the food these consumers are purchasing and consuming (Hanna, Rohm, & Crittenden, 2011).

Social media forms the foundation for the type of interaction consumers seek to build with agriculturalists through the use of words, pictures, videos, and audio (shown in Figure 2). These forms appeal to all human senses and add value to information being shared from agriculturalists to consumers, or visa versa. In a time when transparency and authenticity is valued and desired, delivering the new standard of person-to-person interaction, which is achieved through social media, is crucial to the success of a business (Kaizen Digital Marketing, 2011).

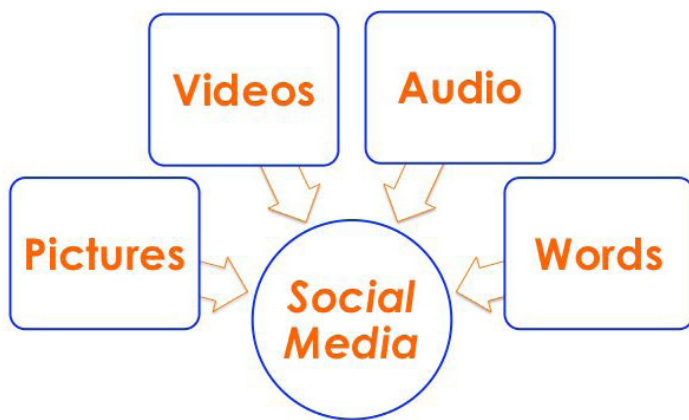


Figure 2. Social media platforms let users create and share pictures, videos, audio, and words online. This contributes to the interactive nature of such platforms.

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It Is Not All about the Consumer

Social media allows agriculturalist to be the face of products grown and harvested in the United States. With less than one percent of the American population claiming production agriculture as their occupation, and only two percent being directly involved in agricultural full time (Baker & Irani, 2012), agriculturalists should share their story with everyone to let them know about agriculture. By adopting social media and understanding its value in today's market, agriculturalists amplify their voice.

Social Media Platforms

The easiest way to get started on social media is by choosing a platform, which is a site that lets users interact with each other, upload files, and post messages, photos, and videos that visitors can see (Telg & Irani, 2012) and that aligns with your objectives and purpose. This means the platform

you choose to promote your agricultural business or share information should reach your target audience and allow you to share the information or content you would like to share. Whatever you chose, remember consistency is key. Start by signing up with one platform and then begin to integrate others slowly. As you begin to feel more comfortable with your abilities, understanding, and overall grasp on social media, you will see that if you choose to add other platforms to the mix, doing so can be easy and convenient and will allow you to reach more demographics.

The following platforms are good places to start:

- **Facebook:** With more than one billion active users worldwide, this social media platform will allow you to share posts consisting of words, pictures, videos, links, and more. By creating a **fan page** for your agricultural business, you can keep your personal profile private and still promote your commodities. You can be active on the platform by posting updates about the activities on your farm, sharing agricultural messages and images, promoting agritourism events, and seeing what other organizations or **friends**, individuals you share a connection with, are up to. You will also be able to see what your **followers**, individuals or organizations that **like** or stay connected with your page, are commenting on your posts and sharing with you. Facebook helps you build a relationship with your followers because both parties are involved in sharing information and actively participating in two-way communication.
- **Twitter:** This social media platform optimizes users communication skills by allowing users to **tweet** 140 character updates that connect them with more than 230 million active users worldwide. With concise tweets that can include quotes, links, and pictures, Twitter users can connect with other users everywhere by simply including a **hashtag** (#) that allows them to search for other's tweets and to connect to other conversations about the same topic. A few example of popular hashtags are: #agriculture, #UFAEC, #AgTechUpdate, and #FLStrawberries. Now it is time for you to get into the conversation too.
- **Pinterest, Instagram, and Blogs:** As growing social media platforms, Pinterest, Instagram, and blogs focus more on sharing do-it-yourself ideas and recipes; images and videos; and online journal-style information, respectively. By linking these platforms to a Facebook or Twitter social media page, your businesses will be able to connect with more individuals across more demographics.
- **Others:** As with any innovation, there are quite a few more social media platforms that reach different groups

of people. Platforms like LinkedIn, can help you expand your professional community, while others such as YouTube can allow you to share videos of your most recent harvest and the delicious dish you prepared with it using your favorite recipe.

There is no limit to how many of these platforms you can use to create sites for your agricultural business. However, remember: quality over quantity—having one platform that you keep up with is more valuable than four platforms that are not active or up-to-date.

Summary

Social media and its many platforms are here to stay; in fact, companies and industries of all sizes now view social media as a mandatory element of their marketing strategy (Hanna et al., 2011). Now is the time to begin integrating and perfecting a social media presence for your organization or business.

Further Reading

For a how-to approach to using Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms, visit the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources' page [How to Make Social Media Work for You](#).

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