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## A Marketing Standpoint: What Marketers Can Teach Extension Professionals About Internet-Based Media

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## **A Marketing Standpoint: What Marketers Can Teach Extension Professionals About Internet-Based Media**

### **Abstract**

Extension audiences are turning to Internet-based media for information Extension professionals traditionally have provided them. In a qualitative study, we sought to relate the Internet-based media strategies of marketing professionals to the needs of Extension professionals to increase Extension professionals' success in using Internet-based media. Extension professionals can more effectively engage modern Extension audiences by implementing four strategies: knowing the research, knowing what makes audiences tick, making changes based on measurable data, and increasing the effectiveness of Internet-based media efforts.

**Keywords:** [marketing](#), [Internet-based media](#), [interviews](#), [audience](#)

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## **Introduction**

Since 1914, Extension professionals have "expose[d] farmers to the new technologies and techniques coming forth from agriculture schools by doing on-farm demonstrations, field trips, and home visits to show the practical applications of this knowledge" (Gould, Steele, & Woodrum, 2014, "Introduction," para. 3). In more recent years, however, the United States' shift away from an agrarian society has challenged Extension's presence as a localized resource, leading to a declining trust in Extension as an information source (Settle, Rumble, McCarty, & Ruth, 2017). In 2007, Telg, Irani, Hurst, and Kistler investigated how Florida Extension professionals promoted their programs to establish themselves as trustworthy information sources. They found that the most successful tool for promoting Extension programs to past and present clients was word of mouth (Telg et al., 2007). In addition, the Extension professionals reported that they most commonly promoted their programs by using press releases, indicating that they viewed exposure in mass media as critical to establishing themselves as trustworthy information sources (Telg et al., 2007).

Another phenomenon has been the influence of the Internet on people's consumption of information and desire for immediate and engaging interactions. In 2010, Scott argued that the Internet has changed marketing and

promoting rules across contexts as businesses now have multiple channels for speaking directly to consumers in compelling ways through interactive, two-way dialogue. Consumers in agrarian communities are no exception. Although many agrarian communities were challenged in the past by lack of access to the Internet and associated information, a relatively recent study showed a shift, with more than 70% of U.S. farms having Internet access (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA] National Agricultural Statistics Service [NASS], 2015). Of course, Extension has not been exempt from the shift in how people consume information as the Internet has upended traditional models of Extension program delivery (Brislen, Tanaka, & Jacobsen, 2016).

Indeed, Internet-based media "enabl[e] communication and dissemination and receipt of information almost anywhere" (Cornelisse et al., 2011, "Why Social Media?," para. 1). Consequently, Extension professionals have had to balance an investment in Internet-based media with the need to provide research-based information using limited financial resources, all while competing in the ever-expanding world of information dissemination. More than a decade ago, Telg et al. (2007) noted that "Extension agents would benefit from the development of marketing and promotional tools that would help them to disseminate information to the public" (abstract) and "maintain their presence" as an information source ("Introduction," para. 1). Seven years later, Doyle and Briggeman (2014) emphasized that social media are integral to an Extension marketing plan and provided five strategic steps for creating brand exposure: Determine objective, research target audience, target posts, be involved, and track progress. This high-level and high-detail approach is supported by Sneed, Elizer, Hastings, and Barry's (2016) findings that Extension marketing is about big pictures and small details. To help Extension professionals leverage their limited resources to maximize the impact of Internet-based media use, Christensen, Hill, and Horrocks (2015) proposed the social media marketing map—"a tool for marketing Extension programs and events while guiding interactions with Extension audiences to build relationships through social media" ("What Is the Social Media Marketing Map?," para. 1).

Clearly, it is incumbent on Extension professionals to find effective ways to use Internet-based media in their mission to disseminate content. Applying marketing strategies may be part of the solution. Some may perceive that there is a difference between using Internet-based media for disseminating content and using such media for selling something. Others, however, would disagree. Moz, an information dissemination company, has likened content marketing to a sales funnel (Moz, Inc., 2017), aligning closely with Rogers's innovation-decision process (Rogers, 2003), a well-known model Extension professionals use to define behavior change. The concept is that blogs, social media, videos, and other Internet-based media forms serve as a pathway for information dissemination that ends in a sale (Moz, Inc., 2017). The idea of a transaction that ends in a sale seems obvious for business, but it can be applied to Extension as well. For businesses, the desired result is a sale, so businesses use Internet-based media to provide potential customers with information that moves them toward the behavior of making purchases. For Extension, the desired result is the intended program outcome, adoption of a behavior, so Extension can use Internet-based media to disseminate information that moves clients toward adoption of various behaviors. Thus, a sale and adoption of an intended Extension program outcome are both results that Internet-based media use can bring about.

Obstacles to Extension professionals' broad use of Internet-based media exist. They may find that the contexts in which they work limit widespread investment in Internet-based media. LaBelle, Anderson-Wilk, and Emanuel (2011) noted that "the issues behind the apparent disconnect between scholarship and the use of new media are multifaceted" ("The Failure to Produce Scholarship of Engagement," para. 2), a circumstance that leads to lack of clarity on policies and rewards related to digital scholarship (e.g., creation of Internet-based media content). Additionally, many Extension budgets are constrained at a time when organizations with sufficient funding

sources to hire a larger staff are better able to withstand the constantly changing Internet-based media landscape (Hestres, 2017).

As the digital age continues to gain traction and as Extension continues to be integral to a thriving community, the need for Extension professionals to be incentivized to use Internet-based media is important. Yet "simply using social media for Extension does not always translate into maximum engagement with a target audience" (Garcia, Dev, McGinnis, Thomas, & The Learning Child Team, 2018, "Conclusions and Implications," para. 1). Instead, Extension professionals must be purposeful and thoughtful (Garcia et al., 2018) in using Internet-based media to deliver engaging content that impacts their audiences. Toward fostering this goal, we undertook a qualitative study relating the Internet-based media success strategies of experienced marketing professionals to the needs of Extension professionals to identify ways of increasing Extension's Internet-based media success, decreasing time barriers, and maximizing use of free, Internet-based mass media channels to reach audiences. Two research questions guided our study: How are the practices of professional marketers successfully attracting Internet-based audiences, and how can Extension professionals apply those practices to become effective users of Internet-based media?

## Method

Because we frequently train Extension and university audiences in Internet-based media strategies and mechanics, we sought to frame our study as a means of gathering marketing professionals' advice for novice Internet-based media users.

We used a semistructured interview protocol (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to interview five Internet-based media strategists in Texas: three agricultural communications professionals, one public relations professional, and one marketing manager. All participants were female and had at least a bachelor's degree. We identified participants by using convenience sampling (Bryman, 2012) that was based on our existing relationships with the participants through our community of practice.

Field notes and interview transcripts served as the data for the study. To preserve anonymity, we assigned each participant a pseudonym, as procedurally described by Merriam and Tisdell (2015). After unitizing the data, we analyzed the data using a content analysis approach (Patton, 2014) with an in vivo coding technique (King, 2008), allowing participants' terminology to become thematic labels.

To achieve trustworthiness, we selected convenience sampling to ensure that participants had deep knowledge of and extensive experience with the topic, kept a reflexive journal throughout the interview and data analysis phases, and circulated two peer-debriefing memos among ourselves as data analysis proceeded (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Additionally, as we have been engaged in conducting or teaching Internet-based media outreach for several years, we were able to achieve adequate engagement. We reached data saturation quickly as we heard the same ideas in all five interviews. Thick description serves as a framework in the results to reinforce transferability of the data (Lindolf & Taylor, 2011).

## Results and Discussion

Four themes emerged from the study: knowing the research, making audiences tick, making changes based on measurable data, and making Internet-based media effective. Each theme involved implications for Extension professionals' use of Internet-based media.

## Knowing the Research

### *What the Experts Said*

Marketing professionals in the study urged anyone creating content for Internet-based media to "know [the] research" ("Sue"). "The genesis of social media is content" (Sue), and the audience must see the content as credible. Content producers should "know what [they] are doing and writing about" ("Jane"), have confidence in their own knowledge, and reassure their readers that the information is credible. "Jill" emphasized that writing for the "common man" is critical when producing content for Internet-based media. The marketing professionals also described the need to be able to turn an idea into a "Tweet, Facebook post, and Blog post" (Jill) to maximize its reach. As well, posts should be designed as "responsible, actionable information" for each platform ("Kim").

When curating content, content producers should balance skepticism and transparency and should not "post anything [they] are overly hesitant about" (Jill). If content producers are hesitant about curated content, they should offer a transparent counterpoint or clarification within the post. The counterpoint or clarification should be based on "macro and micro research," such as "news gathering" (Sue). Content producers should pay attention to trends in their online community so that they can "instantly identify patterns . . . and capitalize on them" (Kim) through a timely, accurate response.

### *How Extension Professionals Can Know the Research*

Extension professionals are content originators in multiple content fields (Gould et al., 2014). Content accuracy is a concern for many, but a network of specialists could provide review of materials to be posted if needed. Also, a library of shareable content written for Extension Internet-based audiences would allow for making a consistent stream of relevant, timely content available to clientele. This approach would help achieve two goals: news gathering and working with experts to produce reliable content.

In 2007, Telg et al. noted that Extension professionals lacked marketing training. Perhaps a "shift away from one-way mass media to interactivity of engagement within media audiences" (Lipschultz, 2015, p. xiii) would help Extension professionals reframe their mass media promotion struggle into a strength—engaging audiences to spark action. Thus, novice content producers should learn to adapt an idea to fit multiple outlets to maximize the idea's reach and design the message as, in Kim's words, "actionable information," an approach that would "organize action around issues" (Rheingold, 2008, p. 25) to achieve measurable impact.

## Making Audiences Tick

### *What the Experts Said*

Content producers need to know "what makes audiences tick" (Sue) as the "ability to understand various needs of target audiences and adapt messages accordingly" (Kim) is an important skill. Knowing this information helps content producers "find" ("Pat") and "build" (Jane) target audiences for Internet-based media. Content producers seeking to grow an audience should take actions such as "follow[ing] all state commodity organizations' community managers on all the platforms" (Jill) and working with existing influencers who have "similar target audiences" (Sue). "Trust is imperative" (Sue), so working with trusted influencers can boost the trust of a new account. Content producers also must "listen [to] and empathize [with]" (Pat) their audiences. However, they

must do so without crossing the professional line as all five marketing professionals noted the importance of differentiating between personal and professional Internet-based media use.

Knowledge of what makes an audience tick is associated with understanding of platforms the audience uses. "Before social media, companies had demonstrations" (Pat), but now companies rely on a medium that "has changed more in the last 12 months than in the 6 years before that" (Sue). Because platforms change, Internet-based media marketers need to stay updated on new platforms to keep audiences "energized" and "engaged" (Sue).

Simultaneously, content producers need to know *how* their audiences use Internet-based media platforms in order to align content with the audiences' expectations. "[Writing] social media messages" (Jill) must align with understanding various platforms' terms of use, accountability, regulations, and best practices to yield success. The marketing professionals emphasized that knowing "how to [effectively] use hashtags" (Sue), "knowing how to post" (Pat), and using tools to "manage [multiple] social media platforms" (Pat) are important skills for reaching audiences.

## ***How Extension Professionals Can Make Audiences Tick***

Extension is the original organization for listening and responding to an audience (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities [APLU], 2012). Extension professionals began with face-to-face demonstrations (Gould et al., 2014) but now, in part, rely on Internet-based media to relay information. Today's Extension professionals can find new ways to identify and build audiences through Internet-based media use by knowing their audiences' preferences for messaging and information sources.

Training for Extension professionals on Internet-based media outreach should include instruction on responding to audience feedback in a way that reinforces positive audience connections within the professional context (Bor, 2014). Responding to negative reactions, rants, and inaccuracies within the comment stream also should be part of any training for Extension professionals, especially as young content producers are more likely than their predecessors to depend on their social networks for information and confirmation (Brislen et al., 2016).

## **Making Changes Based on Measurable Data**

### ***What the Experts Said***

Marketing professionals emphasized the need to "make changes based on measurable data" (Pat) and indicated that establishing baselines promotes good decision making. For these professionals, the first steps are to "take historical data from Twitter and Facebook" (Pat) and find "favorite brands and campaigns" (Jill) to use as models. Next, they determine what they "want to accomplish" (Pat) and use the platforms' analytics tools to make decisions (Sue). Audiences determine strategies, and strategies determine Internet-based media goals. Goals should "support the objectives" (Pat) as goals that support planned objectives will keep audiences from disengaging with what could be perceived as meaningless content (e.g., "too many opinions and not enough facts" [Pat]).

Content producers need to "be a part of the conversation" and "infiltrate" (Jill) themselves into the audiences they seek to reach. This approach leaves room for "one scheduled post a day" (Jane), depending on the platform, and a plan for "how and why to use [content] outside of the content plan" (Jane). For example, planned posts

may need to be canceled in a crisis or in response to an emerging need.

Decisions should not be made without data. To get data, content producers need a track record of posting content that engages the audience, as evidenced through the gaining of likes, shares, or similar actions. Therefore, Internet-based media strategists must "measure the success of a Tweet or Facebook post" (Pat), identify the highest performing posts (Jill), and create more content similar to the high-performing content.

## ***How Extension Professionals Can Make Changes Based on Measurable Data***

Responding to audiences' needs is the essence of Extension's mission (APLU, 2012). Finding "favorite brands and campaigns," as suggested by Jill, necessitates that Extension professionals identify ideal accounts to use as models for developing their own accounts and establish account goals that prioritize audience need, encourage conversation, and are based on a content calendar.

Creating content similar to previously successful content is key to continued success and requires Extension professionals to be familiar with analytics and reporting tools for each platform. Thus, Extension professionals should try multiple strategies over time with defined measures of success. Simultaneously, being "part of the conversation," as Jill suggested, allows one to adapt quickly. Conversation promotes "interactivity of engagement" (Lipschultz, 2015, p. xiii), which media audiences are beginning to expect from content producers.

## **Making Internet-Based Media Effective**

### ***What the Experts Said***

"Mak[ing] digital effective" (Sue) is determined by the Internet-based media strategy. Successfully "integrat[ing] [the strategy] into a content calendar" (Kim), developing "one fresh idea every day" (Pat), having a call to action, and examining strategy case studies are actions that increase effectiveness. Specifically, entering a conversation with a strategy is critical.

Effective tactics for Internet-based media use include aligning actions with strategy; creating a "one-, two-, and four-week content calendar" (Sue); fleshing out long-term plans "once a quarter" (Jill); and understanding how goals become achievable through appropriate platform use. For example, Facebook is an important starting point, and "Instagram should be used to entice people—to get people involved" (Pat). Twitter is valuable for starting conversations, and Snapchat provides "a 60-second wrap-up for the day" (Kim).

Communicating Internet-based media successes is critical to explaining return on investment, and the ability to translate achieved goals "into terms that a CEO can easily understand" (Jill) is important. Many Internet-based media clients "don't have money for big advertising" (Pat), so they use social media as an efficient, low-cost way to achieve targeted impact.

## ***How Extension Professionals Can Make Internet-Based Media Effective***

Impact drives Extension's mission (APLU, 2012). The need to balance the desire for growth with current capacity (DeYoung, 1988) plays into Extension's move toward Internet-based media and Extension professionals'

reluctance to engage. The establishment of strategies and goals can help clarify Extension professionals' reasons for pursuing Internet-based media to grow their programs. Different strategies necessitate different platforms, but Extension professionals should understand that for whatever they want to do, from getting people involved to starting a conversation to curating content, an appropriate platform exists.

The continuing mission of Extension is to respond to the needs of audiences that are increasingly moving online (Gottfried & Shearer, 2016) and seeking engagement and interaction with the experts behind the media (Lipschultz, 2015; Rheingold, 2008). Meeting this mission requires specialized training.

## Summary

Internet-based media as a whole provide Extension professionals an information delivery system that can increase adoption of intended program goals. Extension clientele access information using Internet-based media, and Extension professionals can become the trusted research-based information voice for their subject matter by presenting content on Internet-based platforms. Extension professionals are the bridge between scientists and the public, and this bridge is strengthened through the use of social media and other forms of Internet-based media.

According to the marketing professionals we interviewed, training for Extension professionals aimed at increasing skills in Internet-based media marketing should focus on

- identifying credible content to share,
- crafting a message for multiple outlets,
- determining what audiences need,
- recognizing which platforms audiences use,
- mastering use of those platforms for engagement,
- experimenting with Internet-based media, and
- establishing goals and strategies appropriate to selected platforms.

The public is increasingly searching for credible information on the Internet (USDA NASS, 2015). Extension professionals can learn how to better "inform publics, advocate positions, contest claims, and organize action around issues" (Rheingold, 2008, p. 25) by knowing their research, knowing what makes their audiences tick, making changes based on measurable data, and increasing the effectiveness of their Internet-based media efforts. The marketing professionals in our study noted that content, audience, data, and strategy are the keys to conducting the right kinds of Internet-based media efforts. Designing training to help Extension professionals master these four key areas will increase Extension's impact at local, state, and national levels. Further research should focus on the short-term and long-term impacts of this type of training.

Although some Extension professionals have begun to engage with and learn from professionals in areas such as Internet-based media, such engagement is not widespread. The benefits of Extension professionals' engaging with and learning from industry professionals, such as the marketing professionals in our study, are far-reaching,

with primary benefits relating to program growth, new audiences, and training opportunities.

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