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Social Media Use of Cooperative Extension Family Economics Educators: Online Survey Results and Implications

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Abstract: This article describes results of an online survey conducted by the eXtension Financial Security for All (FSA) Community of Practice (CoP) to determine the social media capacity and activity of its members. The survey was conducted to inform two subsequent FSA CoP programs: an archived webinar on social media programs and impact evaluation methods and a national grant-funded financial education social media outreach project. Survey topics include social media tools and access methods used by FSA CoP members, frequency of use, descriptions of content posted, number of fans/followers, institutional guidelines, and social media impact evaluation strategies.

Introduction

This article reports results of one of the first studies conducted to assess the social media outreach capacity of Extension educators. Social media can be defined as digital networks (e.g., blogs, Facebook, Farmville, Twitter, wikis, and YouTube) that enable people to organize, socialize, learn, play, and participate in e-commerce transactions. Less than 10 years ago, words like "Twitter," "Facebook," and "social networking" did not exist. Today, they are major avenues for communication, marketing, and information sharing. In 2010, average Americans spent nearly 23% of their Internet time on social media, up from 16% a year earlier (Americans Love Social Networking, 2010). Facebook has over 800 million regular users (Statistics, 2011) and is now the most visited Web site in the U.S. (Makan, 2011). People of all ages have been embracing

social media. The fastest growing group of Twitter users isn't people in their 20s—it's 50-somethings, who more than doubled their usage between 2009 and 2010 (Brandon, 2011).

Due to the rapid increase in social networking, social media literacy is a 21st-century technical skill for professionals (Rheingold, 2010). Along with computer literacy and subject matter expertise, Extension educators will need to develop social media literacy skills if they have not done so already. Social media literacy includes understanding, not only how specific social media tools operate (e.g., tweeting or posting a Facebook message) but, much more important, how to engage online users in two-way information flows and measure the impact of social media outreach. Kinsey (2010) describes five different types of social media and how Extension educators can put them in their toolbox of outreach methods: blogs, wiki, podcasts, Facebook, and YouTube. Rhoades, Thomas, and Davis (2009) explored how Extension clientele (4-H youth) use social media and how Extension educators can engage them.

This article describes results of an online survey that was conducted by the eXtension Financial Security for All (FSA) Community of Practice (CoP) to determine the social media capacity and activity of its members, i.e., over 300 state Extension specialists and county agents who teach personal finance. Several FSA CoP leaders began to use social media as an outreach tool in 2009 and were interested in gauging the capacity of the entire CoP to deliver financial education via social media. The purpose of the survey was to inform two subsequent FSA CoP programs: an archived webinar on social media use and impact evaluation and a national grant-funded financial education social media outreach project to promote saving. Survey questions covered topics such as social media tools used, frequency of use, descriptions of content posted, number of fans/followers/friends, and social media impact evaluation strategies.

Methodology and Sample

A 14-question social media questionnaire was developed using Instant Survey, the online survey program used by eXtension. A link to the survey was sent to all FSA CoP members of record in December 2010 and to Extension family economics educators who indicated interest in participating in a social media financial education project at a national professional meeting. Of about 350 people who were sent the survey link, 45 responded. This was not entirely surprising because many people sign up for eXtension IDs and select a CoP, but relatively few become actively engaged to the point that they might take the time to complete a survey. In addition, the timeline to complete the survey was relatively short. Nevertheless, the findings provide interesting insights about how all Extension educators may be using social media.

Demographic data were not collected because the focus of the survey was exclusively respondents' social media use and interest in participating in an upcoming national social media project. This was the second survey conducted of FSA CoP members' social media use. A 2009 unpublished survey conducted to inform a national conference training workshop was completed by 72 family economists, 86% of whom were female, 66% were age 50 and older, and 58% had incomes below \$75,000 (Financial Security for All, 2009). Given that the sampling frame for the study reported here overlapped that of the 2009 study, respondents may have had similar characteristics, reflecting the fact that Extension family economists are predominantly older and female in a generally middle-income range. The 2009 study was administered over a longer period via personnel at NIFA-USDA, which could explain its higher response rate than that of the current study.

Findings

The first question asked the 45 survey respondents how often they used various social media sites. As shown in Table 1, Facebook was clearly the social media tool that respondents used most frequently and, therefore, have the most comfort and experience with. Twitter, YouTube, and blogs were also used at least "sometimes"

by respondents. The following social media sites are listed in descending order according to the number of responses provided for almost daily frequency of use.

Table 1.
Frequency of Social Media Use by Extension Family Economics Educators (N =45)

Social Media Site	Almost Daily	Frequently	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Facebook	42%	20%	22%	9%	7%
Twitter	7%	14%	2%	39%	39%
YouTube	5%	25%	48%	16%	7%
Blog (any)	5%	5%	35%	7%	49%
Linked In	2%	11%	20%	27%	39%
Flickr	0%	0%	7%	19%	74%
Plaxo	0%	0%	7%	0%	93%
My Space	0%	0%	0%	9%	91%
Digg	0%	0%	0%	5%	95%

Respondents were also asked to indicate the method(s) they used to access social media: computer, smart phone, Web-enabled TV, or other methods. They were able to check as many access methods as applied. For Facebook, more than nine in 10 (91%) respondents used a computer, and over a third (36%) used a smart phone. Another 4% of Facebook users checked "other" for additional unspecified methods.

Table 2 lists methods used by Extension family economics educators to access the same social media sites listed above in Table 1. For all social media, computers were by far the most frequent method of social media access. As with Facebook, 91% of YouTube users used a computer to access content. Given the fact that many of the other social media sites were used infrequently, if at all, it is not surprising to see low percentages for each access method and a high percentage of "not applicable" responses.

Table 2.
Method Used by Extension Family Economics Educators to Access Social Media Sites (N =45)

Social Media Site	Computer	Smart Phone	Web-Enabled TV	Other Methods	Not Applicable
Facebook	91%	36%	0%	4%	7%
Twitter	56%	13%	0%	4%	40%
YouTube	91%	18%	2%	4%	9%
Blog (any)	50%	0%	0%	2%	50%
Linked In	62%	12%	0%	2%	38%

Flickr	20%	0%	0%	0%	80%
Plaxo	8%	0%	0%	0%	92%
My Space	10%	0%	0%	0%	90%
Digg	2%	0%	0%	0%	98%

Respondents were asked to describe the type of content that they post online via social media. This was an open-ended question designed to generate a list of possible content ideas rather than to count the number of each. Several respondents indicated that they had only used social media for personal use to date. For those who were using social media professionally, content included: news releases, financial columns, fact sheets, articles, video links, research findings, newsletters, announcements (e.g., program marketing), pictures from events, summaries of legislative changes related to personal finance, links to eXtension and America Saves, original "how-to" videos on YouTube, organization meeting minutes, and quick tips. Slightly more than half (53%) of respondents reported including personal and professional social media content in their online messages, while the remaining 47% focused on one type of message or the other.

To gauge the potential social media outreach of FSA CoP members (i.e., county financial educators and state specialists), the survey asked respondents to estimate their number of social media fans/followers/friends. Outreach numbers varied from less than 50 to several hundred per individual respondent. Collectively, an audience of 5,965 message recipients was identified (a mean of about 132 impressions per respondent), not including followers of respondents' followers.

Interestingly, only 22% of respondents report social media outreach to their Extension administrators. This was done in annual reports, online planning and reporting systems, impact/evaluation reports, and CVs. Of the remaining 78% who do not report social media outreach, 27% said they did not know how but would like to. More than a quarter (29%) of respondents said their institution has a policy or guidelines on social media use, 33% said it did not, and 38% did not know. Of those with institutional policies, most of them can be summarized as follows: "be careful not to do anything personal on work time," do not mention trade names, content must be research-based, and inappropriate material could be cause for disciplinary action.

Slightly more than a quarter (27%) of the sample tracked usage of their social media content by others. Metrics used included statistics provided by Scribd, Google alerts, Facebook reports, and number of Twitter followers. Of the remaining respondents who did not do this, 36% said they did not know how to track usage but would like to. The survey also asked respondents what tools they used to evaluate the reach and effectiveness of their social media content. Methods listed included Google analytics, posting an online survey to a Facebook page, bit.ly monitoring tools, TweetReach, and Wordpress.

Interest in participating in a national FSA CoP social media financial education project was high. Over three-quarters (78%) of respondents were willing to have their personal social media content reused by other community members, and 93% were willing to use FSA CoP content on their individual social media sites (i.e., to cut and paste e-mailed messages or retweet messages from the FSA CoP Twitter site). Subsequently, the FSA CoP launched a national financial education social media campaign with emailed tweets and Facebook posts designed to encourage savings during America Saves Week 2011.

A final survey question asked for comments and suggestions. Below are some representative comments.

- *Looking forward to receiving Facebook and Twitter posts for financial security.*

- *I love the idea of having content we could choose to post when needed.*
- *Since I work on the county network, any work-related social networking is done on my personal computer at home.*
- *I would like training in how to interpret analytics such as Facebook Insights.*
- *Using social media is required now so we need to all be on board.*
- *Aggregate data nationwide to measure diffusion of Extension's social media outreach.*
- *Need training and evaluation tools.*
- *Need a lot of training and simple to follow "cheat sheets."*

Discussion and Implications

Following are implications of the study reported here for Extension professionals interested in social media programmatic outreach.

Provide Step-by-Step Social Media Training Respondents stated they did not have time for a long learning curve. The FSA CoP responded with a 1-page step-by-step "Twitter Homework Assignment" and a 90-minute training webinar archived at <https://connect.extension.iastate.edu/p52944724/>.

Establish and Disseminate Institutional Social Media Guidelines Seven in 10 respondents said their educational institution did not have a social media policy or they did not know if one existed. Some respondents were reluctant to get involved with social media until they were provided more direction.

Aggregate Impacts Are Impressive Forty-five respondents were collectively able to reach almost 6,000 followers. If even 5% (300) of these followers retweeted one of the FSA CoP's Twitter messages, that's thousands of additional people potentially receiving Extension's unbiased, research-based information.

Learn Social Media Evaluation Metrics The survey indicated that social media impact evaluation was a topic of interest to FSA CoP survey respondents. The webinar described above provides a variety of ways to track social media outreach and impact, including unique hashtags and shortened URLs, Klout and PeerIndex scores, number of clicks to recommended Web sites, and embedded online survey links.

Begin with Facebook, Twitter, and/or YouTube These are social media tools that FSA CoP respondents were most familiar with, often because they developed proficiency during non-work hours. The FSA CoP subsequently obtained a grant to buy out a specialist's time to write "cut and paste" tweets and Facebook posts that were sent to FSA CoP members to insert into their own social media accounts.

Address the Issue of Smart Phones Respondents were less likely to access social media via smart phones than at a computer. Clearly, this limits times and places where they can post social media content. Low smart phone usage could be due to lack of technical know-how and/or the cost of smart phone data plans. If Extension wants its busy employees to engage more widely in social media outreach, it should consider providing smart phone training and data plan reimbursement.

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