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## Entrepreneurial Extension Conducted via Social Media

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## **Entrepreneurial Extension Conducted via Social Media**

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**Abstract:** The widespread availability of and access to the Internet have led to the development of new forms of communication. Collectively termed "social media," these new communication tools have created vast opportunities for Extension professionals in how they perform their work and how businesses interact with consumers. This article outlines currently popular social media tools and how they can be used by Extension professionals to carry out their educational and communication responsibilities and by agricultural business owners.

## Introduction

Widespread availability of and access to the Internet have led to the development of new forms of communication. Collectively termed "social media," these new communication tools have created vast opportunities for Extension professionals in how they perform their work and how businesses interact with consumers. A team of Extension educators at Penn State have embraced social media and are using the available tools in numerous ways in addition to promoting their use by agricultural business owners.

## Why Social Media?

Social media consists of a suite of dynamic online communication tools. The variety of tools available provides individuals a choice as to which tool to use depending on audience, purpose, or personal preference. These tools are easily accessible and often free of charge. They have become a source for news, events, market updates, and conversations. With the development of "apps," these tools have become popular for use on mobile networks, enabling communication and dissemination and receipt of information almost anywhere. Therefore, educators have a lot of flexibility to choose tools based on their audience, personal preference, and intended use. There exists a social media tool to accommodate everything from an in-depth description and explanation of a particular issue to the sharing of a photo or a shortened link to an online resource.

The accessibility of social media tools and the ability to share across platforms creates an environment primed for quick and widespread distribution of posts. This results in a sort of snowball effect wherein one post can theoretically be spread worldwide and viewed by millions within minutes, if not seconds. For Extension, this is valuable because our work, events, and resources can be simply, easily, and quickly shared with audiences with whom we don't have traditional connections.

## Popular Social Media Platforms

Electronic technology tools, social media included, have become so popular that most individuals, even if not using them, know what they are (Guenthner & Swan, 2011). Figure 1 illustrates some of the most popular social media tools.

**Figure 1.**  
Currently Popular Social Media Tools



<b>Twitter</b>		
<b>Social Networking</b>		
<b>Video Sharing</b>		
<b>Photo Sharing</b>		

Commonly, a person or entity (such as a business or organization) will incorporate many, if not all, of these into one social media presence. Doing so allows for multi-pronged approach to achieving objectives. Extension educators could use a variety of these tools to develop clientele interaction and relationships beyond traditional face-to-face interaction (Seger, 2011). Chris Raines, PSU Extension meat specialist, uses these tools as follows:

- **Blog:** Meatblogger.orgâ Written fact sheets, how-to guides, and industry news
- **Blog:** academicabattoir.orgâ Photo blog of meat processing as references for butchers and consumers
- **Twitter:** @iTweetMeatâ An individual identity commonly used to interact with farmers with specific questions about meat sales or general Q & A with meat consumers
- **Facebook:** Penn State Meat Marketâ Advertising and engagement of customers providing retail product availability updates

## Extension Opportunities in Social Media

The use of social media tools is not relegated to the business world (Kinsey, 2010). Boundless opportunities exist for Extension to grab hold of and use these tools. What can Extension accomplish through the use of social media?

- Promotion of Extension programs, workshops, and other offerings
- Real-time interaction with clientele
- Extension materials and communications available on mobile devices
- Extending outreach to new audiences that may otherwise not know about Extension

- Promotion of newly developed Extension materials, including those that are developed for social media networks ( e.g., YouTube videos, blog posts)
- Supplying Extension information to a nationwide (even worldwide) audience
- Development of relationships and promotion of Extension and Extension activities to leaders and representatives of government, education, business, journalism, and non-profit organizations

## **Applications in Agricultural Businesses**

One of the things the Penn State Extension team has focused on is training entrepreneurs in using social media tools to market their businesses and provide customer service. Social media has provided those who farm, traditionally thought of as a more or less solitary endeavor, an opportunity to interact with the outside world without leaving the farm. Activities once deemed too draining on a small resource base are simply and easily accomplished through social media. Just a small sampling of what ag entrepreneurs can accomplish through the use of social media includes the following.

- Display the location of their market, co-op, store, etc., through the use of location-based services (e.g., GPS on your smart phone)
- Provide customers/clients with an opportunity to offer feedback or pose inquiries about their business or product
- Monitor social network trends and identify possible "selling points" or other unfulfilled market niches
- Act as their own consumer research, customer service, or public relations professionals, thereby saving on operating costs

## **Monitoring Interest**

Obviously, monitoring contact and impact is important to determining continued use of social media tools in achieving goals. Nearly all social networks provide some metric(s) that can be used to assess activity associated with an account, such as:

- Number of visitors,
- Number of mentions or comments in a given network,
- Number of "fans, friends or followers," and

- Number of incoming links to your site/account

Social media users have the ability to embed custom analytics into their social media presence (e.g., Google analytics). Custom URL shortening programs (such as Bit.ly, which shortens lengthy URLs to a size that is usable within Twitter's 140-character limit) can be used to create URLs for any Web address, and visits to each address can be tracked. One can track the "reach" of a message (namely via Twitter) with Twitter-centric tools such as TweetReach.

Users of social media tools need to monitor which messages and interactions generate and sustain interest over the course of time with each tool. For instance, if promotion of an upcoming field day event generates more registrations through Facebook posts and less through a short YouTube video, re-directing future event promotions away from YouTube is justified.

## Summary

How the world communicates is changing and requires Extension to change as well. Social media provides abundant opportunities to interact with and meet our clientele's needs on platforms that they are using and embracing in their everyday lives.

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