

## Recruiting and Retaining Shareholders for Community Supported Agriculture in Texas

Kelsey Hall

Courtney Meyers

David Doerfert

*See next page for additional authors*

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Community supported agriculture provided consumers, known as shareholders, with a share of locally grown products from a farm. Recruiting potential shareholders and retaining current shareholders were challenges for CSA owners since retention rate varied from 20%-70% for CSAs located throughout the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore how Texas CSA shareholders received information about local food and how CSA owners have recruited new consumers and retained existing shareholders. A mixed methods collective case study approach was employed to collect data from an online quantitative survey from shareholders of three CSAs in Texas and qualitative interviews with the CSA owners. Shareholders preferred to search for food choice information on a daily or weekly basis. Websites and interpersonal communication were communication channels sometimes used by shareholders for seeking out information about food choices. CSA owners used a variety of information sources to recruit potential shareholders, including local media, LocalHarvest, events, and word-of-mouth advertising. One of the most common messages delivered to potential shareholders explained the purpose of a CSA. Communication with current shareholders occurred through weekly email newsletters, website, events and conversations. Texas fruit and vegetable producers could use this information in community-based social marketing campaigns to recruit new individuals to join a CSA and retain existing shareholders. Additional research is needed on the information channels preferred by shareholders when learning about the local food movement, particularly CSAs. Research needs to discover CSA owners' marketing challenges, development of relationships with shareholders, and needed resources.

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## **Abstract**

Community supported agriculture provided consumers, known as shareholders, with a share of locally grown products from a farm. Recruiting potential shareholders and retaining current shareholders were challenges for CSA owners since retention rate varied from 20%-70% for CSAs located throughout the United States. The purpose of this study was to explore how Texas CSA shareholders received information about local food and how CSA owners have recruited new consumers and retained existing shareholders. A mixed methods collective case study approach was employed to collect data from an online quantitative survey from shareholders of three CSAs in Texas and qualitative interviews with the CSA owners. Shareholders preferred to search for food choice information on a daily or weekly basis. Websites and interpersonal communication were communication channels sometimes used by shareholders for seeking out information about food choices. CSA owners used a variety of information sources to recruit potential shareholders, including local media, LocalHarvest, events, and word-of-mouth advertising. One of the most common messages delivered to potential shareholders explained the purpose of a CSA. Communication with current shareholders occurred through weekly email newsletters, website, events and conversations. Texas fruit and vegetable producers could use this information in community-based social marketing campaigns to recruit new individuals to join a CSA and retain existing shareholders. Additional research is needed on the information channels preferred by shareholders when learning about the local food movement, particularly CSAs. Research needs to discover CSA owners' marketing challenges, development of relationships with shareholders, and needed resources.

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## **Introduction/Theoretical Framework**

Community supported agriculture (CSA) started as a form of direct marketing in the United States in the 1980s. Interest in CSA membership has increased among consumers who are interested in purchasing locally grown, fresh produce (Farnsworth, Thompson, Drury, & Warner, 1996; Keeling-Bond, Thilmany, & Bond, 2006; Kolodinsky & Pelch, 1997; Polimeni, Polimeni, Shirey, Trees, & Trees, 2006). Consumers become shareholders in a CSA by purchasing either a full share or half share of the products harvested on the farm (Brown & Miller, 2008). Shareholders share the risks and benefits of food production because they pay for a fixed amount of the harvest regardless

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of its actual quantity and quality (Woods, Ernst, Ernst & Wright, 2009). A CSA owner can require shareholders to pick up their shares at the farm, or a CSA owner can deliver shares to a designated pick-up location, farmers' market, or homes. The majority of CSAs provide shareholders with vegetables, fruits, and herbs; however, some CSAs sell shares of eggs, meat, milk, baked goods, fiber, honey, beeswax, or firewood (Brown & Miller, 2008). As a means to meet Texas consumers' interest in purchasing local food, roughly 120 CSAs have sold shares of products harvested on farms to consumers (LocalHarvest, 2011). Since the retention rate of shareholders has varied 60%-70% per year in the nation, recruitment and retention are important factors that could determine the success of an alternative agriculture enterprise, such as a CSA (Adam, Balasubrahmanyam, & Born, 1999; Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, 2011; Oberholtzer, 2004; Strohlic & Shelley, 2004).

### **Techniques for Recruiting and Retaining Shareholders to a CSA**

Shareholders have identified information channels used to recruit them to join a CSA. Word-of-mouth advertising was an important way of increasing the number of shareholders (Kolodinsky & Pelch, 1997). Furthermore, 220 of the 257 CSA shareholders who responded to a survey about their experiences with their CSA owner learned about the CSA from either a friend or family member in the CSA or another member of the CSA (Polimeni et al., 2006). Similarly, the majority of CSA shareholders in Minnesota joined due to knowing the farmer or another shareholder (Cone & Myhre, 2000). Similar to the CSAs in Minnesota, Sweet Peas CSA in the Midwest grew its number of shareholders through various social networks, personal contact with the CSA owners, word-of-mouth, and information distributed at gathering places of consumers who had probable interest in alternative food sources (Sharp, Imerman, & Peters, 2002). Fliers and posters were ineffective sources for recruiting shareholders (Kolodinsky & Pelch, 1997; Polimeni et al., 2006).

CSA owners have used a variety of techniques to recruit new shareholders. Eight CSAs in Minnesota developed their memberships by relying on their friends and associates (Cone & Myhre, 2000). These CSA owners also recruited shareholders through word of mouth, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and fliers (Cone & Myhre, 2000). Similar results were found through in-depth interviews with 13 CSA owners in California, Oregon, and Washington (Strohlic & Shelley, 2004). These 13 CSA owners recruited shareholders by hosting farm events, conducting membership drives, distributing brochures, speaking at local events, and advertising through local newspapers and radio stations (Strohlic & Shelley, 2004). CSA owners received phone calls from prospective shareholders in response to articles printed in local newspapers. Community leaders who promoted community supported agriculture influenced individuals to become new shareholders (Strohlic & Shelley, 2004).

Some CSA owners have hosted events for individuals interested in joining. Roughly 251 CSAs from 41 states offered potluck dinners, farm tours, events for children of shareholders, and educational programs for the community and local schools (Lass, Bevis, Stevenson, Hendrickson, & Ruhf, 2003).

Communication was equally important for the retention of shareholders in CSAs (Oberholtzer, 2004; Strohlic & Shelley, 2004). CSA owners communicated with their shareholders using newsletters, email, websites, and bulletin boards at drop-off sites (Oberholtzer, 2004). Thirteen CSA owners in California, Oregon, and Washington explained that newsletters were the most common and important form of communication with existing shareholders. These newsletters include recipes for each week's share, stories about farm life, profiles of farm employees, and articles addressing

farming and sustainable agriculture (Strochlic & Shelley, 2004). CSA owners also used institutions (churches, schools, and specific employers) for posting information on their bulletin boards and for updating shareholders using the institutions' communication channels (Woods et al., 2009).

CSA owners have ranked the effectiveness of communication channels used to communicating with their shareholders. Of 205 CSA owners in nine states, more than 90% of CSA owners indicated that one-on-one conversations were the most effective strategy for communicating with shareholders (Woods et al., 2009). The majority of the 13 CSA owners from Oregon, California, and Washington agreed that word-of-mouth was the most effective and cost-effective strategy for recruiting shareholders (Strochlic & Shelley, 2004). The majority of CSA owners from nine states (85%) rated email newsletters sent to shareholders as effective communication channels (Woods et al., 2009). Other effective communication tools were the CSA's own website and the free listing on the LocalHarvest website. CSA owners realized their shareholders often participated in social networks where individuals valued local food and the idea of a CSA. Social networks, such as Facebook, were considered as effective as direct mail. Three CSA owners used a blog, and one CSA owner used Twitter to communicate with shareholders (Woods et al., 2009). In descending importance were farmers' markets, email, mass media, advertisements, on-farm signs, and direct mail.

### **Community-Based Social Marketing**

Community-based social marketing (CBSM) is an approach that promotes the adoption of sustainable behavior in agriculture, such as eating locally grown food (Kennedy, 2010; McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). According to Kennedy (2010), personal contact at the community level is one of the most effective ways to change behavior. The CBSM approach includes several components: (1) identifying barriers and benefits to performing the sustainable behavior, (2) designing a strategy that uses behavior change tools, (3) piloting the strategy with a small segment of a community, and (4) evaluating the behavior change once it has been adopted in the community.

This study was concerned with communication and prompts as behavior change tools in the CBSM approach (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Communication efforts use messages, credible sources, personal contact, modeling, and community leaders to capture the attention of individuals and initiate behavior change (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). These messages need to be tailored to the different segments of the community to be effective. Additionally, effective messages need information that is vivid, concrete, and personalized. Messages delivered through personal contact from credible sources are more influential on forming individuals' attitudes and behaviors than mass media coverage. Persuasive communication research indicates that personal contact is more influential than mass media when influencing attitudes and behaviors (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Examples of personal communication sources are farmers, consumers, extension agents, family members, and neighbors. However, mass media channels—newspapers, radio, and television—disseminate information to a large audience and can increase knowledge, which can change weakly held attitudes and behaviors (Rogers, 2003).

Visual and auditory prompts remind individuals to engage in a sustainable behavior that they have already performed; however, these prompts do not increase individuals' knowledge or change their behavior (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999).

Few studies have used CBSM to promote local food movement activities. Pierre (2010) used a single case study methodology to explain how Parry Sound Community Garden can use CBSM techniques to recruit community members that want the responsibility of a garden plot and to re-

tain those members for the duration of harvest and distribution. Results identified the benefits and difficulties to community gardening at the individual, family, and community levels. Then, the researcher chose to develop a website as the main communication tool to inform residents about the community garden (Pierre, 2010). In another study, an environmental advocacy class at a small Maine school used CBSM to determine what behaviors need to change to increase the amount of local food provided in the cafeteria (Ross, 2005). Students in the course conducted focus groups with students to discover their opinions about local food in the cafeteria and what norms, barriers, and incentives influenced their local food eating habits. The class wrote marketing messages in response to the focus group findings and created posters and table tents.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The 2011-2015 National Research Agenda Priority Area 6 encouraged the development of solutions that engage citizenry and profitable agricultural enterprises, such as CSAs, in rural communities (Doerfert, 2011). The average retention rate of shareholders is approximately 60-70% per year in the nation, so CSA owners must continually recruit new shareholders to remain viable (Strochlic & Shelley, 2004). Successful recruitment and retention is an issue of vital importance because a CSA depends on a direct relationship between the owner and shareholders (Oberholtzer, 2004; Strochlic & Shelley, 2004). Fruit and vegetable farmers could use the knowledge gained from this study to implement their own marketing campaigns for retaining existing shareholders and recruiting new consumers to join a CSA. The purpose of this study was to explore how Texas CSA shareholders receive information about local food and how CSA owners have recruited new consumers and retained existing shareholders. The following research questions were used to guide the study:

1. What are the information channels shareholders use to learn about food choices?
2. What were successful strategies owners have used to market their CSA?

### **Methods/Procedures**

The research questions addressed in this study were included in a larger collective case study, discovering the marketing strategies used by three CSA owners and the factors that influenced their shareholders to join. Bromley (1990) described a case study as “an attempt to systematically investigate an event or a set of related events with a specific aim of describing and explaining this phenomenon” (p. 317). One variation of the case analysis is a collective case study, which uses several data sources from several sites to illustrate an issue or concern. A collective case study is frequently regarded as more robust than other variations of case studies because it is considered more compelling and it is used to compare and contrast situations (Yin, 2003).

The researchers employed a mixed methods design that collected and analyzed the results of an online quantitative survey and qualitative interviews concurrently but separately (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). For the quantitative data collection, the researchers called the 126 CSA owners in Texas from a list accessed from LocalHarvest, an organic and local food website that maintains the most comprehensive searchable database of CSAs in the United States (LocalHarvest, 2011). These CSAs were located in cities, such as Houston, Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin, San Antonio, or rural communities. Sixty-four out of the 126 CSAs in Texas either ceased operation or did not have a working telephone number. The remaining 62 Texas CSAs from the database were used as the population for the study. The researchers called the 62 CSA owners asking for their participation in

the study. Out of the 62 CSA owners, three CSA owners agreed to participate in the study. Most of the CSA owners would not participate in the study because sharing their customers' contact information with a third party was a violation of their CSA member agreement or contract. CSA 1, located near Dallas, has 50 shareholders from the Dallas and Fort Worth areas. CSA 2, located in a rural community in Northeast Texas has 83 shareholders of which 39 shareholders gave permission to receive the emails asking for their participation in the study. CSA 3 was in a rural community near San Antonio and has 120 shareholders from several communities, including Austin, San Antonio, New Braunfels, and San Marcos.

A researcher-developed questionnaire was used for collecting the quantitative data presented in this manuscript. One construct indicated how frequently shareholders used 12 information channels when seeking out information about food choices, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). A panel of experts comprised of faculty and graduate students in agricultural education and communications established face and content validity of the questionnaire. The panel's comments were used to revise the questionnaire before submission to the university's Institutional Review Board. Prior to administering the questionnaire to the study's sample, researchers conducted a pilot test with shareholders of two CSAs in the state to establish reliability of the researcher-developed questionnaire. The Cronbach's alpha value from the pilot test was 0.50 for the information channels construct. The low alpha level could be explained by the homogeneity of the responses by the sample or the use of a researcher-developed questionnaire (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Researchers administered the survey using SurveyMonkey™, an online questionnaire builder and administrator service. The CSA owners did not permit access to the names, mailing addresses, phone numbers, and email addresses of the CSA shareholders due to a privacy clause in their CSA contracts. The researchers created the emails and online survey that the CSA owners sent to their shareholders. As the first contact with participants, CSA owners sent a pre-notice email to their shareholders requesting assistance with completing the questionnaire. One week later, CSA owners sent an email with the link to the online survey as the second contact. CSA owners sent an email two weeks later to thank their shareholders for responding to the questionnaire and reminding others who had not.

Eighty-five out of 209 participants responded to the online survey for a response rate of 41%. The data for each CSA were combined into one Excel spreadsheet and imported into SPSS® 18.0 for Windows™ PC. The researchers handled non-response rate to the online survey by using the Fisher's exact test (Ary et al., 2006). No significant differences were found between early and late respondents for ethnicity, employment situation, marital status, ownership arrangement, and the number of children under 18 living in their households. Frequencies and descriptive statistics described shareholders' use of information sources. The results presented in this study are cumulative of the three CSAs.

For the qualitative data collection, one of the researchers followed an interview guide to complete semi-structured telephone interviews with the three owners of the CSAs in Texas used for the quantitative data collection. The questions addressed the CSA owner's recruitment strategies, successful marketing strategies, marketing failures, consumer relationship building strategies, needs for marketing support, and feedback setup. Each telephone interview lasted roughly 40 minutes and was completed the same month the survey was administered. Each interview was audio taped to facilitate accurate transcription. The researcher also wrote down responses to the questions and thoughts during the interviews. The researcher protected the identities of the CSA owners by masking their

names in the data. The interview transcripts were analyzed using NVivo 9.0, a qualitative data management software. The data analysis process followed a standard format of open coding then axial coding. In open coding, researchers organized the data and made sense of the information by forming initial, major categories (Creswell, 1998). Axial coding allowed researchers to re-analyze the data after open coding to create categories that are associated around a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

For the mixed methods design, the quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently and were given equal weighting. Researchers chose to merge the data after separate analysis of the quantitative and qualitative results (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Researchers select this mixed methods approach when they want to better understand a research problem by collecting “different but complementary data on the same topic” (Morse, 1991, p. 122).

## Results

### Question 1: What are the information channels shareholders use to learn about food choices?

Respondents indicated how frequently they sought out information sources to learn about food choices on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (more than once a day). Table 1 showed the most common responses were daily ( $n=15$ , 30.6%) or weekly ( $n=12$ , 24.5%).

Table 1

*Respondents' Frequency of Searching Food Choice Information*

Frequency	<i>n</i>	%
More than once a day	3	6.1
Daily	15	30.6
Several times a week	5	10.2
Weekly	12	24.5
Monthly	9	18.4
Yearly	3	5.1
Never	2	4.1

Respondents were asked how frequently they used 12 information channels when seeking out information about food choices. Frequency of use was measured on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). As seen in Table 2, websites ( $M=3.81$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) followed by interpersonal ( $M=3.10$ ,  $SD=0.95$ ) were sometimes used. Email ( $M=2.71$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ), events ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=0.99$ ), and print publications ( $M=2.33$ ,  $SD=1.07$ ) were rarely used.

### Question 2: What were successful strategies owners have used to market their CSA?

Three themes described successful marketing strategies: (1) activities for recruiting potential shareholders, (2) messages delivered to potential shareholders, and (3) communication with current shareholders. For the recruitment of potential shareholders, CSA owner 1 already operated an organic garden center year round and a farmers' market twice a month on the farm. In 2008, the owner used a mailing list of individuals who attended the farmers' market. The owner sent a polling question to the individuals seeking their interest in joining a CSA, receiving 80 responses. Most of the individuals found the farmers' market through the owner's posting on the LocalHarvest website or an Internet search engine. CSA owner 3 also advertised on the LocalHarvest website with a description of the farm's organic practices, the CSA, and pick up locations.

CSA owner 1 and 2 recruited potential shareholders using local media. Local neighborhood

newspapers and a large metropolitan newspaper were notified with a press release about the CSA. CSA owner 2 has run a short classified advertisement in the local newspaper. The advertisement listed five chemicals found on many produce and the question “Are these in your food? They are not in mine.” The owner included a phone number and website address for readers. The message in the classified advertisement was slightly changed every three to six weeks to catch the eye of different readers. CSA owner 2 contacted the local television station, airing a news story on the CSA. So many viewers responded positively to the story on the station’s website that the station returned to cover a story about the farm’s bee operation. A local television station learned about CSA 3 from a Facebook advertisement and contacted the owners for a television interview. The owners completed the interview at the station talking about the purpose of the CSA, the vegetables grown, the delivery pick-up areas, and the cost of joining. The interview helped recruit a few new shareholders.

Table 2  
*Respondents’ Frequency of Using Information Channels*

Information Channel	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>
Websites	47	3.81
Interpersonal	50	3.10
Email	49	2.71
Events (farmers’ markets, on-farm)	50	2.38
Print publications (fliers, newsletters, brochures)	49	2.33
Social media (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter)	50	1.96
Local broadcast (television, radio)	50	1.88
Cooperative extension (agent, website, materials, events)	49	1.88
Local newspaper	49	1.86
Presentations at local organizations	49	1.73
Direct mail	49	1.53
Other	27	1.33

*Note.* The scale was 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, and 5 = Always.

CSA owner 3 invested a lot of time to design a website describing the CSA, the vegetables given in a share, the length of the CSA seasons, the cost, and delivery locations. The CSA owner also sold produce at farmers’ markets where consumers could learn about the CSA. A display of photos from the CSA website was set up at the farmers’ markets. Brochures were also available for consumers to pick up. The brochure has the website address where they could go for more information.

Another strategy relied on word-of-mouth advertising of farm activities and involvement by shareholders. CSA owner 2 encouraged shareholders to volunteer time on the farm to complete daily tasks:

When they walk around and see that I’m real busy in the morning with my customers, my customers go out and feed my rabbits, water them. One customer actually cleans the cages and hauls the manure over to the compost pile for me. I got a customer who turns the compost pile. They are doing something involved on the farm, and when they get home they are going to talk about that. That is more word-of-mouth advertising going for you.

On-farm events were another recruitment strategy for potential shareholders. CSA owner 2 placed a sign in front of a study plot on the CSA to promote the organic farming practices studied by

a university and AgriLife extension. University alumni and fans stopped by the farm to learn about the study, and a few have joined the CSA as a result of this activity. The local extension agent held an event at the CSA for 30 Master Gardeners in the area. The owner spoke with the attendees and showed them the farm facilities. Some of these attendees purchased a CSA membership. After the event, the agent sent a press release to promote the success of the event. CSA owner 1 offered a meeting and tour of the farm to potential shareholders. Before the potential shareholders join the CSA, the owner requires that the potential members meet and tour the farm. CSA owner 1 explained the reasoning behind hosting the event:

It [joining the CSA] is an investment, and you wouldn't ever expect people to invest money without doing due diligence. It is an opportunity for me to make sure that no one comes in with misconceptions. I do not want people coming and thinking that this is a huge commercial farm, and we are just growing acres and acres of food and that there is never going to be a week where there isn't something to pick up. I don't want them to think that because they will be disappointed, complain, and quit.

### **Messages Delivered to Potential Shareholders.**

CSA owners delivered a variety of messages to potential shareholders. In an informational letter sent to potential shareholders, the CSA owner 1 explained what the CSA entailed, the importance of supporting small, local farms, and the concept that a CSA was not pre-paying for groceries. The informational letter further explained that the produce from the CSA did not replace a trip to the grocery store because there were products the farm did not grow. The owner wanted potential shareholders to understand that they invested in a small farm and the return on their investment was a share of the food produced. Production was weather driven and seasonal. Owner of CSA 3 talked to potential shareholders about farm's 20-year reputation and the purpose of the CSA, explaining that the CSA was ideal for individuals who were willing to try many fresh vegetables that were tasty. A farmers' market or other way of getting local food was more appropriate for people who had limited eating habits. The owner educated shareholders by telling them a membership provided a share of the crops, and they received what was produced. Additionally, CSA owner 3 told potential shareholders about the cost of the CSA in comparison to nearby CSAs. This CSA offered a smaller share that cost \$20 per week, which was almost half the cost of other CSAs in the area. CSA owner 3 explained the reasoning for this message.

We are competitively priced because we were trying to make the CSA more reasonable. We have heard over the past few years that people buy a \$30 or \$35 share from a farm, and they can't use all of it. Unfortunately, some people see too much produce as a negative thing in their view, and they don't want to sign back up if they see their produce going to waste. They are losing money too because they are not eating and getting the full benefit of what they spend. We stress that we are a more reasonable CSA that's fitting for a couple of people or a family.

CSA owner 2 discussed organic farming practices used on the farm. Many of the conversations started with gardening questions individuals had about using organic practices to grow tomatoes, control weeds, and eliminate algae on the surface of ponds. When the owner's advice worked for individuals, many of them joined the CSA.

### **Communication with Current Shareholders.**

All three CSA owners sent electronic newsletters or emails to shareholders. A weekly email newsletter or email told shareholders about the produce included in that week's share and the activities of the farm, such as irrigating melons, picking strawberries, or working on other projects. CSA owner 3 said the shareholders wanted to know about the weekly share because they liked to plan meals and go to a farmers' market or grocery to supplement what was given. Shareholders in CSA 2 also received emails encouraging them to comment or advise the owner on what they would like grown. Other emails requested that CSA 2 shareholders bring newspapers, yard waste, and compost to the farm. Follow-up emails recognized those who helped.

When a lot of the shareholders were new to CSA 1, the owner sent recipes through email as a reminder for the Saturday pick-up. CSA owner 3 received emails from shareholders asking for the names of specific vegetables. Therefore, the owner sent emails with a few recipes to try when shareholders received an unusual vegetable, such as bok choy or fennel. The email messages also encouraged shareholders to search the Internet for additional recipes. Similarly, shareholders in CSA 2 could visit the CSA website for recipes on how to prepare the vegetables provided in the share:

CSA OWNER 2: What we try to do is that every week as we introduce a new vegetable, like eggplant, we try to put up three to five recipes for ways to use it. What we do is use old southern recipes and maybe more contemporary recipes. We would still include old southern recipes for southern fried tomatoes and things like that.

### **Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations**

This study sought to determine how frequently CSA shareholders used specific information sources to make food choices. Furthermore, the study revealed strategies for the CSA owners to recruit potential shareholders and communicate with current shareholders. Websites and interpersonal communication were sometimes used by shareholders for finding food choice information. Two of the CSAs received requests to join their CSAs through the LocalHarvest website. Previous studies indicated that interpersonal communication was an information source commonly used by CSA owners to communicate with current shareholders and potential shareholders (Cone & Myhre, 2000; Kolodinsky & Pelch, 1997; Polimeni et al., 2006). The finding about word-of-mouth advertising from this study was similar to what Cone and Myhre (2000) and Sharp et al (2002) found in their research. Friends and associates assisted in building membership, and an existing relationship with the CSA owner or another shareholder could influence a consumer to join a CSA.

In the current study, CSA owners primarily used email and their websites to communicate with their current shareholders. These two forms of communication could reach shareholders on a daily or weekly basis, which were the shareholders' desired frequency for communicating about food choice information. While email was an effective information channel for existing shareholders, respondents to the shareholder survey rarely used email, events, and print publications to search for food choice information.

Local broadcast, local newspapers, and cooperative extension were information channels rarely used by respondents to learn of food choices. However, CSA owners in this study did receive a few memberships from the local newspaper's or television station's coverage of their CSA. Events hosted by cooperative extension at one of the CSA farms in the study resulted in new memberships. The CSA owners in Texas need to continue to use events, newspaper articles or radio interviews, just as

CSA owners in Minnesota, California, Oregon, and Washington did to recruit shareholders (Cone & Myhre, 2000; Strohlic & Shelley, 2004). However, the CSA owners in Texas could expand to offer recruitment events mentioned by the 251 CSA owners from 41 states: potluck dinners, farm tours, school events, and educational programs for the community (Lass et al., 2003).

All three CSA owners in Texas communicated weekly with shareholders by sending an email message that contained details of the produce included in the share and recipes. CSA owners from other states also used weekly newsletters to communicate about farm happenings, how to use their shares, and to increase shareholders' interest in the CSA (Oberholtzer, 2004; Strohlic & Shelley, 2004; Woods et al., 2009).

Although the results of this collective case study have provided insight into the communication channels used by shareholders and the marketing strategies CSA owners use for recruiting them, several limitations do exist. The first limitation is that the results are limited to the shareholders and owners of the three CSAs in Texas, which might differ from other CSAs in Texas. The second limitation was the process used to access CSA owners. No organization or government agency tracks the number of CSAs in the United States, so the researchers relied on the Local Harvest website, which had 64 CSA entries not in operation or without correct contact information. The third limitation of the study concerned the quantitative data collection process. The CSA owners insisted on sending only three email messages to their members on behalf of the researchers: a prenotice email, email with the survey link, and a thank you/reminder email. More contacts with CSA shareholders could have increased response rate to the survey.

### **Implications**

Findings from this study have potential implications for developing community-based social marketing strategies for CSAs located in or near Texas communities, particularly focused on communication and prompts as behavior change tools (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). An individual's attitudes and/or behaviors could be influenced with persuasively written messages (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). One of the messages CSA owners sent to potential shareholders focused on the purpose for having the CSA. However, each CSA owner in this study also used different messages for recruiting their potential shareholders. CSA 1 sent a letter emphasizing what the CSA entailed, the importance of supporting small, local farms, and the concept that a CSA was not pre-paying for groceries. The informational letter further explained that the produce from the CSA did not replace a trip to the grocery store because there were products the farm did not grow. CSA 2 stressed the organic farming practices used and the traits of the produce. CSA 3 focused on the farm's 20-year reputation for producing fresh vegetables and the affordability of the share.

Prompts are friendly reminders to individuals to engage in a specific sustainable behavior (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). A CSA owner should continue to email a weekly newsletter to shareholders telling them what produce they should expect to receive in the week's share. It was recommended that CSA owners send recipes through email or in an electronic newsletter as a reminder for shareholders to pick up their shares and to pre-plan their meals according to produce in the share. Prompts could continuously remind shareholders about their role in a CSA. A CSA owner could send email messages requesting shareholders' assistance with bringing newspaper, yard waste, and compost to the farm. These email messages kept shareholders involved with the CSA's activities.

After writing effective marketing messages, CSA owners need to disseminate these messages through the information sources used by potential shareholders. Shareholders reported that they

most often sought information about food choices on a daily or weekly basis. Shareholders used websites most frequently to search for information, followed by interpersonal communication with CSA members, family, friends, and neighbors. Two CSA owners mentioned using a website to advertise the CSA. It was recommended that CSA owners design a website with information about the CSA, its purpose, produce grown, cost of shares, distribution locations, and recipes. A CSA website could also be an important way to reach potential shareholders who did not live near the CSA. These three CSA owners already used email to communicate with potential and current shareholders. CSA owners mentioned email content about the produce harvested and the available items for the weekly share; however, potential shareholders might not use this information when making decisions about their food choices. CSA owners should use the messages about the cost of the share, the length of the CSA season, pick-up details, etc.

Community-based social marketing emphasizes that face-to-face communication is more effective than mass media channels for influencing individuals to change their behaviors (McKenzie-Mohr & Smith, 1999). Some of the most effective face-to-face communication activities were meet-and-greet events and social activities. Potential shareholders have been responsive to tour the CSA, met the CSA owner, and see sustainable behaviors.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Shareholders used very few of the information sources frequently when making food choices. Qualitative interviews or survey questions might shed light on the information channels preferred by shareholders when searching for food choice information. These new findings would help CSA owners make decisions on how to invest their marketing funds effectively, so they reach their audiences using the most appropriate communication channels. Additional research is needed to know what influence these information channels have on shareholders when making food choices. With this additional information, CSA owners would know what information channels to use for delivering their marketing messages. Further research should discover shareholders' motivations for joining a CSA so that CSA owners could write messages about shareholders' motivations. These motivations have already encouraged membership from shareholders, so messages about the motivations could entice similar individuals to join. As a way to assist CSA owners in marketing their CSAs, additional research is needed about their marketing challenges, development of relationships with shareholders, and needed resources. This information would help CSA owners better serve their current shareholders and reduce the effort needed to constantly recruit new shareholders.

### **About the Author**

Dr. Kelsey Hall is an assistant professor of agricultural communication and journalism at Utah State University. Dr. Courtney Meyers is an assistant professor in agricultural communications at Texas Tech University. Dr. David Doerfert is a professor of agricultural communications and graduate studies coordinator at Texas Tech University. Dr. Cindy Akers is a professor of agricultural communications and associate dean in the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas Tech University. Dr. Phillip Johnson is the Charles C. Thompson Endowed Chair in Agricultural Finance and the director of the Thornton Agricultural Finance Institute at Texas Tech University.

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