

Communication Preferences of Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers

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Keywords

Farm Bureau, social media, communication technology, young farmers

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Ricky Telg and Carly Barnes

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Introduction

For almost 70 years, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation has served as a voice for Florida's agriculture industry (Florida Farm Bureau, 2010). A state where agriculture is second only to tourism in terms of economic importance, Florida hosts 47,500 commercial farms producing more than 250 commodities, from citrus and nurseries in central and southern Florida to timber and row crops in the Panhandle (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2010). The Florida Farm Bureau's membership is comprised of 140,000 member-families that represent the state's diverse agriculture industry. The organization is headquartered in Gainesville, Florida, but there are

Research results were shared at the 2011 Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers Leadership Conference.

local offices in 60 of the 67 counties in the state. Florida Farm Bureau's mission is "to increase the net income of farmers and ranchers, and to improve the quality of rural life" (Florida Farm Bureau, 2010). The net income of farmers and ranchers is closely tied to public policy and their accompanying regulations that make public opinion so important (Kaufman, Israel, & Irani, 2008). Because the Florida Farm Bureau Federation's policies come directly from its membership – those directly involved in agriculture – having the ability to effectively communicate to its membership is vital to the success of the organization and its achievement of its stated mission.

The Florida Farm Bureau Federation carries out its mission through a variety of program areas targeted at specific groups within the organization's membership. The Young Farmers & Ranchers program involves active Farm Bureau members ages 18 to 35 (Florida Farm Bureau, 2010). This is a unique age group within the agriculture community because of its relation to the average age of producers. The average American farmer or rancher age was 57.1 in 2007, and the number of farm operators 75 years or older increased by 20 percent from 2002, while the number of farm operators less than 25 years of age decreased by 30 percent (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007).

Internet access on farms within the United States has increased from 50 percent in 2002 to 57 percent in 2007, with 58 percent of farms with Internet access in 2007 having access to high-speed Internet (United States Department of Agriculture, 2007). Previous research indicates that Young Farmers & Ranchers nationally have increasingly adopted Internet-based communication tools. In 2004, 92.4 percent of the American Farm Bureau's Young Farmers & Ranchers had access to computers at home or on their agricultural operations, with 88.3 percent reporting Internet access, up from 52.2 percent in 1999. Cell phones were used by 89.7 percent of Young Farmers & Ranchers. In 2004, Young Farmers & Ranchers accessed the Internet for a variety of reasons – 69.9 percent for accessing general and agricultural news, 60.8 percent for entertainment, 49.1 percent for family education, 41.5 percent for record keeping, 39.5 percent for purchasing equipment and supplies, and 32.5 percent for political activity. The use of the Internet for e-mail increased 5 percent from the previous year to 87.4 percent in 2004. Personal handheld computer devices were used by 23.4 percent of Young Farmers & Ranchers in 2004 (American Farm Bureau, 2004).

As a grassroots agricultural advocacy organization, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation implements programs to engage policy makers with agricultural issues in Florida. The Florida Farm Bureau Federation's Farm Bureau's Agricultural Contact Team program (FBACT) serves to establish a communication channel between the organization and its membership, and also the membership and policy makers concerning agricultural issues. FBACT members subscribe to e-mail alerts containing legislative updates and a link to a Web page that would allow members to contact their legislators (Florida Farm Bureau, 2007). Previous research that indicates congressional aides seek agriculture-related information from interpersonal contacts within the agriculture and natural resources communities only after consulting government and internal sources, not agricultural media or land-grant institutions (Boone et al., 2002).

A 2005 study examined the technological capability and motivation of Florida Farm Bureau leaders to take part in an online lobbying program, part of which was to identify participants' communication preferences and attitude toward using the Internet as a communications tool (Telg, Basford, & Irani, 2005). Research results were similar to the 2004 results of the national Young Farmers & Ranchers group. Most of the Florida Farm Bureau leadership (85.8 percent) had a computer, with the most popular reasons for use being Internet access at 86.5 percent and e-mail at 83 percent. Out of the total participant group, 81.9 percent had access to the Internet and 65.9 percent had been

using the Internet for more than three years. Participants accessed the Internet for e-mail, research, market information, and weather reports, and primarily accessed the Internet at their home or home office. Only 45.9 percent of Florida Farm Bureau leadership had visited the Florida Farm Bureau website in the past six months of when the 2005 study was conducted. The results indicated that Florida Farm Bureau leaders were split between their preferences for e-mail as their “most” and “least preferred” method of communication. Although respondents frequently utilized communication technologies and were comfortable with their level of competence in using the technologies, many expressed a preference for personal communication when contacting legislators (Telg, Basford, & Irani, 2005). No further research has been conducted on Florida Farm Bureau members’ communication technology use until the study presented here.

Internet-based communication has drastically changed since 2005. Facebook’s 5.5 million active users in 2005 increased to 500 million by 2010 (Facebook, 2011). Twitter hosted 95 million tweets per day in 2010 (Twitter, 2011). These statistics show that social media platforms are being utilized as a popular communication method. Social media, or social networking sites, are “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). Social media capitalizes on connections, therefore building a network of individuals who share something in common. The use of Web 2.0 technologies, including not only social media sites but also podcasts, blogs, and wikis, has impacted businesses and organizations because they are easy to use, often free, and offer networking and marketing potential (Allen et al., 2010).

The unique feature of social media and Web 2.0 technologies is that it allows users to generate their own content. The 500 million Facebook users each create on average 90 pieces of content each month, and half of the users log in at least every day. In addition, more than 150 million users access Facebook on mobile devices, and those who access Facebook from their phone are twice as more active on Facebook than non-mobile users (Facebook, 2011). Twitter claims about 75 million users (Gaudin, 2010), and “twitter” was ranked as the most used word in 2009 according to the Global Language Monitor (The Global Language Monitor, 2010). When considered along with the impact of other websites with a similar user-generated framework, such as YouTube, blog sites, Flickr, and Slideshare, Web 2.0 and social networking sites have potential to offer benefit to activist groups in terms of reaching the masses.

Agricultural activist groups are using social media and Internet-based communication to share their messages. The AgChat Foundation uses social media to communicate about agriculture. This foundation was created from the success of the #AgChat community on Twitter, where searching the hashtag “#AgChat” allows the user to follow a conversation about agriculture issues (AgChat Foundation, 2010). According to the AgChat Foundation website, “Social media allows farmers to create meaningful connections, share information and have constructive dialogue” (2010). Through the use of social media and #AgChat on Twitter, farmers successfully influenced Yellow Tail and Pilot to stop supporting the Humane Society of the United States in February 2010, answered consumer questions with 3.1 million unique impressions in three hours, and implemented the “Thankafarmer” social media campaign with 6.7 million unique impressions on the day before Thanksgiving in 2009 (AgChat Foundation, 2010). These numbers indicate that consumers are interested in agriculture and in hearing from those directly involved in the industry.

In addition to farmers using social media, state Farm Bureaus are utilizing social media. The Ohio Farm Bureau Federation developed a guide to social media for Farm Bureau members, which

includes a description of RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds, the newly redesigned OFBF website, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube (Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, 2010). This guide walks the reader through the process of developing an account on these three social network sites.

Purpose of the Study

With dramatic growth in social media and Internet-based communication platforms over the past six years, more research was needed regarding Florida Farm Bureau Federation members' communication preferences. The purposes of this study were to determine the Internet-based communication technologies and social media platforms Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers were using, as well as evaluate their attitudes toward incorporating those communication methods within and from the Florida Farm Bureau Federation.

Theoretical Framework

The Technology Acceptance Model indicates that people accept or reject technology based on the technology's perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989). If a technology, such as social media or Internet-based communication methods, is perceived to be useful and easy to use, it is likely to be adopted, according to this model. For this study, questions were designed to address attitudes and perceptions of social media and Internet-based communication methods.

The Diffusion of Innovations Model outlines the process new ideas or products must go through to reach adoption and implementation. Diffusion is a special type of communication because it deals with new ideas, and is defined as "the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system" (Rogers, 2003, p. 5). According to this model, the four main elements of diffusion are innovation, communication channels, time, and the social system (11). With the Internet and social media communication technologies as an innovation to be adopted or rejected by Florida Farm Bureau Federation members as a social organization, questions used in this study were designed to address potential variables determining the rate of adoption of the innovation. Potential variables according to this model are perceived attributes of innovations, type of innovation-decision, communication channels, and the nature of the social system (221). This model is valuable to this study because of the emphasis placed on the communication that must occur in a series of steps through the social system or organization, as well as the emphasis placed on perceived attributes of the innovation.

Both the Technology Acceptance Model and the Diffusion of Innovations Model were used in this study because of the organizational structure of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation as a grassroots, member-based organization. Adoption of the Internet and social media as communication technologies should be considered on the individual and organizational level due to this structure.

Methodology

A review of previous research indicates that Florida Farm Bureau leaders have a variety of communication preferences, some of which are conflicting within the group (Telg, Basford, & Irani, 2005). The purposes of this study were to determine the social media and Internet-based communication methods used by Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers in terms of personal, professional, and organizational use, and to evaluate YF&R members' attitudes toward incorporating these communication technologies in the Florida Farm Bureau Federation. This study was qualitative in nature, using a set of two focus groups to examine the communication preferences of Florida

Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers. A qualitative research design was chosen to explore the complex issues facing communication within and from a large and diverse membership like the Florida Farm Bureau Federation from the perspective of Young Farmers & Ranchers. Focus groups allow for flexibility and in-depth investigation (Morgan, 1997). A moderator's guide was developed and reviewed by a panel of experts from the University of Florida's Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.

The moderator's guide was designed to address topics concerning communication technologies preferred or not preferred by the focus group participants. First, the participants were asked about their preferences for specific communication technologies, specifically the Internet and social media, as well as reasons for personal and professional use of those technologies. The guide also included questions to evaluate the participants' perception of communication technologies used by the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, other agricultural organizations, and advocacy groups. The final topic the guide addressed was whether or not the Florida Farm Bureau Federation should be communicating through those technologies, and if the participants expressed that the organization should be communicating via the Internet and social media, how to effectively do so to meet the preferences of the organization's members. The questions listed in the moderator's guide are:

- How often, if ever, do you use the Internet for gathering information about agriculture?
- How often, if ever, do you use the Internet for communicating? What sites do you use?
- How, if ever, do you use social media for personal use, and on which sites?
- How, if ever, do you use social media for professional use, and on which sites?
- Where, if ever, do you access social media from? (computer, phone, etc.)
- How comfortable are you using social media?
- How do you incorporate social media into your lifestyle, or do you consider social media part of your lifestyle?
- As a Young Farmers & Ranchers member, to what extent, if any, would you like to see Florida Farm Bureau use social media as a means to communicate information to its members? Which sites do you think would be most effective and why?
- What are the advantages of Florida Farm Bureau using the Internet and social media to communicate? What are the disadvantages?
- How do you feel Florida Farm Bureau can impact public perceptions about agriculture using the Internet and social media?
- Do you feel that Florida Farm Bureau is building relationships with the public and other stakeholders in agriculture?
- Have you seen any examples of other agricultural groups using the Internet and social media in an effective way? What are some of their characteristics?
- Have you seen any anti-agriculture groups effectively use the Internet and social media? How often do you monitor them? How do you combat them?
- Based on your generation, is Florida Farm Bureau reaching out to its members and responding to their needs and wants?
- How can Florida Farm Bureau better provide resources?
- How can members become involved?
- As a YF&R member, what do you think Florida Farm Bureau needs to be doing in terms of Internet communication and social media?

- If you use the Farm Bureau's Agricultural Contact Team (FBACT) program, how effective is it? Are there any suggestions to improve it?

Focus groups were scheduled in conjunction with the Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers State Leadership Conference. Two hour-long focus groups met on Saturday, July 10, 2010, in Jacksonville, Florida. Participants were recruited by announcement to all the conference participants during each session prior to the focus groups. Participants voluntarily agreed to participate in the focus groups during a conference break. There were a total of 11 participants (six in one session and five in the other) in the focus group sessions. Participants were all from the Young Farmers & Ranchers (YF&R) age group of 18 to 35 years of age. There were five males and six females. All participants were Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers members and directly involved in production agriculture. There was a significant difference in age between the two groups. The first focus group was comprised of participants on the older end of the 18- to 35-age range, specifically 25 to 35. Four of the five participants in the second focus group were under the age of 25. Pseudonyms have been given to identify the participants while maintaining their anonymity.

Pseudonyms: Focus Group 1

- FGP1: Male from south-central Florida, member of state YF&R leadership team
- FGP2: wife of FGP1, also from south-central Florida and a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP3: Male from a neighboring county of FGP1 and FGP2 and a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP4: wife of FGP3 and member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP5: Female from central Florida, not a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP6: Female from north Florida, youngest of the group, member of the state YF&R leadership team

Pseudonyms: Focus Group 2

- FGP7: Female from a metropolitan area in northeast Florida, member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP8: Female from north Florida, works with social media at her job, not a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP9: Male from extreme south Florida, recently graduated from high school, not a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP10: Male from northwest Florida, recently graduated from high school. His father is involved with Farm Bureau at the local and state level, but the participant is not a member of the state YF&R leadership team
- FGP11: Male from extreme northwest Florida, recently graduated from high school, not a member of the state YF&R leadership team

Focus Group Process

Each session began with an explanation of the purpose of the study, focus group format, and brief instructions. The participants were then encouraged to give a short introduction to become more comfortable with interacting with the group. The moderator led both groups through a series

of questions posed to the group as a whole. Participants were encouraged to answer each question and converse with one another. The moderator encouraged more reserved members of the group to speak to keep the conversation from being dominated by a small part of the group.

After all of the questions were asked, the moderator summarized the main points of the discussion and asked if the summary was an accurate representation of the discussion, paying close attention to both verbal and nonverbal responses. Focus group feedback was elicited to confirm the accuracy of the main points and summary of the discussion.

The focus group sessions were recorded with audio, video, and field notes. During the discussion, the moderator took brief notes. After the discussions, the moderator reviewed the video and audio for more complete field notes of the sessions. Video and audio notes helped to clarify a few unclear quotes and offered a closer look at body language during the sessions. After the sessions were completed, the field notes and transcriptions were analyzed for common themes and differences between the two groups.

Findings

This section presents the findings of the two focus groups sessions, divided into major discussion themes.

Internet and Social Media Use and Communication Technology Platforms

Participants in both groups reported frequently using the Internet, but for a variety of reasons, ranging from basic Internet searches to visiting agriculture-related, commodity group, and weather-related websites. Participants in the first session used the Internet for e-mail communication, but several also mentioned preferring cell phones to communicate. Participants in the second session reported using the Internet to communicate frequently via e-mail and Facebook. As FGP8 mentioned, "I use Facebook, Twitter, blog readers, e-mail . . . it's my primary means of communication."

Participants in the first group did not prefer to use Facebook as much and showed dissatisfaction toward the network. Many in the first group had Facebook pages, but infrequently checked them. As FGP5 said, "I have a Facebook and all, but I never check it. I get tired of people putting stupid stuff on there about brushing their teeth." However, Google and Facebook were the most commonly accessed websites in both groups.

Three out of the eleven participants reported using social media as a means to promote agriculture, whether with their own agricultural operation or through their job. "Professionally, I maintain three Facebook fan pages, a gardening blog, a YouTube feed, a Twitter feed, and there's at least one more" (FGP8). Participants in the first session were less active on social networking sites, but second session participants more readily utilized social networking sites for professional and personal uses. As FGP8 noted, "Personally, I use Facebook mostly to communicate with my friends and sisters. I have a personal blog and that's more for my parents and family friends who don't have Facebook or can't remember how to get on there." There was a trend for the male participants directly involved in production agriculture as a main source of income and time commitment to not use social networking sites or Internet-based communication methods for professional use. As one male respondent (FGP10) said, "Yeah, we haven't really expanded out that far yet. We don't have a website or really use e-mail. (Communication is) all done face to face."

All participants had access to a computer, and five participants reported accessing the Internet regularly with a smart phone. None of the participants reported accessing the Internet in the field

on their agricultural operation. Participants in the first focus group recognized a need for social media use within the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, but did not express a level of comfort with using social media themselves. Social media was not incorporated into their lifestyle or daily routine. Representative comments related to first group members' use of social media include the following:

- "I think it's a good idea. I mean, they have the e-mails and the magazine . . . but this way it's like they're seeking you out to give you information. I think it's a positive thing they do and I'm sure they're going to pursue" (FGP2).
- "You got e-mail, text Blackberry Messenger, Twitter. When do you stop looking at your phone and actually do something?" (FGP3).
- "You become too available. It's just to keep up with people" (FGP4).

Participants in the second session were much more comfortable with social media, especially Facebook. Social media was incorporated into their daily ritual or routine. "I definitely consider it part of my daily ritual. You know, I get done with work, go home sit on the couch, wind down, open the laptop, and get on Facebook" (FGP10). "I use it for personal use in the morning when I get up or in the evening after work" (FGP8).

Participants in the first session considered FBACT a useful program, especially for older members who have adopted Internet and e-mail practices and for younger members.

I think it's good. I think it's probably working better for the younger generation. I know my dad is in Farm Bureau, and he's really good about calling congressmen, but he doesn't always get the FBACT stuff because he only checks his e-mail once a week, maybe once every two weeks (FGP2).

However, members in the second session found FBACT less effective and were less aware of the program, as evidenced by these comments:

- "I don't even know about it" (FGP11).
- "I don't think it's effective" (FGP8).
- "I think my dad gets those e-mails" (FGP10).
- "When it first started, I looked at it, and I even clipped and pasted and put a picture of us and the whole deal. I can't tell you why because they're doing everything right, so I don't know how to make it better, but I kind of lost interest and didn't do it" (FGP7).

Social Media Opportunities for Florida Farm Bureau

Participants in the first session viewed social media and Internet-based communication as positive and beneficial to the organization because posting material to the Web and using social media would help spread messages benefiting Farm Bureau views more quickly, give the general public access to information, and reach a larger audience than traditional mailings. FGP2 noted, "I think it gets the word out there faster. For example, if Farm Bureau needs everyone to call their congressmen and senators tonight because they need to pass a bill tomorrow, it can get done that way without having to send something through the mail and it taking a week to get there." Others also saw the advantages of Internet-based communication and social media for the organization: "I think the advantage would be that you're reaching out to the younger generation and you're able to spread the

word really easily and making it really accessible” (FGP10). “It can connect new people, too, because your friends can suggest you join. It’s a great way to connect new people to the organization” (FGP7). “I think they can educate a larger public. I think in the past they may have done mail-outs to their members, but not by using social media or their website, much more of the general public can come and access that now” (FGP6).

However, participants also voiced concerns that Internet accessibility is still an issue for some Florida Farm Bureau members, older members may not be receptive, and social media is not incorporated into the lifestyle of every member:

- “You may miss an older generation. Some of the older generation haven’t actually adapted to the Internet or e-mail, and some of them only recently adapted to the cell phone” (FGP6).
- “I guess people are just going to start to expect that things should be done instantaneous nowadays. I just don’t think everyone is up to that full pace” (FGP1).
- “I’d say the same for those of us who spend every day in the pasture. We’re not going to go on Facebook every day or check their e-mail every day. They’re just going to get the information when they get it” (FGP4).

Participants stressed the opportunity social media provides to tell the farmer’s story, as FGP1 described:

I think they can tell the story of the farmer. The farmer does great things already. He knows what he’s doing is right, but the general public does not, and I think it (Internet-based communication and social media) would be a great tool to help educate the public on all the good things the farmer does. Right now you’ve got all this information coming out that people get drawn to and it’s all negative things, but we need someone telling the positive side to the general public which I think is good (FGP1).

Participants in the second, younger, more social media-friendly group thought that Florida Farm Bureau should be using social media much more extensively to share information with members and the general public. “Most people are connected through Facebook, but social media would have to be an extra means of communication. I’d like to see it used to connect people with cool young farmer stories and news,” FGP7 said. They agreed that Facebook newsfeed updates were preferred over messages, and any Florida Farm Bureau social networking account should not update to the point of overwhelming their membership. “It’s good that they’re on there (the Internet), but honestly, if I get a ton of notifications, I’m not going to read them” (FGP9).

Participants in the second group considered Facebook and e-mail to be the most effective means of communication with members; however, they also suggested that postal mail indicated importance or significance:

- “If it comes in the mail, I’m going to read it” (FGP7).
- “I like mail. It’s something you can take with you and read on a lunch break” (FGP11).

They thought that social media would allow Florida Farm Bureau to reach a younger, newer audience, but could come across as impersonal or excessive. Participants in the second group also pointed out the opportunity social media provides to be proactive about sharing the story of agricul-

ture, especially in regards to activist groups or members of the general public that are disconnected from the agriculture industry.

- “Most people are on social media. They may not be active users, but if we’re not on there with Farm Bureau, then we’re not reaching them, so we should at least have an active presence. It’s a great way to bring people to your farm without physically bringing them to your farm” (FGP8).
- “I think a lot of people want to know their farmer. Even if Farm Bureau was able to do some cool, edgy videos highlighting young farmers, it would help the public know their farmer and what’s happening on their farm” (FGP7).

FGP10 proposed the idea of a virtual field day for the general public, as a way to connect the public back to agriculture:

You’d be amazed at the people that have no idea what’s going on. The local community college in [my hometown] had an ag field day. We had our big tractor and planter up there. People see it all the time. They’ve seen us drive it down the road, but they loved the opportunity to see it up close. If you could somehow make that work with Facebook through pictures or videos, it would help (FGP10).

Both groups of participants identified pro- and anti-agriculture groups that utilize social media networking sites to spread their messages. Participants in the first session identified commodity and watch dog groups as pro-agriculture groups using social media; however, they pointed out that some groups post too much in-depth information for the average reader.

They noted The Humane Society of the United States and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals as anti-agriculture groups using social media networking sites, specifically Facebook and YouTube, and said that these anti-agriculture groups have to be combatted via the same communication channels, through the Internet and social media in order to react quickly and proactively.

HSUS is huge. I mean, they’re all over YouTube and Facebook and groups and fan page and commercials. It’s just so overwhelming you can’t even list it all. There’s also a group on Facebook that tells you what HSUS is planning and what’s coming up and what you can do to help. They had an article . . . that was really helpful. It was about how when you donate to the Humane Society. It’s not going to your local animal shelter. It’s going to fight the agriculture that feeds you (FGP2).

Participants agreed that Farm Bureau and the agriculture industry should be combatting misinformation about agriculture with Internet-based communication tools and social media. They emphasized the importance of being proactive instead of reactive, as FGP1 noted:

And it’s tough because most of the things we end up doing are reactive. It’s because somebody like HSUS has put something out and we have to react to it and you just have to get a step ahead of them and be more proactive about just telling the truth. That’s basically all it is, you know, but somebody’s got to tell it and put it out there for people to see (FGP1).

Members of the second and younger group noted anti-dairy groups using ambiguous, emotional commercials and misleading information about “steroid use” on the Internet. They also mentioned anti-fertilizer groups and HSUS using social media. “HSUS does a really good job putting out things against dairies. I see it a lot with water and fertilizer” (FGP8). Members of the second group want to combat this misinformation via social media, but expressed a desire to have more credible information readily available from Florida Farm Bureau in the form of issue briefs, talking points, and electronic links:

- “Maybe equipping our YF&R group ahead of time with issue briefs would help us learn how to respond to those issues. Half of the time I can’t come up with something intelligent to put out there in response to what people are saying against agriculture” (FGP8).
- “Sometimes even being able to respond with a link back to other information would be helpful just to show what the other side is doing” (FGP7).
- “Being out and about and constantly pushing information on news and social media will help with getting the truth out” (FGP10).
- “If they show their side, we can show ours. We need to make our presence known” (FGP11).

Participants in the first group expressed an interest for Florida Farm Bureau to become more involved in combating misinformation on the Web by providing credible information to its membership. “You can always Google it, but it’s not always something you want to read, so it would be good to have a search engine from Farm Bureau where you can go to it and know their stuff’s going to be good” (FGP 2). They suggested Florida Farm Bureau is missing a large audience, and should focus on building relationships with people and organizations, engage local Farm Bureaus in social media, and provide information over a variety of communication channels to meet the needs and preferences of its members, as FGP2 mentioned:

I think Farm Bureau is still missing a huge audience of people. I guess it’s more grassroots; we have to reach out to them, too. You still have to have that relationship. It can’t all be through the Internet. You can’t live through that little device; we’re still human beings. It goes back to having that relationship (FGP2).

Participants in the second session noted the differences in outreach between counties, and suggested that Florida Farm Bureau provide a means for members to share resources and communicate more efficiently and frequently. FGP11 said the local Farm Bureau office communicates well: “My local Farm Bureau is really good about getting information out about upcoming events; they’re active in the community.” In contrast, FGP8 said, “I would say that at the local level they are not meeting my needs; I don’t get communication. On the state level they do OK.” Participants also suggested Florida Farm Bureau utilize social media to reach out to the general public and incorporate other social networking sites than just Facebook: “They should continue with the Facebook and having information, like issue briefs or an easy issue resource for us to share and give our side” (FGP7). Participants, as illustrated by FGP8, suggested resources should be made available to both internal and external audiences:

I think they need to do more external, not people in agriculture, social preaching media work. The Farm Bureau social media work I see is for an internal audience and preaching to

the choir. What are we doing to get our message out to the people who are interested and who are buying local food from the farmers' markets, but don't know anything about food? What are we doing to get to those people? So what happens? They're going to go home and Google it, and Farm Bureau needs to be the first ones that pop up (FGP8).

Young Farmers & Ranchers members in the first session frequently mentioned an organizational social media policy or information coming from the organization itself, while members from the second session focused on grassroots communication, related to policy issues, and facilitating conversation between members and the general public. First group member FGP1 said, "I think it would be good to have some oversight on it, too. Some people may get a little excited and slip up and say some things they didn't mean to. I think it'd be good to have some oversight or a mediator of some sort, like a policy." FGP8, a member of the second group, was representative of the discussion related to the importance of reaching out to the general public: "You've got to be able to answer, 'How does this apply to me [the general public]?'"

Discussion and Conclusion

Overall, participants suggested that the Florida Farm Bureau should expand its social media and Internet-based communication methods, even though those communication methods may only appeal to a small segment of Florida Farm Bureau's total membership. Concerns were expressed about Florida Farm Bureau missing the opportunity to reach a large audience of people within the membership and in the general public by not having more of a presence on social networking sites. Concerns were also expressed in regards to anti-agriculture groups using social media and the Internet to spread unfavorable messages about agriculture. However, no participant suggested that Florida Farm Bureau focus on social media as the sole communication channel. They simply noted the benefits it could provide in addition to other communication efforts. There was a recurring theme in the discussion of the need for producers to find ways to be proactive and share their story, and that Florida Farm Bureau could aid them in doing that through providing issue briefs, communication materials, or other member resources.

Even within this group of Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers, there was a difference in the level of competency and comfort participants expressed with social media, which could affect their predisposition toward utilizing that communication method. The Technology Acceptance Model indicates that people accept or reject technology based on the technology's perceived usefulness and ease of use (Davis, 1989). According to a study conducted by Venkatesh and Morris (2000) using the Technology Acceptance Model, men's technology usage decisions were more greatly influenced by perceptions of usefulness, whereas women were influenced by perceptions of ease of use and subjective norm. Results from a study by Venkatesh, Morris, and Ackerman (2000), using the theory of planned behavior, also indicated men's decisions were strongly influenced by their attitude toward using a new technology versus the women in the study, who were strongly influenced by subjective norm. Although gender differences in technology adoption were not included in the research objectives of our study, the findings certainly showcased the differences between the opinions of men and women in the two focus groups. The perceived usefulness of Internet-based communication and social media was a recurring theme throughout the focus groups, with most of the men seeming hesitant to use social media because they did not perceive it as being very useful, whereas some of the women in the focus groups expressed using social media to communicate with family and friends, perhaps as a form of subjective norm. Further research should be conducted to

evaluate whether certain types of Internet-based communication and social media are more suitable for the Florida Farm Bureau Federation and similar organizations based on gender preferences. Several of the focus group participants mentioned generational differences when discussing communication preferences. Although this study focused on Florida Farm Bureau Federation members ages 18-35, further research could be conducted to assess the potential effectiveness and adoption of communication technologies based on generational or age preferences.

A review of the findings indicates variances in responses based on gender and age. The women and significantly younger men in the focus groups contributed the most to the conversation, especially with positive comments about Internet-based communications and social media. It is interesting to note this difference in responses due to the leadership structure of the Florida Farm Bureau Young Farmers & Ranchers leadership team. Most members of the team participate as married couples, where husband and wife serve on the team together. The younger men in the second focus group were not members of the leadership team. Perhaps the older men's reluctance to adopt social media as individuals, as well as for the organization as a whole, is related to gender, age, as well as leadership involvement.

Although the focus group participants as whole recognized a need and value for social media, some were hesitant to utilize the communication channel because it was not easy to access to use on the individual level. Further research should be conducted to consider the barriers to farmers and ranchers adopting social networking sites and other Internet-based communication methods in terms of technical competence and lifestyle. Also, further research should be conducted to evaluate the ability and willingness of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation to utilize social networking sites in an effective and sustainable fashion. Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Model indicates that a series of interactions must occur for an innovation to become implemented in an organization (2003). Perhaps social media and Internet-based communication has not become widely implemented in the Florida Farm Bureau Federation because that particular innovation has not gone through the correct organizational change process. Instead of using a trial-and-error process, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation should create a social media strategy to suit the needs of the organization and its members, to ensure that the organization is using the social media channels that appeal most to its members and are the most effective in accomplishing the organization's communication goals. Once the strategy is better defined, the organization can continue to move the innovation through the organizational change process.

Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations Model also indicates the importance of variables determining the rate of adoption of innovations (2003). The focus group participants did recognize the need for social media within the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, but many did not want to adopt the innovation as individuals. The five perceived attributes of innovations included in Rogers' model include relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability (222). The findings suggest that the focus group participants do not form a consensus on these five attributes and their application to the adoption Internet-based communication and social media within the Florida Farm Bureau Federation. Further research is needed to develop a more thorough understanding of this population's perceptions of Internet-based communications and social media by repeating similar studies with the Florida Farm Bureau Federation, as well as other state Farm Bureau federations and similar organizations.

The findings from the two focus group sessions indicate that Young Farmers & Ranchers group members within the Florida Farm Bureau Federation recognize the need for the organization to

utilize social media internally and externally, and that information shared through those channels should be more comprehensive and valuable to the general public and the agriculture community. However, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation should keep its membership in mind when utilizing social media. Social media is much more interactive and fast-paced than other forms of communication, and requires a level of technical competence from the users to be effective. This form of communication also raises the need for accountability because it puts the communication power in the hands of the members as they interact with the social media content posted by the organization.

According to the discussion, social media will most likely appeal to the younger members of the Florida Farm Bureau Federation. The implementation of social media should not alienate or leave a gap in communication with older members. Social media used by the organization should supplement existing communication channels, and satisfy younger members' need for the organization to employ a stronger Web presence and make information readily accessible online both for internal and external audiences. The use of social media by other agricultural and anti-agriculture groups indicates that social media is not a fad, but a communication channel that needs to be evaluated and more comprehensively utilized by the organization. Although a portion of the membership may not use social media, the Florida Farm Bureau Federation should not miss the opportunity to communicate with a larger, younger audience and involve more people in communicating its messages. The organization can provide training to increase technical competence of social media use within its membership. The Florida Farm Bureau Federation should also benchmark social media use by other agricultural organizations, as well as anti-agriculture groups, to evaluate communicate methods to consider using within the organization.

The focus group discussion indicates a need for the organization to combat misinformation about agriculture using the same communication channels, which are largely social media networks, that opposing groups are using. The organization can do this by producing videos about agricultural production and its members, providing online resources for members to access to advocate their side of agricultural issues, and facilitating discussion between members on social networking sites. The Florida Farm Bureau Federation could also improve the FBACT program by making the information available on social networking sites, instead of only through e-mail. This would make the information more readily available to members who are social media users, and allow them the opportunity to share information about important issues on social networking sites. The focus of social media should move from a strictly internal audience to taking advantage of the opportunity to expand communication methods to include external social media efforts in an attempt to connect the general public with the people that produce their food and the truth behind how their food is actually produced. Florida Farm Bureau should utilize social media not only for advocacy from the organization, but also to empower its members to share the story of agriculture.

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