

Advocacy in Agricultural Social Movements: Exploring Facebook as a Public Relations Communication Tool

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Abstract

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Keywords

social movement, social media, Facebook, interviews, online communication, public relations

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Courtney Meyers, Erica Irlbeck, Mica Graybill-Leonard, and David Doerfert

Abstract

Public relations is the act of building and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships among organizations and people through the use of marketing and promoting strategies to build and maintain a successful public image. Currently, social media (including Facebook) are being adopted as a communication tool in public relations efforts to build relationships with different publics. Facebook is a popular social networking site that has the capability to offer a range of promotional tools and allows users to build relationships. The purpose of this study was to determine how administrators of Facebook groups are utilizing Facebook for promoting their agricultural advocacy campaigns. Eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with Facebook group administrators who actively contribute to the promotion of a cause by using the social networking site. Results indicated that administrators believe Facebook has been an effective form of communication and that people join their groups primarily to engage in conversations about agriculture and to build relationships with people who share similar interests. Overall, participants were pleased with the outcome of their Facebook groups and offered advice for future practitioners who want to use social media to promote agricultural social movements. The results of this study also led to the development of a model to illustrate how Facebook can be used to promote social movements in agriculture.

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Introduction

Definitions for advocacy and public relations both relate to actively promoting an issue or cause. Advocacy is taking a stand on issues that one is passionate about by offering opinions, suggestions, help, and support to the people in control of the situation in order to improve that situation (The Community Tool Box, 2010). Advocacy is a chosen action for change and involves working to gather support for a cause, raising money, and recruiting members of a community to be part of an organized event or program (McHale, 2004). Public relations efforts are used to build relationships with the public in order to raise awareness about an organization that promotes a product, service, or cause. The relationships created and maintained determine the success of those promotional efforts conducted on behalf of the organization (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 1985).

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In a social movement, advocacy communication is the key tool for influencing perceptions of the public; communication is a central phenomenon that enables advocates to influence public opinion (McHale, 2004). According to Tarrow (1994), social movements are a philosophy that identifies values and goals, and provides a conceptual framework by which all experiences or events relate to the identified goals or values. The most important component of advocacy is having dedicated social movement activists who promote these causes.

Having the ability to communicate through various media is the primary tool for the success of social movement activists. Social movement activists are similar to public relations practitioners because they are both known as individuals with a common goal of promoting an issue or cause and attempting to implement change in a society. Social and political movement activists use communication to contribute to the construction of public reality, to mobilize members, to establish a collective identity, and to reach multiple audiences (McHale, 2004).

Many public relations practitioners use traditional methods of public relations because they have found them to be reliable and changing their methods of communication might disorganize their system (Grunig, 2009). Although public relations practitioners were once viewed as laggards when it came to adopting new communication channels, research suggests that practitioners are more willing to adopt new digitally based technologies (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetster, 2008).

Social media sites provide many opportunities for public relations practitioners to communicate and build relationships with others and to carry out programs and campaigns (Grunig, 2009). Social media also create an environment for communities to form and for individuals to interact around particular organizations, which in turn create situations for relationship building and maintenance with publics (Edman, 2010), especially with those who adopt these digitally integrated tools in their everyday lives (Curtis et al., 2010). Relationships such as these can benefit the outcome of how people adopt messages, services, or products marketed by organizations (Rajagopalan & Subramani, 2003). "Greater interactivity promotes greater brand learning through better information assimilation and could help companies forge cognitive and emotional bonds with their brand users" (Dou & Krishnamurthy, 2007, p. 204).

Facebook is one of the most popular social mediums and social networking tools. According to Facebook statistics, there are currently more than 500 million users with active users having approximately 130 friends each (Facebook, 2010). Using Facebook has many benefits including meeting new people and building relationships, or learning more about people in one's offline community (Lampe, Ellison, & Steinfield, 2006).

Hoffman (2009) said social media use in agriculture has become "more of a business responsibility than a luxury" (para. 6). Through the use of social media tools, farmers, ranchers, and other agriculturalists are making a difference (Hoffman, 2009) because social media gives agriculturalists an opportunity to share their stories (Bradshaw, 2009). Farmers and ranchers alike can send messages or create posts in forums like Facebook or Twitter, which can instantly create awareness about agricultural topics and issues. "The value of that kind of Twitter or Facebook message cannot be quantified, but it's the type of reassurance, accountability, and responsiveness consumers are seeking and that they expect" (Hoffman, 2009, para. 8).

In recent years, several agricultural organizations or individuals involved in agriculture have created Facebook groups as a means of promoting their messages or causes as they relate to certain agricultural issues. The content of these groups vary greatly. Some are very limited in activity, while others are very active, including daily posts, encouraging member participation, asking for feedback, and posting news and other information that would be of interest to the members.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on four key theories: intentional social change theory, social capital theory, computer mediated communication, and uses and gratifications theory. Intentional social change theory is focused on an individual's efforts to bring about a specific change (Sato, 2006). According to Sato (2006), the analysis of intentional social change contributes to the general understanding of society in at least three respects. First, the analysis offers a general framework for the study of social planning and social movements. Second, it can be instrumental in developing a theory of social change in general. Third, it provides a new perspective for unintended social consequences.

While intentional social change works specifically to bring about certain intentions or purposes, social capital theory encompasses the "norms and networks facilitating collective actions for mutual benefits" (Woolcock, 1998, p. 155). Social capital theory accepts the concept that social networks are valuable, because participants are expecting advantages by gaining personal relationships with others. People take part in social interactions and networking in order to gain profits for themselves. Lin (1999) listed three conclusions to explain why social relationships benefit the outcomes of those actions:

- 1) to assist with the flow of information; 2) social relationships may bring forth influence on agents who play a critical role in decision-making processes; and 3) social relationships may be recognized, by agents within an organization, as an individual's credentials, which may reflect how well people adapt to new people and surroundings in social situations. (p. 31)

A key component of the emerging technology of computer networks and social media is the computer mediated communication (CMC) theory. CMC directly relates to the use of computer networks to support interaction and communication between computer users (Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995). CMC often affects users of this type of interaction by instigating societal and behavioral effects. The technologies used to facilitate CMC include discussions among computer users, electronic mail, and on-line databases. However, as new technologies emerge, so do new forms of CMC (Rominszowski & Mason, 1996). The significance of these types of communication is that they have the capabilities to support conversation and collaboration. Knowledge construction and the sharing of ideas and beliefs transpire when people explore issues, take and discuss positions, and reflect on and re-evaluate their positions (Jonassen et al., 1995).

The final theory utilized in this study is uses and gratifications theory. Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) said that there has been an awareness of the gratifications that media provide since the beginning of empirical mass communication research. This theory specifically studies how people use media to fulfill goals and gratifications that they expect to fulfill by choosing to engage in particular media (Joinson, 2008). Uses and gratifications theory has been used to study different types of media, but most recently has been used for electronic media such as the Internet or social media. According to Park, Kee, and Valenzuela (2009), one way to explore individuals' reasoning for using Facebook is to apply the uses and gratifications theory because the theory has a helpful framework to understand Internet usage and users' needs. Park et al. (2009) found four primary needs for participating in groups within Facebook: socializing, entertainment, self-status seeking, and information. The researchers found that users joined groups for informational purposes and tended to be more interconnected to civic and political circumstances than they were to recreational purposes (Park et al., 2009). Raacke and Bonds-Raacke (2008) found that college students use social networking sites,

particularly MySpace and Facebook, to build new relationships and maintain existing ones. Other gratifications received from using these sites were making new friendships, keeping in contact with old friends, and using Facebook as a marketing or promotional tool (Bonds & Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

Purpose and Objectives

Because social media tools are emerging communication technologies, the use of these tools has not been fully examined in regard to their contribution to agricultural communications. There also exists a need to identify best practices for using social media as public relations communication tools in agricultural advocacy. These areas of research were identified in the *National Research Agenda: American Association for Agricultural Education's Research Priority Areas for 2011-2015* (Doerfert, 2011) with Priority 2, specifically to determine “the potential of emerging social media technologies, message formats, and strategies in realizing a citizenry capable of making agriculture-related informed decisions” (p. 8). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand how Facebook group administrators advocate and promote agricultural social movements from a public relations standpoint. To achieve that purpose, the following research objectives were used:

1. Describe participants' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of using Facebook as a communication channel in agricultural social movements.
2. Describe participants' perception of success for using Facebook for advocating agricultural social movements.
3. Describe participants' advice for best practices when using Facebook as a communication channel in agricultural social movements.

Methods & Procedures

To achieve the stated research purpose and objectives, this study used a descriptive, qualitative research design using in-depth interviews with eight Facebook group administrators. Qualitative research tends to seek breadth over depth and is more focused on learning about real life experiences as opposed to simply collecting direct evidence (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995). In-depth interviews are one of the most common forms of data collection in qualitative research. They are a successful way to get people to talk about their personal feelings, opinions, and experiences. It also allows the interviewer to gain insight as to how people interpret the world (Rubin & Rubin, 1995).

Selection of the participants of this study followed the strategy of purposeful sampling. Creswell (2007) described purposeful sampling as selecting “individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 125). The researchers set the following five criteria to select participants: (1) The group or page had at least 1,000 members; (2) The Facebook group or page was updated weekly; (3) The information provided was current at the time it was posted; (4) The Facebook administrators were involved in posting information at least once a week; and (5) The posts from the administrators communicated positive messages for agriculture.

The researchers conducted a search for Facebook groups that met the pre-set criteria by typing the following words into the Facebook search box: “agriculture,” “farming,” “ranching,” and “animals.” Once results from the search terms were displayed, the lead researcher evaluated each result's appropriateness for inclusion in the study and removed any entries that did not meet the established criteria to be selected.

The researchers contacted participants first by the Facebook e-mail messaging tool, then by an e-mail recruitment letter. When contacting initial participants, others were recommended using a snowball sampling technique to identify more potential participants that met the criteria. Once participants agreed to be interviewed, they provided their phone number in order to be contacted. The lead researcher first contacted participants to further explain the study and to set up a later time for the interview. All participants agreed using verbal consent before the actual interview took place.

A panel of experts familiar with the study's purpose and in-depth interviewing was chosen to review the semi-structured interview guide. Questions were developed in a way that results would depict a more thorough understanding of how Facebook is utilized to meet communication needs when disseminating information, particularly about agricultural issues. Participants in the study were not questioned on their personal Facebook pages, only on group pages in which they served as the administrator. A pilot test was conducted prior to beginning the interviews to determine the effectiveness of the questioning guide and to make sure the allotted time for the interview would be enough time for each question to be answered thoroughly.

Eight telephone interviews were conducted between September 6, 2010 and September 20, 2010 with respondents across the United States. A questioning guide was used for each interview to ensure consistency of questions and approximate duration of interview. A digital recording device was used to record the telephone interviews and additional notes were made by hand. Each interview was transcribed then imported into NVivo 8.0 to store and manage the data. Results were analyzed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code themes and categories.

Findings

All participants were administrators of Facebook groups for social movements related to agriculture. The groups ranged from watchdog organizations against the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) to groups that simply advocated in favor of agriculture, which was determined by both the group's content and mission. Either directly or indirectly, the participants were all involved with the agricultural industry. Three were employed by an agricultural organization and administered their Facebook groups as a part of their jobs. Five were agricultural producers who started and maintain their Facebook groups voluntarily. The participants' primary responsibilities for managing their Facebook groups included maintaining the page, updating new information frequently, and monitoring what was posted on the page.

In order to gain a better understanding of the study's participants, demographic questions asked age, gender, and geographical location. The results from these questions are displayed in Table 1 along with the mission and number of members in each Facebook group. Two administrators interviewed represented the same Facebook group.

Objective 1: Describe participants' opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of using Facebook as a communication channel in agricultural social movements.

The primary themes identified within this research objective were effectiveness of using Facebook as a communication channel, measuring the success of the Facebook groups, perceptions of why people joined the Facebook groups, and communicating with group members.

All participants agreed that Facebook had been effective in helping promote their movement or cause. Several participants agreed that a good testament to the effectiveness of how well their Facebook groups have been received was the increase in the number of followers. Jeremiah said:

I believe that our Facebook group has been very effective. In fact, within the first week of having the group up, we had over 1,000 followers. Within a month, we were approaching five to six thousand. Then it just skyrocketed from there.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Interviewed Facebook Group Administrators (N = 8)

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Geographic Location	Mission of Facebook Group	Members in Group
Blake	30	Male	Ohio	A place to connect with farmers and ranchers	2,334
Dustin	21	Male	Arkansas	Created for people to share all aspects of agriculture	4,331
James	40	Male	California	A place for farmers and ranchers to connect with communities using social media	1,848
Jeremiah	22	Male	Missouri	Taking a stand against the agenda of the United States Humane Society	18,071
Jill*	25	Female	Washington D.C.	Watching practices of the United States Humane Society	167,550
Katherine	27	Female	Washington D.C.	Aim to improve media's perception of U.S. agriculture	1,631
Mark	33	Male	South Dakota	Shares the importance of telling agriculture's story	11,611
Shawn*	40	Male	Washington D.C.	Watching practices of the United States Humane Society	167,550

Note. Membership numbers were as of September 24, 2010.

*These administrators represent the same Facebook group

Participants also said they considered their Facebook groups to be effective because they created a central location where conversations could occur. Dustin said: "I can connect with people across the country that I never would have been able to meet otherwise. It's great to share ideas with people and to start a conversation that would never have occurred without Facebook."

When it comes to measuring success of Facebook, participants said that one way they determined success was by tracking the increase in members of the Facebook group. James commented: "If the Facebook page wasn't being well received by members, people would quit reading it and our mem-

bership would stop increasing. Neither of those have happened yet, so we must be doing something right.” However, participants did make note that it is very difficult to get tangible measurements of just how successful Facebook groups are at making an impact on members. The participants also noted they did not set goals for their Facebook groups prior to launching them.

Participants said they thought people joined their Facebook groups to share their own story or to listen to others’ stories. Several participants said they believed the majority of their users are producers or agriculturalists who want to share their stories. Jeremiah said, “Some people are involved in production agriculture, and they have a story to share, and they know how agriculture affects them and their everyday lives.” Other participants said people joined their Facebook groups to read the provided stories. Dustin said:

I think people who are not involved directly in agriculture want to see the stories that myself and others share. Those people really enjoy hearing the stories of others. If this is something you don’t get to do every day, it may be interesting to get to hear people talk about that. I guess that’s why people visit the page.

Participants also said they thought people joined their Facebook groups for the simple reason of loving agriculture, and wanting to show their pride by taking part in a movement that supports agriculture. Jeremiah said: “My hope is that people share the same desires and passions for defending agriculture, and so they join. There are people who love agriculture the way I do and want to defend it.”

When asked what gratifications members were trying to fulfill by joining the Facebook groups, participants said the majority of people were trying to gain more information about how the agricultural industry was being affected by positive and negative perceptions in society. Another gratification that participants said they believe members are trying to fulfill is a need to advocate in favor of agriculture. When people join groups, participants said they have a need to voice their opinion, spread the word, and share their beliefs. People genuinely want to take part in the cause and have a need to do their part to stand up for what they believe is right. Mark said, “I think it sells itself at a certain point because it’s something people are born into and feel passionate about. They want to help share their message.”

Participants were asked if they could share the overall demographics of people who were involved in their Facebook groups. While they could not give specific numbers, the participants specified two main demographic groups. The first group was comprised of people who are involved in the agricultural industry in one way or another. The other group of members tends to be people who are not involved in agriculture, but may just want to learn more about the industry and help support what is happening.

Participants use several ways to communicate with their members on Facebook, but agreed they primarily post information on the group’s wall, or main communications page. By posting on the group’s wall, the information was more easily noticed by members. Participants also communicated with members by using the messaging tool, though this was not used as often as wall posts. By sending messages, it goes directly to the inbox of each member. This ensures that a member of the group is personally contacted by the administrator or someone in charge of the group. Dustin said, “I communicate primarily through messaging. That way I can constantly remind them that the group is there.”

Objective 2: Describe participants' perception of success for using Facebook for advocating agricultural social movements.

The themes identified within this research objective were Facebook's influence on awareness of the cause, evaluation of Facebook practices and goals, and plans for future use of Facebook. Participants unanimously agreed that Facebook had generated awareness about the message they were advocating and that it has been a successful communication tool in their social movements. Shawn said, "This is a new phenomenon. Facebook has typically generated a measuring tool for popularity of media. You can instantly see how many people are thinking like you are."

Evidence for this conclusion was primarily based upon membership increase or the constant comments being posted on the group's wall. Evidence was also based on the fact that information about agriculture is being spread and shared among other key players within the industry. Participants said they felt strongly about sharing information with others and having it continuously passed on. Jeremiah stated:

I would say that the outcome has been very satisfying from my initial expectations of getting stories and articles out there to producers and consumers, about issues coming up in agriculture as well as general facts; it has been very successful, and has helped contribute to the cause.

Giving people a place to interact and respond to issues within the agricultural industry seemed to be one of the more effective practices used to promote the cause or movement. Though participants did not see any patterns or practices as ineffective, several participants did comment that it is important to not ignore attacks or negative comments on a Facebook page. Blake said, "You are not going to get a lot of respect because they will tell people you are biased and pushing your agenda. You have to be respectful."

When asked if the purpose for initially establishing the Facebook group had been achieved, participants shared that one of the main objectives was to spread the message and share as much information with people as possible. Several participants said they were most concerned with being able to speak to people through Facebook and providing as much valuable information as possible. Shawn said:

I think the biggest goal I had was uniting people from different walks of life and for people with particular opinions to not feel that they are alone. And in that respect, though I couldn't determine how that goal was going to be reached, Facebook has turned out to be the solution.

Participants also commented that they do not have any particular goals established for the future, except to continue to see success in their Facebook groups. The Facebook groups continue to gain members, and participants expressed their optimism in seeing the growth continue. Participants said they were constantly striving to improve the success rate of their Facebook groups and to reach as many people as possible every day. Dustin said:

I would say that my goals have been achieved for the most part. But I don't consider my goals reached. I am working toward obtaining those goals, but my work will never be completely fulfilled. However, it is in progress when it comes to inspiring people and creating a network in a conversation between consumers and agriculturalists.

After assessing the success and failures of the Facebook groups, participants had different responses to whether or not they would consider using Facebook again for promoting a different cause or movement. While several said yes, they would use Facebook again, others said it would depend on the cause or movement they were trying to promote, and whether or not Facebook would be effective at reaching the target audience. James said:

Yes, it's very effective at reaching the public; more and more of the general public utilizes some form of social media. However, we can't forget the in person, one-on-one interaction with those in agriculture, because many of those in agriculture still don't participate in social media either because they are not comfortable with it, or more often than not, they don't have the technology to participate in social media.

Participants also indicated that, although Facebook was extremely successful in helping reach goals of spreading the word about their cause or movement, Facebook alone would not have been satisfactory. Several participants said the best way to utilize Facebook is to pair it with other communication tools to spread the message in every way possible. Dustin said:

I feel like Facebook is effective if used along with the other applications and tools such as a blog or a Twitter page. Just having other ways of interacting is important. Facebook doesn't cover everyone, and each one has its advantages. I think a combination of different types of social media is best for promoting a cause like that.

Objective 3. Describe participants' advice for best practices when using Facebook as a communication channel in agricultural social movements.

The final question that participants were presented with asked them what advice they had to share with future agricultural communicators who might want to promote a cause or movement using Facebook. Participants said choosing a name for the Facebook group is very important, and could affect the overall success of the Facebook group. One participant said to use a generic-sounding name that still sets the group apart from others. The name should identify the group and the specific cause or movement being promoted. Whether selling something or promoting a movement or cause, the name of the Facebook group is a brand and it should be appropriate and pleasing.

After creating the Facebook group, the participants said they invited as many friends as possible. Jeremiah said to "have a cause that people are going to want to follow, ask as many people to follow as you can and then ask all of your friends to join and then to ask their friends to join."

Administrators can also invite people who they may not know, but think would be interested in joining by using the "friend finder" tool in Facebook. This is done by searching for people with common interests, then adding them to see if they want to be part of the group. When inviting people to join a group, it is also important to make sure to target the demographic audience is best suited for the group.

Participants said that, in order to be successful, it is important for Facebook groups to be as current and up-to-date as possible. Participants said they are constantly monitoring what is being posted, and that they are making posts as well. Jackson said: "If you are going to start an interactive page, make sure that you are interacting. Having a successful Facebook page hinges on involvement."

If the purpose of the Facebook group is to spread the social movement's message and share in-

formation, participants said the group's administrators should be doing that as often as they have the opportunity. Jeremiah commented:

Utilize every resource you have and promote your cause by advertising and messaging, as well as promoting through other media, such as a website or YouTube for example. Get the word out as much as possible, and make it something that makes people curious and want to be involved.

Participants also said that the majority of consumers and Facebook users are not necessarily going to care about a cause. They suggested making the page unique so it will stand out from other groups. Also, they recommended making people feel an urge to keep coming back to the page because they need the information being posted. Shawn said:

Understand that 99.9% of people don't care about your cause. They don't care how wonderful the farmers are that bring chocolate milk to your kids at school. They simply do not care. If you want them to care and sympathize with your cause, you have to wrap it up in something they do care about.

After establishing a Facebook group and building membership, participants said it is important to use other forms of social media such as Twitter and blogs. These tools are inexpensive, if not free, so using them will only further promote the cause with limited expense. These social media tools can all be linked together to reach different groups of people who may not be connected to just one social media tool to communicate the Facebook group's message.

Participants also provided advice for agricultural communicators who may be skeptical about joining Facebook, or utilizing social media to promote an organization, cause, or movement. According to Katherine, people who are not utilizing social media as a communication and promotional tool are falling behind and are putting their organizations at a disadvantage. Blake said:

Whether you are on social media or not, people are going to be talking about you and your cause. If you are there, you are giving them the face to associate with the cause, which is a huge advantage for yourself and consumers alike.

Conclusions, Discussion & Recommendations

Both advocacy and public relations are related to the promotion of an issue, cause or organization through relationship building (McHale, 2004; Cutlip et al., 1985). Within social movements, advocacy communication is essential to influence public perceptions through the use of a number of channels and tools (McHale, 2004) with more and more emphasis on the use of social media. As Grunig (2009) noted, social media provide public relations practitioners with more opportunities to build relationships and achieve communication goals. The purpose of this study was to understand how individuals use Facebook to advocate and promote agricultural social movements from a public relations standpoint.

Participants were satisfied with using Facebook as a communication tool in their agricultural social movements with all participants indicating the Facebook group served as an effective communication channel through which to advocate their causes. Participants said the Facebook group ef-

fectively increased awareness of their causes or movements, which they measured through an increase in followers and the amount of information posted to the group's wall. Although the participants did not establish goals prior to launching their Facebook groups, they were positive in their comments regarding the use of Facebook as a communication tool. Participants also did not have a definite understanding of the members in their groups, but categorized them broadly as those directly involved in agriculture and those who have an interest in agricultural issues. Participants said they believed their Facebook group members primarily joined to gather information or advocate on behalf of agriculture. The most effective method used to communicate with group members was to post information on the group's wall, but participants occasionally did use the messaging tool in Facebook.

Regarding the assessment of using Facebook to advocate their social movements in agriculture, participants said Facebook did increase awareness of their causes. They based this conclusion on the increase in members of the group and how often the information provided was shared with others. Participants mentioned that Facebook helped their causes because it gave people a place to share stories, post information, and make comments. Again, participants did not have any specific future goals for their Facebook groups except to continue to see membership increase. Many said they would use Facebook to promote another cause or movement, but this would often depend on the purpose of the cause and the target audience. Participants also recognized that the Facebook groups should not be the only communication tool utilized in a social movement. While participants were heavily involved in Facebook and its use as a promotion tool, they also used other social media tools to incorporate with Facebook, such as Twitter and blogs, to draw more people to the Facebook group as the main place to interact with people about the cause.

Finally, participants provided advice for other agricultural communicators who are considering using Facebook in their agricultural social movements. Successfully using Facebook starts with selecting a name for the group that is both distinctive and recognizable. Once the site is established, participants said group administrators need to increase the number of followers by inviting their friends, encouraging their friends to recommend the group, and using the "friend finder" tool in Facebook. These Facebook groups must provide current and interesting information to appear as a credible source and stimulate discussion among members. This would also lead to more information sharing as members of the group post links on their own Facebook pages to the resources provided on the group's wall. Facebook administrators must also be prepared to communicate with individuals who are not as passionate about the cause and those who oppose the purpose of the group.

Participants in this study did not emphasize the use of planning or establishing objectives and goals prior to launching the Facebook group. Ideally, this should be accomplished to help determine the effectiveness of the site, especially when compared to other communication tools. As more resources and advice are available for measuring the impact of social media tools, practitioners should place more importance on evaluating their online communication efforts.

The integration of the four theories that provided the theoretical framework for this study helped develop a framework to explain the use of Facebook as a communication tool for agricultural advocacy. Figure 1 displays this framework to help practitioners and communicators understand the fundamentals of using Facebook to promote social movements related to agricultural issues on both a corporate or individual level.

The framework for agricultural advocacy begins with intentional social change theory (Sato, 2006). This theory recognizes that action or change is attempting to be brought about. Intentional social change can be used by advocates to create change, to promote, to market, and for emotional

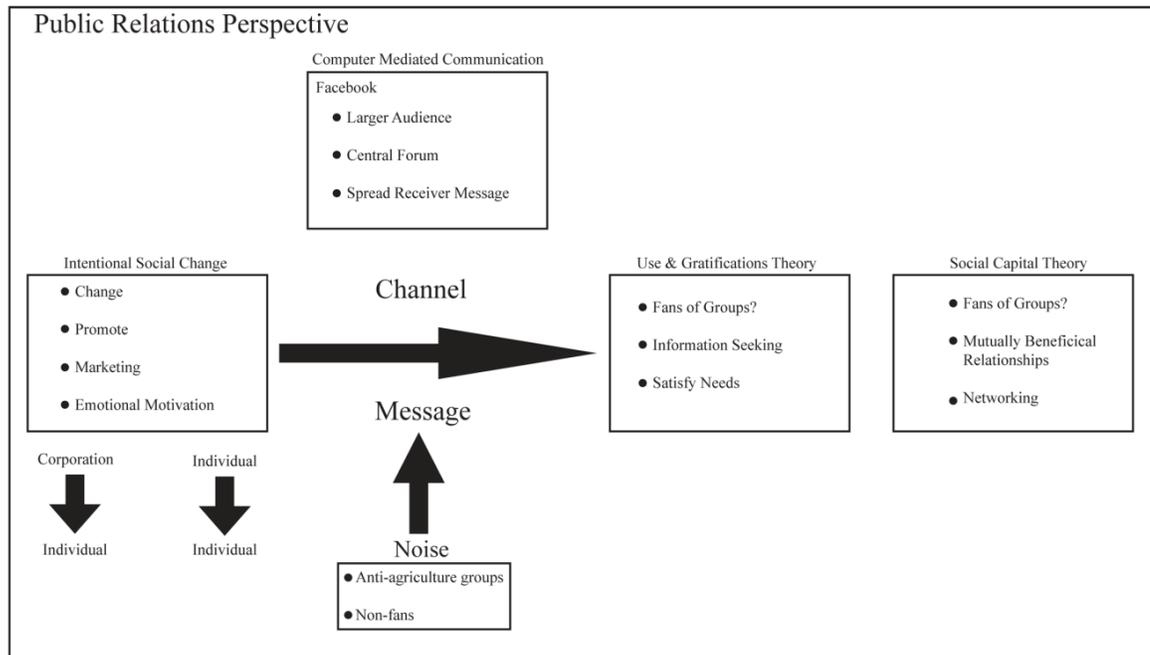


Figure 1. A Framework for Agricultural Advocacy Using Facebook

motivation. Many of the participants encouraged participation on the page and away from the page, and they said their group was a successful way to advocate for their cause. Although participants were notable to provide data that indicated their group was bringing a social change, they all indicated that positive change was taking place. As the message moves through the Facebook channel, computer-mediated communication (Jonassen et al., 1995) becomes a relevant theory because of Facebook's large audience, its ability to be a central forum for communication, and its capability to spread a message quickly and efficiently. Noise from non-agriculture Facebook groups and non-fans of the issues being promoted can interfere with transfer of the message. From the channel, uses and gratifications theory and social capital theory are addressed. Uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1974) becomes relevant as administrators determine what Facebook members want and need. Finally, social capital theory (Woolcock, 1998) is a way for group members to build mutually beneficial relationships and to gain rewards by networking. All the components of this framework help advocates understand how to successfully use Facebook as a communication channel to inform people of an issue or movement from a public relations perspective.

The exploratory nature of this study provided a number of future research opportunities. Additional research should be conducted to examine why people join Facebook groups including their motivations, demographic characteristics, what they gain from the group, what improvements they would suggest for the group, and what impact the group's messages have on attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. It would be interesting to compare the effectiveness of social movement messages received through traditional communication channels with those received through social media. Finally, a quantitative study measuring the effectiveness of the Facebook groups on agricultural movements is necessary to determine if using Facebook is worth the investment of time and resources.

About the Authors

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