

Web Site Media Relations: A New Direction for Agricultural Public Relations Professionals

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Abstract

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Authors

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Abstract

Agricultural public relations practitioners and communicators face a challenge in following the current trend in Web-based media information dissemination. Most agricultural organizations serve a traditional clientele that prefer conventional media as a source of news and information. This may result in many agricultural communicators overlooking the information needs of the media, which in turn could be a reason for the media to neglect agricultural news. A content analysis was conducted of Web sites created and maintained by all major Florida agricultural commodity organizations to determine the percentage of Florida Agricultural Web sites that provide media information, the location of media information within the Web sites, and the type of media information provided. Results indicated that the primary objective of these agricultural commodity Web sites appears to be to provide an internal communication mechanism for members. It was evident that the agricultural sites are not created with the needs of journalists or members of the media as a priority. Certainly, it is positive that there are press releases, feature stories, and logo graphics available on numerous Web sites; however, many releases were outdated and many elements of a good pressroom were absent.

Introduction

As more audiences become dependent on the Internet as a source of information, it has become increasingly important for companies and organizations to have a strong Web presence. When communicating with stakeholders and other target audiences, the Web can be a valuable tool; however, it also can be a critical component of effective media relations efforts.

The adoption of Web technology by media outlets has drastically changed the method of information dissemination and newsgathering. "Growing numbers of journalists use the World Wide Web as a reporting

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tool" (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003, p. 44). The speed at which detailed information can be retrieved makes the Internet an efficient and attractive information resource for journalists (Wright, 2001; Metcalfe & Gascoigne, 2001). Understanding the significant role the Web plays in the mass media industry, public relations practitioners have redirected many of their media relations strategies to the Web. Hill and White (2000) contend "the trend to use Web sites for public relations type activities is noteworthy" (p. 31). Using the Web as a media relations tool has been, and will continue to be, a critical factor in establishing and maintaining relationships with the media (Middleberg & Ross, 2002).

Agricultural public relations practitioners and communicators face a challenge in following this move to Web-based media information dissemination. Most agricultural organizations serve a traditional clientele that prefer conventional media as a source of news and information (Bisdorf, Irani, & Telg, 2003). The issue that may result is the tendency of agricultural communicators to overlook the information needs of the media, which in turn could be a reason the media are inclined to neglect agricultural news (Pawlick, 2001). Although public relations efforts in agriculture are improving, the adoption of Web technology throughout the agricultural community is moving at a much slower rate than other industries (Bisdorf et al., 2003). Using the Web as a way to communicate with the media can be an effective method to improve media relations within the agricultural industry; nonetheless, it appears to be an under-utilized channel to deliver agricultural information.

This study examines the ways in which the agricultural industry in Florida conducts media relations on the Internet by analyzing Web sites created and maintained by Florida agricultural commodity organizations.

Literature Review

A study of Florida media outlets found that 95% of reporters use the Internet every day (Bisdorf et al., 2003). Despite the popularity of using the Web as a communication tool, agricultural organizations tend to favor more traditional means of disseminating information other than the Internet. This study indicated that

...agricultural industries and institutions may need to move more to electronic dissemination of information if they want to stay abreast of trends in the newsroom. Attempting to respond to newsroom trends while still maintaining ties with rural audiences and their preferences for traditional media will not be easy; however, this represents one of the biggest challenges ahead for agricultural communicators (Bisdorf et al., 2003, p. 1).

Another study found that reporters often visit an organization's Web site before contacting someone at the organization (Middleberg & Ross, 2002). However, a journalist will quickly abandon a site if the desired information cannot be located quickly. Therefore, to affect media relations, an organization should not only have a presence on the Web, but also provide information that will capture the attention of the journalist and encourage the reporter to continue to contact the organization in the future.

Increased use of the Internet for newsgathering by journalists makes it extremely important for public relations practitioners to recognize not only the value of the Web as a source of information for different audiences but also as a competitive advantage in acquiring media attention.

Potentially, the web allows public relations firms and their clients to shift from merely delivering "content" to journalists to using technology to lure journalists. However, this greater opportunity will put pressure on the resources of PR firms and departments if they are able to take maximum advantage of this new tool (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003, p. 45).

Reaping the maximum benefit from the Web requires having a media-friendly Web site that is easy to use with quality information. A survey of computer industry journalists found that the journalists used a number of criteria to judge the quality of material found on an organization's Web site (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). The criteria included the credibility and reputation of the source and the value of the content provided on the Web site. "Both a reputation as a source of usable information and credibility of the source as a supplier of accurate, reliable and trustworthy information play critical factors" (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003, p. 60). In a recent study on the perceptions of journalists toward public relations Web sites, trade associations/nonprofit organizations were perceived to be the most credible source for Web-based information (Hachigian & Hallahan, 2003). This finding is encouraging for the agricultural industry, because much of the communication responsibility for the industry falls to state and national commodity associations, further demonstrating the importance for these organizations to have strong media-focused Web sites.

Although most organizations today, including agricultural organizations, have a Web presence, the content found within many Web sites lacks the necessary information media relies on for information harvesting. Emery (1999) asks agricultural organizations two questions concerning their Web presence, "What are you doing on the Internet and why?" (Emery, 1999, p. 28). While not specifically mentioning journalists, Emery says agricultural organizations need to think more about the needs of their users and structure their sites in response to those needs. Ignoring these questions, many

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organizations consider the development and maintenance of their Web site a low priority, or they view their Web site as a statement of status rather than a tool for communication (Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003). As a result, the quality of the content suffers as well as the needs of the users, specifically the media.

In addition, recent content analyses of media coverage found that agricultural reporters tend to use more opinion than fact when reporting on agricultural issues (Saunders, Akers, Haygood, & Lawver, 2003; Hagins, Lockaby, Akers, & Keith, 2002). As a result, some experts are calling for more education of the media by agricultural communicators (Hagins et al., 2002). One of the clearest ways to accomplish this is by providing strong Web site content on issues related to the agricultural industry.

The results of another survey of journalists suggested that not only should organizations provide information that the media need, but they should also designate a place for media, essentially a pressroom, on their Web site (Callison, 2003). A related content analysis study looked at the public relations content of Fortune 500 Web sites and found that only 39% contained a designated pressroom. Of those, only 62% were linked from the home page of the site. The study also measured the number public relations materials available on the sites to determine the media focus of each site. These materials included: press/news releases (96.9%), executive bios/profiles (51.3%), executive photographs (48.7%), company fact sheets (35.4%), annual reports (33.8%), company history (31.8%), news alert service for media (30.8%), company staff speeches/presentations (29.7%), product or company-in-action photos (28.2%), press release search engine (25.6%), company logos for use in publication (22.6%), media kits (21.0%), corporate profile (20.0%), quarterly reports (17.4%), material presented in archived video (17.4%), company philanthropic activity (16.4%), news published or aired about company (15.9%), company backgrounder (15.4%), material presented in archived audio (13.3%), FAQ section aimed at media (11.3%), company perspective pieces on current issues/trends (10.3%), opportunity for press personnel to register (9.2%), company mission statement (8.7%), material presented in real-time video (8.2%), feature stories written by company staff (7.2%), material presented in real-time audio (7.2%), company value statement (4.6%), company vision statement (4.6%), editorial stories written by company staff (3.1%), broadcast release (zero), and broadcast research search engine (zero). The public relations materials coded for in this study constitute the media information/content necessary for a Web site to qualify as a media-friendly Web site.

Research Questions

Based on the information gathered from the existing literature, the purpose of this study was to determine:

RQ1: What percentage of Florida agricultural Web sites includes media-focused materials?

RQ2: If these Web sites have media-focused materials, where is this information located?

RQ3: What type of media-focused material is included within these web sites?

For the purposes of the present research, media-focused materials include press releases, backgrounders, fact sheets, campaign materials, speeches, media contact information, photographs, as well as product and company information.

Methodology

To better understand how agricultural organizations provide information to the media on the Internet, a content analysis was conducted of Web sites created and maintained by all major Florida agricultural commodity organizations.

Sampling: The universe for these Web sites was identified through the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services' list of published agricultural commodity organizations in Florida. Because the universe consisted of only 67 Web sites, the entire universe was analyzed.

Unit of analysis: The commodity organization Web sites have been chosen as the unit of analysis for this study.

Coding Technique: The 67 Web sites were divided among four trained coders, who coded over a four-day period. Initially, coders coded a subset of six randomly selected Web sites (10% of the sample), together. For this subset, intercoder reliability for the data was assessed using Holsti's formulaⁱⁱ, which was 90.17%. From this point on, each Web site was coded by a single coder. For each Web site, the coder identified the URL, name of organization, and type of commodity. Then, Web sites were analyzed for six categories: (1) timeliness of information, (2) navigation ability, (3) links/additional information, (4) pressroom, (5) public relations materials, and (6) contact information.

Categories: The time-sensitive nature of the reporting business demands that journalists have access to current information. Organizations wishing to attract the media to their site should provide timely information on their Web sites. To judge the timeliness of information on the Web sites in this

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study, coders noted the date of the most recent press release and the date of financial information. In addition, if the Web site provided a date of the most recent update, that was noted as well.

To examine ease of navigation, coders noted the presence or absence of a search function on the homepages and a site map linked from the homepages of the sites in this study. While a search option and site map assist users with site navigation, external links may direct journalists to additional information needed for a story. Coders coded for the presence or absence of external links on the Web site. Specifically, external links on the homepage as well as the presence of a designated links page were noted.

Each Web site was examined to locate a pressroom and any public relations information. The items within this category were defined as important for effective Internet public relations efforts in a study of Fortune 500 company Web sites (Callison, 2003). A pressroom was defined as a page specifically designated for members of the media. Often, organizations provide a link on their homepage titled "news room," "press room," or "media" that leads the reporter to the pressroom (Callison, 2003). Public relations information was defined as any of the following: press release, executive bio/profile, executive photograph, company fact sheet, company profile, company history, annual report, quarterly report, speeches/presentations, products, company-in-action photos, association logo, media kit, company philanthropic activity, news published/aired about the association, media FAQ section, company perspective pieces on issues/trends, opportunity for press personnel to register with the company, mission statement, material in real-time, archived video, and feature stories written by company staff. Some items found in the study of Fortune 500 Web sites were not utilized in this study because of the fairly unsophisticated nature of agricultural industry Web sites; for example, it was believed that agricultural sites would not contain material presented in archived audio, broadcast releases, or press release search engines.

As a result of the vast amount of literature stating that reporters prefer a designated pressroom for members of the media, coders noted the presence or absence of a pressroom, based on the definition provided above. In addition, the name of the link from the homepage to the pressroom, if one was provided, was coded.

Using the list of public relations items provided above, coders indicated the presence or absence of each of the items for each Web site. If an item was not found in the pressroom, the coder searched the site to determine if it was present in another location. In addition to presence and absence of all items, the location (whether in the pressroom or not) of each was noted.

Another critical piece of information provided by organizations' Web sites is contact information. Journalists are indicating a preference for news-gathering through e-mail (Middleberg & Ross, 2002). Most Fortune 500 companies provide the name and contact number of a media contact (Callison, 2003). This study looked at the presence of general contact information as well as specific media relations contact information. Coders indicated the presence of a name, title, office number, e-mail address, fax, physical address, cell phone number, pager number and home phone number for both a general contact and for a specific media contact.

Findings

Sample characteristics

Of the 67 original sites, five were excluded from the final analysis because of their nonfunctional nature. The five nonfunctional URLs were: Hereford Association, Gasden Country Tomato Growers, Florida Hay Association, Florida Tobacco and Candy Association, and Florida Agriculture Association. Table 1 presents the total number of agricultural commodity Web sites in Florida along with the commodity that they represent.

Table 1. *Frequency of functional Web sites by Florida agricultural commodity*

Commodity	Frequency	Percent
Aquaculture	4	6.5
Cattle	10	16.1
Citrus	12	19.4
Fruit, Vegetable, Nuts	7	11.3
Dairy	4	6.5
Forestry	5	8.1
Horticulture	9	14.5
Industry-wide	5	8.1
Miscellaneous	6	9.7
Total	62	100.0

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Of the sites with functional URLs, media unfriendly trends emerge. The majority, 77.4% (n = 48), of sites did not contain information that indicated when they had been updated. Additionally, the same number of sites, 77.4% (n = 48), did not contain advanced navigation tools such as a site map, 77.4% (n = 48), or search feature, 74.2 (n = 46), that would make it easy for a journalist to find information.

Despite being somewhat difficult to navigate, most of the sites did make an effort to provide third party information on the industry to visitors, and the majority of this information was easy to find. The analysis indicated that 67.7% (n = 42) of the sites contained a links page, and 85.4% (n = 53) of those sites labeled the page "links." Third party information was given even more prominent placement on half the sites with links to external pages appearing on the homepage.

RQ1: Percentages of Florida agricultural commodity Web sites with media information

Thirty-three of the 62 total sites had a press or media link visible on the homepage. Of those pages, most had functional links with the majority being easy to find variations of "News" such as newsletter, newspaper clippings, etc. Of the 29 sites without a media link from the homepage, only one site had media information located elsewhere on the site. The percentage of Web sites that included a media link from the homepage is presented in Table 2. In addition, the label of that media link is included in Table 3.

Table 2. Sites with a press/media link from homepage

Press/Media Link	Frequency	Percent
No	29	46.8
Yes	33	53.2
Total	62	100.0

Table 3. *Web site's label for the media/press link on homepage*

Label for Media/Press Link	Frequency	Percent	"Other" label
News	15	45.5	
News _____	9	27.3	"And information," "and Press Releases," "and programs," "-letter," "-paper tidbits," "room" "Releases"
Press _____	2	6.1	
Media	1	3.0	
Media _____	2	6.1	"Releases," "Resources"
Other	2	6.1	"Important Contacts," "Industry News"
Total	31	100	

RQ2: Location of media information on Florida agricultural Web sites

RQ3: Type of media information presented on the Florida agricultural Web sites

In the pressroom, the most popular item was a press release, followed by feature stories written by association staff, and association logos. Company perspective pieces were the only other significant common feature, occurring in seven of the 33 sites. If the public relations materials were not found in the pressroom, the entire site was searched for the material, resulting in the data shown in Table 4.

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Table 4. *Presence of public relations materials in site and its location from the homepage*

Public Relations Materials	In "Pressroom"	"In Site"	Average # of Clicks from Homepage
Press/News Release	23 (25)	4 (7)	.1428
Executive Bios	1 (1)	7 (10)	1.2
Board Member Contact Info	(1)	16 (30)	1.0333
Executive Photos	2 (3)	12 (17)	1.1176
Company Fact Sheet	(2)	11(16)	1
Company History	1(1)	17(23)	.9565
Annual Report	2(3)	4(6)	.6666
Quarterly Report		1(2)	1.5
Speeches and Presentations	1(1)	2(6)	1.333
Product	4(5)	10(20)	.65
Company in Action Photos	3(4)	11(17)	.47
Association Logo	10(10)	18(35)	.0571
Media Kit	2(2)	1(1)	2
Company Philanthropic Activity	1(3)	5(10)	.8
New Published About Association	5(5)	4(4)	.75
Media FAQ		2(2)	1.5
Company Perspective Pieces	7(7)	10(14)	1.0714
Press Registration	2(3)	7(9)	.4444
Mission Statement	1(1)	18(26)	.7307
Materials in Video	1(1)	3(4)	.75
Feature Stories	10(10)	4(7)	1

The presence of media contact information was measured independently from the pressroom feature. Few of the associations had contact information specifically for the media, only 16 out of 62 sites. Most of the sites did contain some other contact information. E-mail was the most popular form of contact, with 46 out of 51 sites containing other (nonmedia) contact information featuring e-mail. Office telephone numbers were the next most common contact information, followed by physical address and fax numbers. Of the 51 other contacts listed, 31 were named with an official title. These results are provided in Table 5.

Table 5: *Media and other contact information present on Web site*

Contact Information	Media contact info (16)	Other Contact (51)
Contact Title	9	31
Office Telephone Number	11	36
E-mail Address	12	46
Fax Number	5	33
Physical Address	6	35
Cell Phone Number	0	1
Pager Number	0	1
Home Phone Number	0	0

Summary

Among the 67 sites identified, there were five nonworking URLs; therefore, only 62 of the sites were analyzed. The top three commodities, with 49% of the working sites, were Citrus (19%), Cattle (16%) and Horticulture (14%). This was not surprising considering these are Florida's top revenue-generating commodities (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2002).

The majority of these sites did not contain information that indicated when they had been updated. Unpredictably, the majority of sites did include sitemaps for users; however, they commonly did not include a search option. This is an important asset for journalists, because while they might be investigating a certain commodity, they may need access to specific information not readily available on the homepage. A search option provides the "user-friendliness" aspect for reporters.

A majority of the sites contained a press/media link on the homepage. Therefore, journalists visiting these agricultural sites would consider the media information to be easily accessible. However, two of the sites did not have a functioning media link causing journalists encountering these sites to discontinue their media search within this site, possible leading the commodity to lose an opportunity of media coverage. Most of the media specific links were labeled "news" (15 sites) or a variation of "news" (nine sites), which provided an obvious indication for the purpose of the link.

Of the 33 sites with a media specific link from the homepage, 23 (69.6%) sites had press releases available in this area. If these sites were used to continuously attract the media, these press releases needed to be of high quality and up-to-date. Including current press releases within a site would adhere to the standards of newsworthiness, which would increase the "media friendliness" of the site. A press release is one of the most valuable tools for a public relations professional to use in attracting media attention. Thus, it is

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critical to use the organization's Web site to post press releases, making them extremely accessible.

Of the 62 working Web sites, only 16 (25.8%) had specific contact information presented specifically for media use. This could communicate to media professionals that some of the agricultural commodities are not available or interested in being contacted for media information. This may inadvertently reinforce an image of general apathy towards the press by the agricultural industry and, therefore, hindering media relations. It may also promote the idea that the agricultural industry focuses inward on industry members, thus conveying an undesirable image for establishing relationships with the media.

Conclusion

The primary objective of the agricultural commodity Web sites analyzed appears to be to provide an internal communication mechanism for members. This leads the industry to miss out on several opportunities for promotion and public relations. For example only 22.5% (n = 14) sites had a picture of their product or company-in-action photos. Only 30.6% (n = 19) sites clearly stated their mission and only 24.2% (n = 15) offered additional feature stories. The lack of material provided on agricultural Web sites may thwart image-building opportunities for the commodities.

One of the most basic public relations functions is to build relationships with publics (Grunig, 1992). Many organizations fail to remember that these publics include members of the media. While many of these sites have places for media, the quality of the information is suspect. Nonetheless, quality of information was not coded for and cannot be disclosed unless further research specifically measures the quality of information provided on these Web sites.

Due to the lack of media materials and information present on the sites, it was evident that the sites are not created with the needs of journalists or members of the media as a priority. Undeniably, it is positive that there are press releases, feature stories, and logo graphics available; however, many releases labeled current, not including archived releases, were outdated and critical elements of a good pressroom were absent.

If Florida agricultural commodities are interested in increasing their profile and garnering publicity, more of an effort must be made to create Web sites that contain relevant information for the media. Utilizing the Internet to increase media relations is increasingly important for agricultural communicators. "Using their innate skills, communicators have the ability to refine

that tool and use it to benefit their organizations as well as the many people who depend upon them for agricultural information" (Emery, 1999, p. 40).

This exploratory study advanced the understanding of the "media friendliness" of Florida agricultural Web sites. Although this study is specific to Florida agricultural commodity Web sites, it provides a methodological base for similar research in this area. First, future research needs to validate these findings, expand this approach to other areas of agricultural media relations, and identify a model for agricultural Web site development that would facilitate improved media relations. Second, the findings of this study indicate that agricultural organizations may need to focus on making strategic changes to their Web sites to make them more appealing and useful for the media. Therefore, the researchers hope this study will encourage readers to examine their own Web sites to determine the "media friendliness" of their Web communication efforts. By developing and maintaining a media-focused Web site and using it as an additional strategy in their media relations toolbox, it is without doubt that an agricultural public relations practitioner can enhance media communication efforts.

About the Author

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Agriculture, media relations, Internet, public relations, Web content analysis

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Footnotes

¹At the outset, each of the four coders coded seven randomly selected sites on each of the 95 items. Seven sites were selected because it was originally thought that there were 70 total sites, of which on 62 were not duplicates or non functional. When Holsti's formula was applied to the seven randomly selected sites it indicated that inter-coder reliability was only 70.3%. Upon examination of the data it became clear that most of the disagreement amongst the coders had to do with page counting. The site in question had a "gate page" before the home page. Some of the coders had coded this gate page as the home page, which caused the discrepancy. In all, that particular site represented a disagreement on 45 out of 95 items. Because of the circumstances, that page was excluded from the inter-coder reliability function yielding 90.17% reliability.

²Holsti's formula: the formula used to compute reliability is a formula given by North, Holsti, Zaninovich, and Zinnes (1963). It is given for two coders and was modified for four coders. $R = 2(C_{1,2}) / C_1 + C_2$ where $C_{1,2}$ equals the number of category assignments both coders agree on and $C_1 + C_2$ equals the total category assignments made by both coders.