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Abstract

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Reaching Florida Urban Opinion Leaders: Uncovering Preferred Communication Channels

Amanda Ruth and Lisa Lundy

Abstract

Opinion leadership is a common concept in communication theory and research. This study examines the communication channels and sources of information that opinion leaders access for general information and specifically for agricultural information. Through a mailed survey opinion leaders' pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward agriculture were measured as well as their concern with several agricultural issues. This information was used to construct a foundation for an agricultural campaign in the state of Florida. By understanding the important issues that could make effective agricultural messages and the means for disseminating those messages, agricultural communicators can more successfully implement public relations campaigns to garner support for the agricultural industry. Survey findings suggest that opinion leaders do not have high knowledge levels about agriculture; however, they feel it is an important industry and have an interest in knowing more. The results indicate that an agricultural campaign to reach Florida urban opinion leaders should consist of a message dealing with agriculture's role in water quality and the primary means of message dissemination should be through print media, primarily newspapers.

Introduction

Agricultural communicators daily face the challenge of garnering public support for agriculture. Because the majority of the population is many generations removed from the land, most people have no direct connection to agriculture. Establishing the connection that everyone has to agriculture is the objective of many agricultural public relations campaigns. An effective public relations campaign has the ability to communicate this connection and the importance of agriculture.

A public relations campaign has been defined by Rice and Atkins (1989) as "purposive attempts to inform, persuade, or motivate behavior changes

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in a relatively well-defined and large audience, generally for noncommercial benefits to the individuals and/or society at large, typically within a given time period, by means of organized communication activities involving mass media, and often complemented by interpersonal support" (p. 7). It is through this interpersonal support that the power of influence and persuasion is utilized (Stone, Singeltary, & Richmond, 1999). This interpersonal power is the key characteristic in influencing individuals' opinions, attitudes, and behaviors.

There are several types of communication power; however, it is the utilization of referent and expert power in a public relations campaign that can be extremely valuable. Referent power is based on the receiver identifying with or having respect for the source (Stone, Singeltary, & Richmond, 1999). It is earned over a long period of time through hard work, diligence, cooperation, respect, and responsiveness with others. Expert power is based upon the receiver of a message believing that the source of the message is knowledgeable, competent, and experienced (Stone, Singeltary, & Richmond, 1999). Sources that communicate with expert power primarily include leaders or individuals whom others listen to for information and look to for advice. Thus, finding these individuals with this communication power and utilizing them as a source of communication for campaign efforts can be extremely beneficial. Individuals with this referent and expert communication power often have the same characteristics as opinion leaders. Opinion leaders are influential individuals who, through interpersonal communication, influence another's opinions and decisions (Wright, 1986). Many people within their own social network look to them for advice before making decisions (Wright, 1986).

Theoretical Framework

Various studies have focused on the impact of communication sources on campaigns and found that interpersonal communication had more of an effect on attitude formation than the mass media (Weimann, 1994). "The role of interpersonal relations in the flow of information and influence, as revealed by various studies, caused a growing interest in personal networks and in key positions in these networks" (Weimann, 1991, p. 268). Interpersonal communication is the sending of messages by one person and the receiving of messages from another person, or small group of people, that have established a relationship, with some effect and some opportunity for feedback (DeVito, 1991).

One of the most significant studies in this field is the *People's Choice Study* by Lazarsfeld (1948), which was designed to explain the impact of the mass media on shaping voting decisions and behaviors. This study

demonstrated that the flow of mass communication is less direct and powerful than was initially believed. Moreover, this study found that within interpersonal communication networks, key individuals were more central and influential in their groups, "often acting as intermediaries between the mass media and the public: they acted as filters or mediators through which the persuasive messages in the mass media had to pass" (Weimann, 1994, p. 5). These individuals, described as opinion leaders, have the ability to influence the decisions, attitudes, and behaviors of others.

Their influence is related to three personal attributes: 1) their personification of certain values (who one is), 2) their competence (what one knows), and 3) their strategic location (whom one knows) (Weimann, 1994). Opinion leaders are credible sources for a wide range of topics and as a result are relied on for information and advice (O'Hair, Friedrich, & Shaver, 1995). Identifying opinion leaders to whom the campaign audience defers can be an important resource for effective communication. Confirming this idea, O'Hair, Friedrich, and Shaver (1995) believe that "linking your message to a person whom the audience respects may bring about acceptance" (p. 443).

This notion of utilizing opinion leaders when communicating a campaign message to the intended audience is based upon the theory of two-step flow by Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet. This theory discredits the hypothesis that the media has a direct and immediate influence on its audience. Instead, the two-step flow of communication suggests that "the influence of the media occurs in two steps: (1) the media influences opinion leaders, and (2) the opinion leaders influence the general population through interpersonal communication" (DeVito, 1991, p. G-13). This two-step transfer of information and influence accurately reflects the process behind interpersonal communication (Reynolds & Darden, 1971).

The two-step flow theory of communication is founded upon the idea that a majority of the public relies more on interpersonal contacts, like friends and relatives, for information and decision making than on the mass media (Stone, Singeltary, & Richmond, 1999). It assumes that individuals interact in groups or networks in which they are members and their membership usually requires conformity in essential attitudes, opinions, and actions in return for group support (Stone, Singeltary, & Richmond, 1999).

The two-step flow of communication is also based on the concept that the opinion leaders in these groups or networks are more exposed to mass media sources (Reynolds & Darden, 1971; Weimann, 1991). As first presented in Lazarsfeld's People's Choice Study, "ideas often flow from radio and print to opinion leaders and from them to the less active sections of the population" (Weimann, 1991, p. 13). More recent studies indicate that

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exposure to mass media sources may not be greater for leaders than non-leaders; however, the form and quality of their mass media consumption is greater (Weimann, 1991).

Using opinion leaders as a communication vehicle for various campaign messages is an effective strategy for most campaigns. Rogers (1995) indicated that campaigns are more likely to be successful if opinion leaders are identified and mobilized. However, uncovering the media channels that opinion leaders rely on most for their information is necessary in reaching these individuals before they are able to be used in communication efforts. Several studies indicate that opinion leaders rely more on the printed word as opposed to the broadcast media on which their followers primarily rely (Kingdon, 1970; Reynolds & Darden, 1971; Levy, 1978; Weimann, 1991). "Influentials were found to read more newspapers and magazines and spend more time reading the papers. They [the influentials] are clearly more exposed to all types of print media: they read more books, newspapers and magazines than the others." (Weimann, 1991, pp. 269-270).

Uncovering the communication channels that Florida urban opinion leaders seek for information was deemed important for a public relations campaign developed by the Florida Farm Bureau and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The purpose of this study was to:

- 1) Assess Florida opinion leaders' pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward agriculture and their self-indicated level of opinion leadership.
- 2) Identify current communication channels used by opinion leaders for information and the preferred communication channels for improving communication of agricultural messages.
- 3) Uncover what agricultural issues concern opinion leaders and would make effective messages that would motivate opinion leaders to take action in spreading agricultural information to their networks.

Methodology

This study is a follow-up to a qualitative pilot study specific to the Miami research market (Ruth, 2002). The research design for this study was a descriptive survey mailed to a purposive sample (N = 525) of opinion leaders in three urban markets, Miami, Tampa/St. Petersburg, and Jacksonville, representing the three primary regions of Florida: north, central, and south.

The purposive sample of opinion leaders was chosen from positions of high profile/visibility, which included elected positions, and from an

informal content analysis of local media. The sample represented influentials from four major fields: education, politics/government, business/commerce, and media/communication industries.

A 40-item descriptive survey was used to gather knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors of selected opinion leaders. Surveys were reviewed and evaluated by a panel of experts that consisted of university faculty and agricultural communication practitioners to establish face and content validity. The reliability of the survey instrument was .95, using Cronbach's Alpha. The mailed survey was conducted using Dillman's Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000). The survey consisted of demographic, multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions.

To conduct the analysis, open-ended questions were analyzed first, using qualitative techniques (Ruth, 2002). The second stage of analysis, which forms the basis of this study, was conducted using quantitative analysis methods. The overall response rate for the study was 23.2% (n = 122). With a more general population, this would have been considered low. But we were concerned with respondents who had an interest in the subject for this study. An assumption that has been cited in similar studies supports the contention that those who responded were the actual target audience for the study and could therefore be considered to be the most likely to express interest and take action in agricultural awareness/literacy. In these cases, the results from those who responded represent the population of interest (Miller & Carr, 1997).

Results

Respondent Characteristics

Respondents for this study included 57% (69) male and 43% (52) female. The majority of the respondents were over 51 years old; 31% (38) were between 51 to 60 years and 19% (23) of the respondents were over 60 years old. Seventy-three percent (89) of the respondents indicated they were Caucasian. For careers, 36% (44) were in communication/media, 23% (28) were in education, 22% (27) were in business/commerce, and 19% (23), government/politics.

Florida opinion leaders' pre-existing knowledge, attitudes and perceptions toward agriculture and their self-indicated level of opinion leadership

The first step in the analysis was to assess respondents' pre-existing knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions toward agriculture to determine if Florida opinion leaders already have an appreciation for and understanding of agriculture. This objective was intended to either confirm or refute the notion that opinion leaders, along with their networks that make up the

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general public, do not know much about agriculture and therefore are an important audience for communication campaigns.

Respondents were asked the question "Are you aware of the economic impact that agriculture has on your region of Florida?" Just over 82% (100) of the respondents reported that they believe they are aware of the impact agriculture has on their region of Florida. Those not aware of this impact, 17.4% (21), were predominantly respondents from the Jacksonville research market (11).

Respondents also were asked if they felt they know about Florida agriculture. Results suggest that only 21.3% (26) of the respondents indicated that they felt they know about agriculture. Nevertheless, when asked if they would like to know more about Florida agriculture, 66.4% (81) said they would.

Along with their knowledge of agriculture, respondents were asked about their attitudes toward agriculture. When asked if agriculture plays an important role in their community's economic development, over 63% (77) felt that agriculture was important to future economic development. Respondents also were asked if they felt Florida's economic condition relies on the viability of agriculture in the state, and 67.2% (82) answered affirmatively. Finally, the majority of respondents, nearly 78% (95), felt it is important for the Florida general public to know and understand agricultural issues.

To ensure that the sample population possessed opinion leadership characteristics, respondents were asked five questions to measure self-indicated opinion leadership levels, one of the four common methods of identifying opinion leaders (Weimann, 1994). Three of these results are presented in Table 1 and were based on general opinion leadership characteristics.

The results of "I have influence on others' opinions and attitudes toward certain situations and issues" revealed that 68.9% (84) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. The second item, "My career/position allows or enables me to communicate with others and reach a large number of people (more than other careers/positions)," indicated that 76.2% (93) of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed.

The next question, "People in my community/social network respect me, value my opinion, and ask me for advice," also generated results that support the opinion leadership level in the respondents with 73.8% (90) respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing.

The final two questions differed in that they were intended to gauge opinion leadership with agricultural information. The first asked, "If avail-

able, how likely are you to access and use agricultural information and materials?" Only 28.6% of respondents answered likely or highly likely. This indicates the majority of the respondents are not very likely to access agricultural information. In spite of this, the last question involving opinion leadership levels was a little more promising with 41.7% of respondents suggesting they would communicate agricultural information to others if they felt it was important information.

Table 1. *Respondent's Perceived Opinion Leadership Levels*

(The following represent respondents who "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with statements regarding their opinion leadership.)

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
#1 Influence on others' opinions and attitudes	84	68.9
#2 Ability to reach a large number of people	93	76.2
#3 Respected by community, opinion valued	90	73.8

Current communication channels used by opinion leaders for information and the preferred communication channels for improving communication of agricultural messages

The second step in the analysis was to establish the current communication channels opinion leaders access for information and the communication channels they would prefer for agricultural information. Respondents were asked if current communication efforts were adequate for informing opinion leaders about Florida agriculture. Results suggest that the majority of opinion leaders, 51.2% (62), do not think that current methods of communicating agricultural information are adequate. Respondents also were asked if they learn about agriculture primarily through the mass media. Just over 33% (41) said yes, nearly 29% (35) were unsure, and 37.8% (46) indicated that they do not learn about agriculture through the mass media. These results imply that opinion leaders, if they are receiving agricultural information, are receiving their information from a variety of channels and not just the mass media.

When provided a list of possible communication channels and asked how often they access the channels for general information, respondents indicated that they use newspaper most often. Television, magazines, and radio followed consecutively. The mean scores of all the listed channels are included in Table 2.

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Table 2. *Opinion leader's use of communication channels for general information, measured on a five-point scale (1 = most accessed, 5 = least accessed).*

<i>Communication Source</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Newspaper	2.34	122	1.35
Television	2.64	122	1.39
Magazines/Journals	2.88	121	1.19
Radio	3.00	121	1.32
Internet	3.29	121	1.36
Personal Contacts	3.34	122	4.89
Billboards	3.36	122	1.25
Newsletters	3.38	120	1.24
Fact Sheets	3.43	120	1.22
E-mail/Listserve	3.62	122	1.32
Seminar/Conference	3.96	121	1.19
Technical Reports	4.07	121	1.09
Computer Databases	4.13	121	1.05
CD-ROMS	4.24	121	1.03

When asked to rank the preferred communication channels/sources for receiving agricultural information, opinion leaders also indicated that newspapers would be the preferred communication source for receiving agricultural information. This result was followed by television, government agencies, and radio. The mean scores of all listed preferred communication channels/sources are included in Table 3.

Table 3. *Opinion leader's preferred communication channels/sources for agricultural information, measured on a five-point scale (1 = most preferred, 5 = least preferred).*

<i>Communication Source</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Newspaper	2.18	114	1.11
Government Agencies	2.69	119	1.23
Television	2.62	117	1.18
Radio	2.74	117	1.19
Personal Contacts	2.83	116	1.29
Local Ag. Orgs.	2.97	116	1.22
Newsletters	2.98	115	1.20
Organizational Speakers	3.03	116	1.26
County Extension	3.05	113	1.39
Agribusiness	3.06	118	1.29
Internet	3.09	117	1.22
Fact Sheets	3.09	116	1.18
State Ag. Orgs.	3.09	118	1.18
Ag. Print Publications	3.16	116	1.18
Web Services News	3.22	116	1.27
Agricultural Media	3.27	117	1.17
Seminars/Conferences	3.31	114	1.28
Land-Grant University	3.42	114	1.22
Private Consultants	3.69	115	1.11
CD-ROMS	3.82	115	1.20
Technical Reports	4.06	115	4.96

This study explored sections of the newspaper that the respondents feel are the most influential sections that they access. The respondents who read their local newspaper, 99.1% (115), indicated that front-page news is the most influential section they read. The sections that followed are state and local news, world news, and business/finance. Table 4 includes the mean scores for all newspaper sections.

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Table 4. *Opinion leader's perceptions toward the influence each section of the newspaper had for themselves, measured on a five-point scale (1 = most influential, 5 = least influential).*

<i>Newspaper Section</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Front page	1.42	119	.71
State/Local News	1.61	118	.82
Business/ Finance	1.94	116	.94
World News	1.97	118	.99
Editorials	2.49	116	1.23
Letters to Editor	2.63	117	1.29
Health/ Food	2.65	115	1.19
Sports	3.18	114	1.44
Real Estate	3.38	113	1.22
Entertainment	3.49	117	1.20
Comics/ Crossword	3.96	116	1.19
Classifieds	4.07	116	1.08

Agricultural issues that concern opinion leaders and would make effective messages to motivate opinion leaders in spreading agricultural information to their networks

Tailoring a message so that it is effective in reaching your target audience is an extremely important step in a campaign development process (Bryant & Zillman, 1994). The current agricultural campaign in Florida focuses on the safety, affordability, and security of Florida's food supply. These three agricultural issues were isolated and respondents were asked their level of concern for each. The majority of respondents, 77.9% (95), indicated that they are concerned with the safety of the food supply. Even more respondents, 83.6% (102), are concerned with the affordability of the food supply. When asked about their concern with the security of the food supply, 78.5% (95) of the respondents indicated that they are concerned.

It was assumed that when asked separately, respondents would indicate that they are concerned with the safety, affordability, and security of their food supply; however, when compared to other agricultural issues, these three issues may not be of highest concern for respondents. Thus, an additional question regarding the level of concern was asked to determine the predominant agricultural issues of concern for opinion leaders.

When asked to rate their level of concern for a list of aided agricultural concerns/issues, which included the three issues presented above, respondents indicated that they were most concerned with water quality. There were four other issues, which included the three isolated issues, of high

concern with opinion leaders—food safety, food security, food affordability, and conservation practices. The mean levels of concern to the listed issues are included in Table 5.

Table 5. *Opinion leader's concern toward agricultural issues, measured on a five-point scale (1 = most concerned, 5 = least concerned).*

<i>Agricultural Issue</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>SD</i>
Water Quality	1.22	119	.49
Food Safety	1.48	121	.73
Food Affordability	1.73	120	.81
Food Security	1.73	120	.82
Conservation Practices	1.74	121	.81
Community Health	1.75	120	.83
Pest Management	1.83	119	.95
Nutrition	1.89	122	.88
Animal Health	1.97	120	.97
Urban Sprawl	1.97	118	1.02
Rural & Economic Development	1.98	121	.89
Waste Management	2.04	119	.99
Biotechnology	2.11	118	.93
Value-Added products	2.27	118	1.04
International Markets	2.42	120	1.01
Information Technology	2.49	120	1.07
Ag. Policy	2.53	120	1.16
Ag. Marketing	2.53	119	1.03
Risk Management	2.58	120	.99

The means presented for each of the issues were the average from all opinion leader responses from each research market. However, concern with the issues did vary among regions. For example, water quality was the issue of greatest concern in the Miami and Tampa research markets, and food safety in the Jacksonville market.

Discussion

The ability of opinion leaders to influence decisions and behaviors of others is apparent and heavily supported by opinion leadership literature; however, the use of opinion leaders as a target audience for campaigns is not as apparent. Agricultural communicators must recognize the importance

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of this audience, identify them, mobilize them, and use them in communication efforts to spread agricultural messages.

The results of this study demonstrate that opinion leaders do not feel that they know about Florida agriculture. However, they do feel it is an important industry and that they and others would like to know more about agriculture. This presents an opportunity for communicators in the agricultural industry to target a difficult-to-reach, yet potentially interested audience.

To effectively reach opinion leaders, it is necessary to know the communication channels that they access most for their information. Consistent with results from previous studies (Kingdon, 1970), opinion leaders indicated that they are primarily using print media, mostly newspapers, as their major channel of information. However, the results show that newspapers are not the sole channel of information being used. Opinion leaders seem to use a combination of mass media channels. They do not rely on one single source/channel. Other prevalent channels include television, magazines/journals, and radio. It is important to note the high standard deviation that resulted from the responses to the personal contact channels. It is believed that the large deviation occurred because of the respondents' opinion leadership characteristics. The majority of the respondents believe that they are an opinion leader. Literature suggests that opinion leaders are not as likely to access other people for information as much as mass media sources (Weimann, 1991). Thus, the discrepancy in responses for accessing personal contacts for information could have been caused by the respondents' perceived opinion leadership status.

Respondents were also asked what sources/channels they prefer to access for their agricultural information. Results were somewhat similar in that opinion leaders would prefer to access agricultural information from the newspaper, government communication, radio, and personal contacts. Despite the seeming prevalence of information seeking on-line, the results contradict the Internet popularity by indicating that the majority of opinion leaders are not using the Internet as a major channel for information. It is also important to mention the high standard deviation for the technical report channel. This inconsistency could have resulted from respondents' lack of understanding or experience with technical reports.

Assuming that newspapers were going to be a common response, uncovering sections of the newspaper that were most influential was considered valuable information by the researchers. The front-page news along with state/local news, world news, and business/finance news were the most influential sections that opinion leaders accessed for their information.

This result was anticipated, because these sections contain the most significant, time-sensitive news for the day. This result may imply that news not included in these sections is not read by opinion leaders, which could pose a challenge for agriculture communicators who commonly do not make front-page news with their agricultural information.

Utilizing the communication channels that will most likely reach opinion leaders is an important step in developing an agricultural campaign. Nevertheless, reaching them will not prove successful unless an effective message that they deem important is disseminated (Rogers, 1995). In this study, Florida opinion leaders indicated that water quality is most important to them, which is not a surprise because of Florida's water problems (Florida Water, 2001). Food safety, food affordability, food security, and conservation practices were also among the issues of concern for opinion leaders. As noted, issues of concern are specific to each region; however, for a statewide campaign for Florida, the issues that overlap should be considered for possible campaign messages.

The results of this study suggest a Florida agricultural public relations campaign should focus around three core messages: agriculture's relation to water quality; the safety, affordability and security of the food supply; and current conservation efforts of the agricultural community. These messages should be disseminated through heavy use of newspaper press releases, coupled with television public service announcements and programs, radio announcements, and grassroots efforts utilizing individuals in agriculture as personal contacts.

Aside from providing information as to the most effective methods to disseminate agricultural information, this study has implications for the overall effectiveness of an agricultural campaign. Although generalizations cannot be made from this study, the findings suggest that opinion leaders' knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and preferred communication channels for information as well as issues of concern can be assessed to determine effective communication messages and strategies. Opinion leaders can play a significant role in disseminating agricultural information to make a positive impact with stakeholders and the general public.

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