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Fresh, grown, made, and proud: How state governments use stewardship to collectively promote their state's food products

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Abstract

Many U.S. state governments have programs that promote the food grown or made within their state. In this study, the websites of 41 such programs were analyzed for indicators of stewardship, a framework concerned with relationship cultivation. Several of the indicators were observed commonly, demonstrating a generally balanced use of stewardship strategies by the programs. The websites also provided a platform to grow relationships between producers and consumers. One recommendation for managers of statewide food promotion programs, or similar umbrella food brand programs, is to examine their own websites to ensure indicators of all stewardship strategies are present. Though most websites examined in this study posted mission statements, for example, not all of them did. Expressions of gratitude to multiple stakeholder groups were also lacking on many of the websites. Another recommendation for managers is to implement some of the more creative ways programs have practiced stewardship such as giving audiences opportunities to co-create content. Overall, this analysis showed that state-run food promotion programs function as public relations and agricultural communications tools.

Keywords

agricultural communication, government public relations, local food, stewardship

Long before local food was a top culinary trend, U.S. state governments were promoting food grown or made within their state's borders. Some states began promoting particular categories of products (e.g., Washington apples), as far back as the 1930s in response to the Great Depression (Patterson, 2006). Programs to more broadly promote agricultural products and food grown or made in a state under an umbrella brand began in the 1980s, with a second wave of such programs launching in the early 2000s that used funds from the Emergency Agricultural Assistance Act of 2001 (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006). Today, most U.S. state governments, often through a department of agriculture, offer programs to collectively promote their state's food and agricultural products with a logo (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006). Typically, if a food or farm business meets state-specific qualifications to participate, they may pay to use the logo, with funds then being used to promote the state brand (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006).

Although previous studies have reviewed these programs (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006), such reviews have not focused on the strategies these programs use to cultivate relationships with stakeholders, such as producers, consumers, and others. With producers, the programs need to show their value so that they can attract and retain members. The programs also need to foster positive relationships with consumers so that they seek out and trust the brand. Other stakeholders may include retail or restaurant partners (Gibson et al., 2012), associations, or sponsors.

Cultivating relationships through websites

Administrators of state brand programs could work to cultivate relationships with stakeholders through a variety of communication channels, but this study focuses on websites specifically. Websites have been conceptualized as a medium for public relations for at least 20 years (White & Raman, 1999), and since then as tools for maintaining relationships with stakeholders, in particular (Hoefer & Twis, 2018; Zhu & Han, 2014). Relevant to this research, previous work has found connections between the use of state government websites and trust in government (Hong, 2013). Past research also demonstrates that producers and agricultural organizations use digital platforms such as websites, blogs, and social media to connect with consumers (Meyers et al., 2011; Moore et al., 2015). Consequently, in addition to using digital communication to cultivate relationships with producers and consumers, state food promotion programs may help build relationships *between* consumers and producers. As few individuals in the U.S. are involved in food production, fostering understanding between consumers and producers is key (Irani & Doerfert, 2013).

Statewide food promotion programs

Research about local food consumption points toward a logic behind why statewide brands may be popular with consumers. For one, research finds that consumers will give local food a premium (Darby et al., 2008). Furthermore, many consumers, though not all, think of their state's boundaries as a way to define "local" (Conner et al., 2010; Durham, et al., 2009). Consequently, a logo indicating that a product is made or grown within a state's boundaries could signal to a consumer that a product is local and therefore deserving of a premium. Furthermore, research finds that consumers are more likely to use labels if they have prior knowledge about what those labels mean (Valor et al., 2014), suggesting that if statewide brands

communicate effectively with consumers about what they stand for, they may increase the odds that consumers will seek out or give preference to products with the logo.

A limited number of studies have examined statewide food brands specifically, but these studies do provide at least initial evidence that the brands have the potential to increase consumer awareness about the products they represent, make those products easier to identify for consumers, and/or help producers increase sales or premiums. For example, a survey examined consumer awareness of five statewide food promotion brands (Onken & Bernard, 2010). Among consumers surveyed, awareness of their state's food brands varied between about 50% and 85%, depending on the state (Onken & Bernard, 2010). Complimentary results were found in work from Canada, where a consumer survey from Nova Scotia revealed that consumers felt that the provincial brand, *Select Nova Scotia*, made it easier for them to identify local food and that it motivated them to purchase it (Knight, 2013). When it comes to increasing sales or premiums for producers, two additional studies offer support. One study confirmed through a choice experiment that consumers in Arizona would pay a premium for a product with the *Arizona Grown* logo, compared to a local product without the label (Nganje et al., 2011). Another study, an evaluation of the *Kentucky Proud* program, found that a majority of participating farmers who were surveyed agreed that the *Kentucky Proud* program was valuable to them, with a strong minority of farmers (38% of mid-sized farmers and 28% of all others) reporting that the program increased their sales (Hullinger & Tanaka, 2015).

Additional evidence of program success comes from statistics publicly shared by the programs. For example, text on the *From the Land of Kansas* program website notes that, "consumers are 81% more likely to buy a product that carries the From the Land of Kansas logo" (From the Land of Kansas, 2021). On the producer end, text from the *Idaho Preferred* annual report reveals, "64% of members report increased sales due to Idaho Preferred Membership, some as much as 20%" (Idaho Preferred, 2021).

In sum, these studies demonstrate the potential for positive outcomes of the state brands, though additional work is needed to more conclusively show their impact. Nevertheless, the brands are worth examining given these initial results, broader work supporting consumer interest in local food, and the fact that state governments have clearly invested resources in the brands. Understanding more about the strategies these brands use to cultivate relationships with these stakeholders could lead to recommendations that help them achieve further success.

Conceptual framework

As this work seeks to understand how state governments use statewide food promotion programs to cultivate relationships with stakeholders, the framework for this analysis is stewardship. Stewardship is the fifth step in the public relations process (Kelly, 2001). The steps preceding stewardship include 1) researching the situation and target audiences, 2) identifying objectives that address target behaviors and outcomes that an organization wishes to achieve, 3) implementing programming, such as campaigns or events, and 4) evaluating whether the objectives were achieved (Kelly, 2001; Waters & Sevick Bortree, 2010). Stewardship, the fifth step, involves maintaining strong relationships with publics, after relationships have been established (Kelly, 2001; Waters & Bortree, 2010).

Kelly (2001) defined the "elements" of stewardship as reciprocity, relationship nurturing, reporting, and responsibility. These elements have also been called "dimensions" (Pressgrove, 2017), as they represent unique concepts, and "strategies" (Waters, 2009), as each dimension or

element is associated with actions or practices that organizations can take. Pressgrove (2017) provided definitions and indicators for each of the dimensions in an effort to reduce conceptual overlap between them. Pressgrove (2017) separated reciprocity into recognition and regard; recognition means that the organization appreciates supporters publicly, and regard means that the organization appreciates supporters personally. Relationship nurturing means that an organization maintains consistent and open communication with publics, and offers publics options to engage in ways that support its mission (Pressgrove, 2017). Reporting means that an organization demonstrates that it meets ethical and legal requirements, such as by making policies public (Pressgrove, 2017). Responsibility means that an organization acts to fulfill its mission, with a potential indicator being storytelling content that shows how the organization uses resources (Pressgrove, 2017).

Research confirms connections between the key measures of stewardship and relationship outcomes. Multiple survey studies of donors and volunteers have found favorable perceptions of an organization's stewardship strategies to be positively associated with variables representing Hon and Grunig's (1999) indicators of relationship outcomes of trust, satisfaction, commitment, and "control mutuality," or balance of power (Harrison, 2018; Pressgrove & McKeever, 2016; Waters, 2009). In a study about employees and employers, Waters et al. (2013) found similar results.

Germane to this study is previous work that confirms stewardship strategies are used and identifiable on websites (Pressgrove & Kim, 2018; Waters et al., 2011), and that some organizations use stewardship more comprehensively on websites than through social ages media (Waters et al., 2011). It may be that when it comes to stewardship, websites have certain advantages over social media platforms in that websites are less vulnerable to misuse, organizations have more control over their websites, and websites can host more in-depth content (Hoefer & Twis, 2018; Waters et al., 2011).

Purpose and research question

The purpose of this study was to analyze the websites of U.S. state government programs that promote food products grown or made within their state through the lens of stewardship in order to generate insights about the underlying communication strategies of these programs, and to increase understanding about how U.S. state governments cultivate relationships with key stakeholders. Consequently, the research question was:

How do U.S. state governments practice stewardship on the websites of their food promotion programs?

Materials and methods

Study inclusion

Program websites were included in the study if the programs were managed entirely or partially by a state government and the programs promoted food products grown or made in the state with a logo or slogan. Having a formal membership process was not required for inclusion. Websites of programs were excluded if only a single food category (e.g., dairy) was promoted. If a program's website promoted non-food products, in addition to food products, it was included. To confirm the program was run by a state government, the contact information on the website was

checked for a state government connection. Other information, such as content on pages describing the program and/or state seals, was also used to confirm that programs were run by a state government.

To locate the websites, the websites listed in two previous reviews of statewide food brands (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006) were used as a point of departure. Not all of the programs mentioned in those studies were analyzed, as some had been discontinued, and some did not meet the aforementioned criteria because they were run by nonprofits or associations instead of state governments (as stated on their websites), or they only promoted a single category of food product. For states without a qualifying website after the initial search, additional searching was done using terms common to other programs. Search terms included "[state name] food brand," "[state name] local food," "[state name] grown," "[state name] made," "[state name] fresh," and [state name] proud." Nine states were ultimately not included because qualifying websites could not be confirmed: Michigan, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Vermont, Washington, Oregon, and Wyoming.

In total, 41 states had qualifying program websites, as shown in Table 1. Of note is that in some cases, programs promoted multiple related brands together on their websites (e.g., *Arkansas Grown* and *Arkansas Made*). In these cases, Table 1 only lists the name which appears to be primary program name. Virginia used separate websites to promote fresh state-grown products (*Virginia Grown*), and "specialty foods and beverages" (*Virginia's Finest*). Table 1 lists both of these sites. As the two websites are both run by the same state, they were coded together as one unit for the state.

Table 1

State-run websites promoting food grown and/or made within a state

State	Program name	Website
Alabama	Buy Alabama's Best	https://buyalabamasbest.org/
Alaska	Buy Alaska Grown	http://www.buyalaskagrown.com/
Arizona	Arizona Grown	https://azgrown.azda.gov/
Arkansas	Arkansas Grown	https://www.arkansasgrown.org/
California	California Grown	https://californiagrown.org/
Colorado	Colorado Proud	https://www.colorado.gov/pacific/agmarkets/colorado-proud
Connecticut	Connecticut Grown	portal.ct.gov/DOAG/Marketing/Marketing/Connecticut-Grown-Program
Delaware	Delaware Grown	https://delawaregrown.com/
Florida	Fresh from Florida	https://www.followfreshfromflorida.com/
Georgia	Georgia Grown	https://georgiagrown.com/
Hawaii	Made in Hawaii with Aloha	https://hdoa.hawaii.gov/madewithaloha/
Idaho	Idaho Preferred	https://www.idahopreferred.com/
Illinois	Illinois Product	https://www2.illinois.gov/sites/agr/Assistance/LogoPrograms/Pages/default.aspx
Indiana	Indiana Grown	https://www.indianagrown.org/
Iowa	Choose Iowa	https://www.chooseiowa.com/
Kansas	From the Land of Kansas	fromthelandofkansas.com

Table 1. (continued)

State	Program name	Website
Kentucky	Kentucky Proud	http://www.kyproud.com/
Louisiana	Certified Louisiana	https://certifiedlouisiana.org/
Maine	Real Maine	https://www.getrealmaine.com/
Maryland	Maryland's Best	https://marylandsbest.maryland.gov/
Massachusetts	Massachusetts grown...and fresher!	https://www.mass.gov/orgs/massachusetts-grownand-fresher
Minnesota	Minnesota Grown	https://minnesotagrown.com/
Mississippi	Genuine MS	https://genuinems.com/membership/guidelines/
Missouri	Missouri Grown	https://agrimissouri.com/
Montana	Made in Montana	https://madeinmontanausa.com/
Nebraska	Nebraska Our Best to You	https://ourbesttoyou.nebraska.gov/
New Jersey	Jersey Fresh	https://findjerseyfresh.com/
New Mexico	Taste the Tradition	https://www.nmda.nmsu.edu
New York	New York State Grown & Certified	https://certified.ny.gov/
North Carolina	Got to be NC	https://gottobenc.com/
North Dakota	Pride of Dakota	https://www.prideofdakota.nd.gov/
Ohio	Ohio Proud	http://ohioproud.org/
Oklahoma	Made in Oklahoma	https://www.madeinoklahoma.net/
Pennsylvania	PA Preferred	https://www.agriculture.pa.gov/Business_Industry/pa_preferred/Pages/default.aspx
South Carolina	Certified South Carolina	https://certifiedsc.com/
Tennessee	Pick Tennessee Products	https://www.picktnproducts.org/
Texas	GO TEXAN	http://www.gotexan.org/
Utah	Utah's Own	https://utahsown.org/
Virginia	Virginia's Finest	http://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vafinest.com/
	Virginia Grown	https://www.vdacs.virginia.gov/vagrown/
West Virginia	West Virginia Grown	https://agriculture.wv.gov/ag-business/west-virginia-grown/
Wisconsin	Something Special *from* Wisconsin	https://somethingspecialwi.com/

Note: Shortly after the review of these websites was completed, New Mexico's *Taste the Tradition* program moved to https://www.elevatenmag.com/logo-program/

Coding strategy and procedure

Following other studies that have coded for the presence or absence of stewardship dimensions on different types of websites (e.g., Pressgrove & Kim, 2018; Waters et al., 2011), statewide food promotion program websites of U.S. states were analyzed for the presence or absence of indicators representing four stewardship dimensions: recognition, relationship nurturing, reporting, and responsibility. The websites were not coded for "regard" as it is a measure of personal thanks (Pressgrove, 2017). The unit of analysis was multiple pages, with all pages of the

websites coded if the websites were stand-alone program websites. In cases where the program information was nested within other governmental pages, all pages relevant to the program or brand were analyzed.

The main instrument was an electronic codebook form created through Qualtrics. The coding scheme was developed to include the indicators identified by Pressgrove (2017) and further refined to fit this specific context with two to three indicators per stewardship dimension after an initial scan of websites and discussion between coders. For example, as this research took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, information about the COVID-19 pandemic was included as an indicator of "responsibility."

For the stewardship dimension of recognition, coders searched for the presence or absence of two indicators. One was listings about program members or participants. A checklist of possible ways participants might be listed on the website (e.g., a business profile, contact information, searchable map) was provided as a guide. A second indicator of recognition was words of gratitude. Coders searched the websites for the words such as "thank" or "appreciate" and then copied and pasted the text into an open field in the codebook form.

For the stewardship dimension of relationship nurturing, coders examined the presence or absence of three indicators. One was a feedback form, and the second was connections to social media such as embedded social media content and/or links to the program's social media platforms. Third, for relationship nurturing, coders searched for opportunities to participate with the programs and a checklist was provided as a guide. The checklist included options such as a newsletter sign up form, donation form, information about events, etc.

For the stewardship dimension of reporting, coders searched for the presence or absence of two indicators. The coders searched the websites for rules about participation (e.g., membership eligibility or brand license agreements), and then copied and pasted key rules into an open field in the codebook form. Next, coders searched for elements of a newsroom with a checklist to guide them that included options such as press releases, links to stories in the media about the brand, and news-focused blog posts.

For the dimension of responsibility, coders searched for the presence of three indicators. The first was a mission statement, and coders copied and pasted the statement into an open field in the codebook. Text describing the program's "vision" was also acceptable. Another indicator of responsibility was information about COVID-19. Coders searched the websites for the words "COVID-19" or "coronavirus," and copied and pasted the text into an open field in the codebook form. Third, as an indicator of responsibility, coders searched for food and/or agricultural resources with a checklist to guide them which included items such as recipes, a seasonal produce chart, best practices for marketing, grant application information, etc.

In addition, coders had an open field to qualitatively note observations. These observations included exceptional website features, common practices observed, and problems encountered on the websites (e.g., broken links).

The lead researcher coded all of the program websites, and archived content by printing all website pages as PDFs. A graduate research assistant coded 20% of the program websites. The coding took place in the autumn of 2020. To test reliability, Gwet's reliability coefficient was calculated as data appeared to be unbalanced in some cases (e.g., all of the sites contained participant listings). Gwet's reliability coefficient can help avoid one of the pitfalls of the more commonly used Cohen's kappa, as kappa can produce statistics that show low reliability even when there is high agreement between coders if the data is unbalanced (Neuendorf, 2017, pp. 177-178). An index for each of the four stewardship dimensions was created using the indicators,

with the coefficients being .69 for recognition, .71 for relationship nurturing, .66 for reporting, and .69 for responsibility. For coefficients that account for chance, such as Gwet's reliability coefficient, agreement at .60 or greater is generally considered acceptable (Neuendorf, 2017, p. 168). Before analyzing the data, any disagreements between the coders in the mutually coded content were resolved through discussion and re-examining the websites.

Results

Forty-one state governments had statewide food promotion programs with qualifying websites. Ninety-five percent of the program websites examined had at least one indicator from each of the four stewardship dimensions. The four most commonly observed indicators each represented a different stewardship dimension. This is shown in Table 2, along with examples for each indicator. The most frequently observed indicators included participant listings (an indicator of recognition), connections to social media (an indicator of relationship nurturing), rules for participation (an indicator of reporting), and food and/or agricultural resources (an indicator of responsibility). At the same time, few program websites had content diverse enough to touch on all 10 indicators – only two program websites, *From the Land of Kansas* and *Made in Montana*, did so.

Table 2
Presence of stewardship indicators on the state-run food promotion program websites

Dimension	Indicator	Example	Present (%)
Recognition	Participant listings: The website included information about the program members.	The *Utah's Own* producer directory included a business profile, contact information, photos, and customer reviews.	100%
	Words of gratitude: Words that express gratitude to stakeholders, such as "thank" and "appreciate," were present on the website.	On their homepage, *New Jersey Fresh* prominently displayed the text, "THANK YOU NJ FARMERS."	48.8%
Relationship nurturing	Connections to social media: The website connected users to its social media pages.	*Pick Tennessee Products* embedded Tweets and Facebook posts on their homepage.	95.1%
	Participation opportunities: The website offered individuals ways to participate further in the program.	The *Georgia Grown* website offered instructions to add a recipe to their site with the text, "Submit a Recipe. Family favorite or something new (and delicious) that you dreamed up yourself. Let's dish!"	75.6%
	Feedback form: The website had a feedback form.	The *Something Special from Wisconsin* "Contact Us" page included a feedback form and the text, "Send us your questions or comments using the form below. We will respond promptly to your inquiry."	46.3%

Table 2. (continued)

Dimension	Indicator	Example	Present (%)
Reporting	Rules for participation: Rules about membership eligibility or brand license agreements were posted.	To participate in *Ohio Proud*, products need to be "at least 50% raised, grown, or processed in Ohio and meet all inspection and labeling requirements."	87.8%
	Newsroom elements: News about the program was posted on the website.	*Minnesota Grown* highlighted when their members were featured in the media, in addition to their own news, in a "News" section on their website.	61.0%
Responsibility	Food and/or agricultural resources: The website hosted or linked to resources about food and agriculture.	*Idaho Preferred* offered a produce calendar for users to see when different products are in season, with content about how to select, store, and use the products.	90.2%
	Mission statement: A mission or vision statement was present on the website	*PA Preferred* posted a mission statement that read, "The mission of PA Preferred is to create opportunities for Pennsylvanians to easily identify and purchase locally grown and processed items, which in turn benefits Pennsylvania's farmers, agribusinesses and economy."	85.4%
	COVID-19 information: The website offered information about the COVID-19 pandemic.	The *Maryland's Best* website provided information about purchasing Maryland seafood during the COVID-19 pandemic, posting, "Maryland farmers and seafood companies doing direct sales to replace markets unavailable during the COVID-19 pandemic are listed in the maps on this page, along with Maryland farmers markets."	65.9%

Recognition

As shown in Table 2, the most commonly observed indicator was participant listings, an indicator of recognition. This indicator was observed on all of the program websites. There was quite a bit of variation in the quality of listings, however. Some websites simply shared a business name and website, while others, like *Utah's Own*, featured detailed profiles with photos, videos and recommendations. Some websites also offered more advanced options in their search tools to help consumers find members, such as product categories and locations.

In contrast, the other indicator representing recognition – words of gratitude – was observed on just under 50% of the program websites. An example of recognition was a statement from the Secretary of Agriculture displayed on the *Delaware Grown* website that said, "I want to thank you for supporting Delaware's family farms." Even when websites did include grateful language, generally only one stakeholder group (e.g., sponsors, farmers, consumers) was thanked on the website.

Relationship nurturing

Connections to social media was an indicator of relationship nurturing, and this was observed on 95% of the program websites. A second indicator for relationship nurturing, participation opportunities, was also observed frequently, on about 75% of the program websites. Participation opportunities included links or forms to sign up for newsletters, calendars with public event information, and brand-related items available for purchase. Several websites also offered more unique ways to engage. For example, the *Indiana Grown* website featured guides for individuals to use as they visited participating businesses. Individuals could then comment about their experiences on the website. Another unique option came from the *Missouri Grown* website, which featured information about using *Missouri Grown* products in fundraisers. Directions and a product catalogue were posted to facilitate that opportunity. A third indicator of relationship nurturing was a feedback form. Fewer than half of the program websites (46%) included one.

Reporting

Rules about participation (e.g., membership eligibility or brand license agreements) were observed on 88% of the program websites. Often, rules specified that agricultural products must be completely grown or raised within a state. For manufactured or processed food products, there was more nuance, with some rules specifying that a minimum proportion of product ingredients must have originated within the state. Alternatively, some programs specified that a minimum proportion of product value must have originated within the state. Sometimes the rules also specified that the business be headquartered in the state and/or that the state name appear on the product label.

A second indicator of reporting was elements of a newsroom, which 61% of the program websites offered. Most often the newsroom elements were press releases or news-focused blog posts. Some websites linked to news coverage of the brand or members. The *Minnesota Grown* program, for example, posted links to stories or videos of their members when they were featured in the media. Occasionally websites offered news in other formats, such as the podcast "Cultivation Station" by *Colorado Proud*.

Responsibility

Resources about food and agriculture, an indicator of responsibility, were observed on 90% of the program websites. Resources were aimed at both consumers and brand members. For consumers, websites commonly featured recipes and seasonal produce charts. Storytelling text or videos helping consumers get to know members were also a commonly featured resource. Information about government-initiatives such as farm-to-school activities and food assistance options were also posted frequently. Resources geared toward members highlighted grant opportunities or offered information in the form of toolkits, links, or factsheets about food safety, risk management, or marketing. Less commonly, programs posted information for producers about connecting with wholesale buyers, workshop videos or sample graphics. Several websites contained "members only" tabs with content that was not publicly accessible, so other types of resources may have been offered to members, as well.

A second indicator of responsibility, mission statements, were observed on 85% of the program websites. Mission statements focused on educating consumers, increasing access to

products grown or made in the state, and/or supporting farms, food processors, and food manufacturers in the state.

A third responsibility indictor considered content related to COVID-19, with 66% of the program websites including information about the COVID-19 pandemic. On some of the websites, information about COVID-19 was generic, such as a header with a link to click on to find up-to-date information from the state. Other information included event cancelations, or warnings about delays in service. Some websites posted food-specific information about COVID-19, however, such as information about how the virus was impacting farmers markets, or where individuals could seek local food safely. For example, *Kentucky Proud* shared information about restaurant safety protocol, posting, "As dine-in restrictions due to COVID-19 start to ease, many Kentucky Proud Buy Local restaurants continue to offer carry-out, curbside pick-up, and/or delivery." Similarly, the *Maryland's Best's* website notified consumers of seafood companies working to provide seafood despite market closures with the text, "Maryland farmers and seafood companies doing direct sales to replace markets unavailable during the COVID-19 pandemic are listed in the maps on this page, along with Maryland farmers markets."

Discussion

This study sought to explore how U.S. states practiced stewardship on the websites of their statewide food promotion programs. Forty-one states had statewide food promotion program websites, which confirms previous work that demonstrated that these programs exist in most states (Onken & Bernard, 2010; Patterson, 2006). The fact that nine states did not have qualifying program websites, however, underscores that in some states, the priority may be promoting specific product categories rather than promoting products with an umbrella brand, and/or that non-governmental entities, such as associations or nonprofits, are managing the umbrella brands instead. It is also possible that some of the states without qualifying websites do have programs, but without a web presence detectable by the search methods used in this study.

The qualifying websites were analyzed for 10 indicators across four dimensions of stewardship: recognition, relationship nurturing, reporting, and responsibility. As the program websites for most states had at least one indicator from each of the four stewardship dimensions, this suggests that state governments use stewardship strategies in a balanced way. The fact that participant listings were observed on all program websites is not surprising, as promoting participating businesses is a key benefit that the programs can offer members. Programs also clearly recognized the value of social media, with connections to social media present on almost all (95%) of the program websites. This point is important, as small farm and food business that lack their own social media pages, or have a weak social media presence, may benefit from the ability of state-run programs to amplify their presence on social media. For example, in an examination of members of the *GO TEXAN* program, Gibson et al. (2012) found that 50% of members did not have a Facebook presence.

The fact that most (90%) of the programs observed in this study provided food and/or agricultural resources on their websites demonstrates how the websites can function as a public relations tool, as informing citizens about important issues is a key function of government public relations (Kim & Cho, 2019). For example, some of websites provided information about accessing food during the COVID-19 pandemic, in turn helping citizens and businesses cope with the crisis. Offering helpful information about food and agriculture may also build trust between the programs and stakeholders, as Hong (2013) found a connection between trust and

usage of state government websites for information. Furthermore, government agencies likely play a special role when it comes to sharing information about agriculture, as a national survey found that awareness of government agencies was generally greater than awareness of nonprofits or associations tasked with communicating about agriculture or natural resources (Settle et al., 2017).

The websites of these programs also provide an example of how governments can use communication to build relationships between stakeholders. Many of the program websites provided contact information for participating farms, farmers markets, food manufactures, food processors, and/or retail outlets, and this information could facilitate an individual's ability to connect directly with farm and food businesses in their community. Some programs also incorporated storytelling text and videos featuring people representing these local businesses and/or local chefs using local products, which may help individuals get to know the food and farm businesses in their community better. As research finds that local food is supported by people across political ideologies (Witzling et al., 2019), these government programs may also foster community among ideologically diverse citizens in a time of heightened partisanship through promoting content and products that are mutually celebrated.

Although at least one indicator of each stewardship dimension was observed on most program websites, all ten indicators were observed on few (only two) program websites, indicating room for improvement in terms of the richness of content provided. Therefore, one recommendation is for managers of statewide food promotion programs, or similar umbrella food brand programs, is to examine their own websites to ensure indicators of all stewardship strategies are present. Adding content with stewardship strategies in mind could lead to more diversified content. Offering diverse content was also a recommendation by researchers who reviewed agricultural center websites (McLeod et al., 2018).

Furthermore, there were some program websites lacking key content that nearly all other program websites contained. Some specific areas for improved are with mission statements — though most websites posted mission statements, 15% of websites did not. For programs lacking mission statements, adding them to their websites could mean relationship-building gains without expending many resources. Furthermore, organizations should review their mission statements to ensure that they align with content offered on the website (McLeod et al., 2018). Additionally, all programs could increase their use of thankful or grateful language, and intentionally direct such language toward multiple stakeholder groups. It appeared that when programs did include grateful language, it was directed at a single stakeholder group, yet these programs rely on multiple stakeholder groups to function.

Another recommendation is that if and when programs have more resources available, managers should consider some of the more creative ways other programs have practiced stewardship, such as co-creating content with audiences (e.g., submitting recipes), incorporating blogs, offering search tools with more advanced options (such as product type, business type, and location), and posting videos. With videos, in particular, there may be opportunities to cross-promote content with social media. Research from a different public communication context found that on a state's university Extension Facebook page, social media posts with videos increased user engagement (Kesler et al., 2021). With blogs, programs should ensure that the content is posted frequently and use a "conversational tone that encourages interaction," as Moore et al. (2015) recommended after a review of U.S. agricultural commodity organization blogs.

In addition to adding diverse content that speaks to the different stewardship dimensions, programs should also make website design a top priority. Websites designed with credibility in mind (e.g., contemporary designs, reassuring colors, forms that align with the organization's services) result in increased perceived credibility (Lowry et al., 2014). Many of the websites examined in this study were in fact problematic in terms of navigation, broken links, and outdated design. If and when design work, or other work that addresses the image and/or identity of the brand is considered, managers might include stakeholders in the process, as suggested by related work concerning place-based tourism brands (Casidy et al., 2019).

One limitation of this work is that only government websites were examined, and non-governmental programs to collectively promote agricultural products were not examined, nor were regionally based programs. Another limitation of this work was that websites were coded for the presence or absence of stewardship dimensions overall, without further detail about when stewardship strategies appeared to target different stakeholder groups.

Future work might examine how different stakeholder groups interpret and/or recognize stewardship indicators on websites, and how the recognition or interpretation of those indicators influence their perceptions of the brand. This suggestion builds on a previous suggestion by Pressgrove et al. (2015), who called for more work about how different stakeholders view the utility of each stewardship strategy. Future research might also examine whether managers of these programs take stewardship into consideration, or how they think about the role of relationship management more generally in their programs. Future work should also continue to consider the effectiveness of these programs, as prior research about program success was somewhat limited. In particular, more understanding about the degree to which the programs lead to successful producer outcomes would be helpful.

Overall, this analysis showed that state-run food promotion programs function as public relations and agricultural communications tools. Though some stewardship dimensions were not present frequently, at least one indicator of each dimension was observed commonly, suggesting a balanced use of stewardship strategies by the government programs. Additionally, through providing resources, story-telling content, and contact information, the websites have the potential to build understanding and relationships between agricultural and non-agricultural audiences. Building such relationships is essential, as producers and consumers must collaborate to make decisions about their local and regional food systems.

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