

NOTE 15: Social Media for Rural Advisory Services

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There is plenty of information available in the public domain that covers various aspects of extension and know-how about new methodologies for implementation. However this information is often scattered and presented in complex academic language. Hence practitioners, who often have very limited time and/or may only have basic formal education, find it difficult to make use of this information.

The Global Good Practices Initiative aims to bridge this gap by providing information about extension approaches and methods in easy-to-understand formats. As part of this effort, it makes "Good Practice Notes" available to all at www.betterextension.org. This Note contains one of the extension methods included in this series.



Introduction

Social media refers to the web-based tools and media that allow users to personally and informally interact, create, share, retrieve, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social media includes social networking sites, blogs and microblogs, online forums, discussion boards and groups, wikis, socially integrated text messaging services, videos and podcasts, and many more. Rural advisory services (RAS) have seen enormous changes in the 21st Century that require interaction among multiple stakeholders – public, private, and non-profit – and learning to take collective action. These services have been called upon to be less 'top-down' and more interactive, and social media can be a potentially powerful tool in this regard. With increasing reach among rural people, especially the youth, through increasing mobile phone subscriptions and decreasing data tariffs, social media can help RAS to reach farmers more efficiently. The high level of user engagement in

social media also makes it one of the most participatory mediums of extension. This makes the sharing of data, information, and knowledge faster, easier, and more cost-effective, while at the same time enabling collaboration and demand-based RAS.

Philosophy and principles

The basic philosophy of social media is the democratisation of information, communication, and knowledge management. The following principles for using social media for RAS should be considered:

- **Involve and engage:** The ultimate end goal of a social media strategy should be the engagement and involvement of clients and other stakeholders, in order to achieve sustained communication processes.
- **Organisational policy on social media:** Sharing personal and professional information online needs guidelines. The key consideration is how users can differentiate between personal and professional opinions when using social media. A social media policy for organisations, including an ethical standard for users, can create a balance between maintaining a professional reputation and encouraging the free flow of information.
- **Broad-based information:** RAS facilitate communication, learning, and action related to improved livelihoods of clients. Therefore, a social media strategy should cover a wide range of knowledge and information resources, while also addressing specific information needs.
- **Subject to change:** Social media works best if based on continuous, iterative processes that allow for necessary



changes in the social media platforms used, as well as adjustment to the content and delivery needs of the clientele. For example, social media might start off on one platform, such as Facebook, and later include other platforms or lists of users.

- **Gate keeping:** One or more facilitators should be assigned to make sure that conversations and information flows remain relevant and contribute to the strategic goal associated with the use of social media. A content filtering technique to eliminate any irrelevant or repetitive information is important to ensure everyone's right to communicate, whilst maintaining the free flow of information in the group without repeating past posts.
- **Facilitating the interaction:** Social media encourages extension organisations to act as facilitators, bringing all stakeholders to the same platform, but it can also relieve the organisations' central coordination of information and encourage direct interaction among the communicators, namely, rural community members.

Implementation

Baseline survey: Baseline surveys are used to understand the social media preferences of clientele. This information can help to determine the correct platform, expected frequency of use, and set targets such as maximum reach.

Creating interest groups: Depending on clients' needs and also location specific problems, interest groups or lists can be created with a moderator from the organisation for the sake of gatekeeping information.

Formulating social media policy: At the organisational level, social media policy/guidelines will help achieve the full potential of social media for RAS. The policy should be flexible to allow some personal approaches to communication. For example, one extension worker or producer may focus primarily on their area of work or interests. Guidelines also ensure that sensitive information sent or discussed over social media is appropriately managed. There should also be a risk management strategy within the social media policy.

Sensitising and training of extension professionals and clientele: Social media literacy training on its effective use by extension personnel and at the grassroots level, specifically among the rural youth and women, will enhance the use of social media in RAS.

Timing is everything: Both in social media and agriculture, timing is of the essence. Timely updates become much easier through social media in extension. Well planned and strategically timed posts can be more effective than frequent messages. Quality as well as quantity of posts should be considered.

Using pictures and videos: Pictures and multimedia content always attract more attention. Sharing information with relevant pictures and videos sends a clear and effective

message. Don't forget to ask permission before taking and sharing photos or videos.

Adding value and acting on feedback: Remember, two-way communication is about asking not just telling. User engagement in discussions and comments should be highly encouraged.

Capacities required

Social media based communication requires technical and organisational capacities, such as the knowledge and skills to use relevant tools, graphics, or metrics. It also requires organisational buy-in. A once-off process won't be sufficient for a successful social media strategy. The organisation will need to ensure their clientele has social media know-how and provide basic technical support on how to use social media on their internet enabled devices. Training should be tailored to specific target groups – extension personnel, researchers, and academics will have different needs from farmers or other stakeholders at the grassroots.

A clear understanding of the extension organisation's domain of work and clients' lives and livelihoods, as well as their needs for accessing and sharing information, is important. Engagement with the clientele is also needed on a regular basis to hold their interest. On social media this can be done by using direct messages or 'liking' posts from clients.

Governance

Since organisations maintain the pages, groups, and accounts on social media platforms, it is easy to retain oversight. However, policy guidelines need to be followed properly and reviewed regularly. Social media policy is usually specific to the communication goals of the organisation. Policy should be built on principles such as keeping content up-to-date, commenting and providing feedback in a timely manner, encouraging relevant and meaningful content, following and engaging audiences, providing accurate information, and avoiding arguments and comments on legal matters. An organisation should anticipate challenges in managing social media to maintain a professional reputation, whilst encouraging the free flow of information. There are technological, organisational, institutional, and capacity challenges that may restrict the impact of social media (see Box 1).

Costs

Cost effectiveness is one of the major advantages of social media use for RAS. Hosting pages, groups, and accounts, and sharing multimedia content on social media is free of cost in most of cases. There may be nominal costs for paying external experts to develop the capacity of staff in using social media and/or to formulate organisational policy guidelines for social media.

Social media campaigns and subscription fees have been used to raise funding for a special project or group activity. They should not be overused.

BOX 1: GLOBAL SURVEY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN RAS

In 2015, GFRAS conducted a global survey on the use of social media in agricultural extension and RAS. The survey was conducted online across 60 countries and 226 respondents provided results. Facebook was found to be the most popular platform used by RAS actors. The main uses for social media were searching for news and events and sharing information. A major impeding factor for social media use was the lack of authenticity of information shared online. Social construction of information (development and publication of information socially by the users) was considered the most important feature of social media (95.1%). Ninety five percent of the respondents believed social media can play an important role in bridging the gap between stakeholders in agricultural innovation systems. Reaching clients (77.4%) was a major use of social media in RAS. Training in social media use was uncommon, and 71% of the respondents said they need training. If and when there was training conducted by the respondents' organisation, it mainly focused on the specifics of different platforms, and on the uses of social media in agricultural extension or the creation of social media tools. But at an organisational level, social media is still not given much importance by higher authorities (45.6%), and social media policy restricts rather than encourages its use (41.9%). Also, weak or non-existent connectivity in rural areas (69.9%), high data costs (52%), illiteracy of the clients (43.4%), and low participation and lack of interest (16.2%) of clients are reported to be major problems. Overall, the survey found that social media is still a very useful tool. To quote one respondent, "Social media is not only a tool for reaching large audiences; it is also an opportunity to develop relationships."

Strengths and weaknesses

Table 1 outlines the strengths and weaknesses of using social media in RAS.

Best-fit considerations

Target audience: Social media are useful for extension professionals and educated farmers, especially young people, who have online access, and also other RAS actors (input and market personnel, researchers, administrators, policy-makers, etc.).

Innovations: Social media tools help facilitate the free flow of information, knowledge, and creativity, enabling innovations by different stakeholders of RAS. Social

media is ideal to inform, share, create awareness, and mobilise extension professionals, farmers, and other RAS stakeholders in the shortest possible time.

Ecological and institutional settings: Social media works best for institutions and individuals with better ICT availability and access.

Evidence of impact and potential scalability

The impact of social media is mostly determined by the user base and level of participation. Continuous engagement and discussions, and creation and sharing of content can help to increase the membership subscription and enable feedback from members, as well as provide

Table 1. Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges

Strengths	Weaknesses	Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highly cost effective Simultaneously reaches large numbers of people Location and client specific, problem-oriented User-generated content and discussion among the community of members Easily accessed from mobile phones Increases internet presence of extension organisations and their client reach Democratisation of information Brings all RAS stakeholders onto a single platform Can measure impact and success by tracking number of visitors, friends, followers, mentions, Facebook 'likes', conversation index, and number of shares 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited ICT and online facilities in rural areas Only suitable for educated and online clientele Lack of awareness and readiness to accept social media by some farmers and extension professionals Internet privacy issues Relevancy of information Success of social media depends on commitment level of community of members in using social media for RAS Information overload 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Few social media apps are available without internet. Forming local/regional interest groups is possible Reaching one to many Greater engagement and dialogue Allows for integration of a wide range of stakeholders Can act as catalyst for resource mobilisation (technological, organisational, and financial) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality control and monitoring of posts Ensuring participation Internet and IT infrastructure issues Satisfying heterogeneous users Institutionalising social media Continuous engagement Skilled human resource to maintain social media Measuring the impact – lack of capacity for tools and analytics that help monitoring and assessing the value of information Creating awareness about social media's potential at the organisational level Allocating time to update content Encouraging stakeholders to access resources through social media links



evidence of social media impact. Facilitation of social media platforms is key for achieving audience growth and scalability. A social media communication strategy is scalable across geography (local, regional, national, global), topics of interest (e.g. business, career, agronomic practices, crops, etc.), and type of clients (women, young people, smallholders, etc.).

Issues of sustainability

Most social media platforms are available free of cost. Sustainability depends upon the ability of the members to feed the content, add value to content, and support purposeful online engagement. Social media sustainability depends on the capacity of the stakeholders (individuals, groups, and organisations) to address the dynamic information needs of clients and create networking opportunities that lead to agricultural enterprises. It may be possible to create operating revenue through various 'information-on-demand' services.

Training material

AgEd Open Course Wave. 2015. *FAO short course on Web 2.0 and social media for development*. <http://elearning.icrisat.ac.in/moodle23/course/index.php>

FAO and CTA. 2015. *Innovative collaboration for development*. Available at: <https://www.unitar.org/ksi/innovative-collaboration-development>

Oregon State University. 2015. *Social media tools*. Available at: <http://extension.oregonstate.edu/help/training/social-media>

Utah State University. 2015. *Social media tools*. Available at: <http://extension.usu.edu/socialmedia/htm/social-media-tools>

Useful tools for monitoring and social media analytics
DATASIFT – a social media management tool.

<http://datasift.com/>

Hootsuite – a social media management tool.

<https://hootsuite.com/>

TouchGraph – visualisation of social media network data.

<http://www.touchgraph.com/navigator>

TrueSocialMetrics – a tool for analysing different social media data. <https://www.truesocialmetrics.com/>

TWEETREACH – a tool for analysing Twitter data.

<https://tweetreach.com/>

Further reading

Andres, D. and Woodard, J. 2013. *Social media handbook for agricultural development practitioners*. Publication by FHI360 of USAID. Available at: <http://ictforag.org/toolkits/social/SocialMedia4AgHandbook.pdf>

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Harder, A., Carter, H.S. and Chiarelli, C. 2011. *Maintaining professionalism on Facebook: Tips for extension agents*. Florida, USA: University of Florida. Available at: <http://ufdc.ufl.edu/IR00004180/00001>

Newbury, E., Humphreys, L. and Fuess, L. 2014. Over the hurdles: Barriers to social media use in extension offices. *Journal of Extension* 52(5), Article number 5FEA1.

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Picture: Screengrab of <https://www.facebook.com/groups/Livestock.TN/>

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