

2014 Final Report for Joint PDP Training Project for Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont

Project Title: Sustainable Agriculture through Social Media Tri-State Training

1. Report Summary

Internet access across the U.S. is changing quickly and more Americans—including farmers—are integrating online resources into their daily lives. According to the 2013 USDA NASS Farm Computer Usage and Ownership research report, 67% of US farms have access to the Internet (an increase from 59% when this project started); in New England, 80% of farmers have Internet access. Farmers' use of electronic technology, however, is often underestimated, as reported in a 2011 Journal of Extension article that found that potato farmers were more likely to use more kinds of new technology than university students.

To keep pace with these changes, this project sought increase efforts by Extension educators in Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont to communicate with and provide education to farmers about sustainable agriculture through the use of social media. Project goals included: 1) Increasing Extension educator knowledge of social media tools and how they can be successfully used to increase awareness and knowledge of sustainable agriculture topics with farm clients; 2) Determining which tools are most effective for specific outreach and/or education objectives; and 3) Implementing and evaluating at least one social media tool for their work with farmers.

The three-year project offered 27 webinar trainings, in-person workshops, and round-robin style discussion sessions. Trainings focused on five social media tools of most interest to participants: Facebook, Twitter, blogs, webinars, and YouTube (and video content). However, additional social media tools (like Constant Contact and crowdfunding) were also covered based on participant feedback.

Thirty-four Extension educators from Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were the target audience of this project; however, a total of 193 service providers and 13 farmers participated in the trainings.

As a result of what they learned 30 of the 34 Extension educators (88%) incorporated new ideas they learned from the project's webinars and in-person trainings to create and/or change at least one social media tool as part of their outreach and education work with farmers. On average, each educator changed or created 3 social media tools for their work; most changed or created a YouTube account and/or made videos (23), offered/improved a webinar (20), and created/improved a Facebook page (17). In total, they collectively changed or created 96 social media tools, reaching no fewer than 228,790 farmers and others.

2. Performance Target(s)

Of the 90 Extension educators and other agricultural service providers who participate in the social media training program: 40 educators will implement and evaluate the use of at least one social media tool to deliver their educational programs and/or provide at least 900 farmers with whom they work with time-sensitive sustainable agriculture information; 450 farmers report that they were able to receive new or improved information to better inform their decisions on the farm.

3. Report on 2013-2014 Milestone Accomplishments

- 40 ag service providers participate in the final 4 live online training sessions, where they learn about 3 different social media tools (focus will be analytical / survey tools). October 2013 – January 2014.

101 Extension educators participated in 3 training sessions (2 online and 1 in-person training) offered between October 2013 and May 2014; they learned about several different social media tools, including Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and LinkedIn; built-in analytics were covered for each.

- 20 further explore the social media tool/s covered by the trainings; they request more information and/or support. November 2013 – June 2014.

During the final project year (October 2013 to September 2014), 7 educators used the Facebook group pages and/or direct contact (email, in-person, and/or phone) to request more information about specific social media tools.

- A third multi-state working team of 10 providers is selected to collaborate on the development of sustainable agriculture content through social media tool implementation; they conduct at least 2 online planning meetings and one in-person working retreat. November 2013– January 2014.

No working team came forward during this project year; however, 27 educators remained active on the project's Facebook group pages, and the Vermont educators (12) met at an annual in-service to share tips, tools, and troubleshooting advice.

- A six month online project survey reveals that 15 additional providers have adopted at least one social media tool in their work, providing at least 300 farmers with sustainable agriculture information. July 2014.

A mid-project survey (conducted in December 2013) revealed that 28 Extension educators had incorporated new ideas they learned from the project to date to create and/or change at least one social media tool as part of their outreach/education work with farmers; 17 Extension educators indicated they had created at least one new social media channel as part of their farmer education and/or outreach work, including 5 new Facebook pages aimed at farmers, 1 new Twitter site, 4 new blogs, 8 new webinars, 10 new videos, and 1 new e-newsletter-- these efforts reached at least 33,547 farmers and others.

- Participants respond to a final online evaluation. It reveals that a total of 40 providers have implemented at least one social media tool to deliver their educational programs that have reached at least 900 farmers with whom they work with time-sensitive sustainable agriculture information; 450 farmers reported that they were able to receive new or improved information to better inform their decisions on the farm. July – September 2014.

The final project survey revealed that 30 Extension educators incorporated new ideas they learned from the project to create and/or change at least one social media tool (and, on average 3 social media tools) as part of their outreach/education work with farmers. In total, they collectively changed or created 96 social media tools, reaching no fewer than 228,790 farmers and others.

4. 3-Year Summary of Activities, Participants, Learning Outcomes and Products

Table 1 –Activities.

Type of Educational Activity Conducted by Project	Number of Each Activity Conducted
Workshop/Field Day	4
On-farm Demonstration	
Tour	
Webinar/Talk/Presentation	20
Other on-line training	
Individual Consultations (an estimate is acceptable)	22
Other (specify)	3 round-robin discussion / troubleshooting sessions

Table 2 – Participants.

Type of Agricultural Service Provider	Number Who Participated
Extension	166
NRCS	
Other Federal/State Agency	
Other (specify)	27 unspecified ag professionals
Total Number of Agricultural Service Providers*	193
Farmers	13

Table 3 - Learning Outcomes.

	Total Number of Agricultural Service Providers	Total Number of Farmers	Total number of acres or animals the farmers manage, if known
Verified an increase in knowledge of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of social media tools in outreach and education efforts 	54	4	--

Table 4 – Products.

Type of Information Product Produced	Number of Each Type Produced
Fact sheet/Guidance document	
Decision tool	
Website/web content	5 webinar recordings
Article (newsletter, press)	
Curricula	
Video	
Other (specify)	1 blog post

5. Performance Target Outcomes and Additional, Unanticipated Outcomes

a. Summarized Outcome Data

Table 5 – Numbers of agricultural service providers taking action

The total number of agricultural service providers who incorporated information and/or used skills learned through the state program training activities in their educational activities, services and/or information products for farmers.	30
The total number of farmers these agricultural service providers reached through their efforts.	228,790 farmers & others

Table 6 – Actions taken by the agricultural service providers

Place an X next to all that apply	Types of Educational Activities Ag Service Providers incorporated information they learned into	Number of Each Activity Type, if known
	Workshop/Field Day	
	On-farm Demonstration	
	Webinar/Talk/Presentation	
	Other on-line training	
	Individual Consultation (an estimate is acceptable)	
	Fact sheet/Guidance document	
	Article (newsletter, press)	
X	Web content	96*
	Other (specify)	
*Number of social media tools changed and/or created as a result of the project		

Table 7 – OPTIONAL - Actions taken by farmers

The number of farmers who made a management change as a result of learning from the project activities and/or the trained agricultural service providers?	Unable to verify*
*Although the project was unable to verify specific farm-level management changes as a result of the project, educators cited an increase in engagement among farmers as well as an increase in attendance at farmer events due to their use of social media. At least 3 educators said that farmers have changed their practices as a result of learning information through notices of educational events or the content itself from social media channels but were unable to provide specific numbers.	

Table 8 – OPTIONAL – Additional outcomes as a result of the project

Type of Outcomes Achieved	Number of Each Outcome
New working collaboration	N/A
Grants applied for	N/A
Grants or other funds received	N/A
Other (describe)	Project coordinator asked to provide technical assistance to numerous webinars and conference broadcasts (6 offered to date; an additional 13 planned for 2015)

b. Outcome Narrative**Performance Target Outcomes**

Thirty-four Extension educators from Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont were the target audience of this project. Of those, 30 (88%) incorporated new ideas they learned from the project's webinars and in-person trainings to create and/or change at least one social media tool as part of their outreach and education work with farmers. On average, each educator changed or created 3 social media tools for their work; most changed or created a YouTube account and/or made videos (23), offered/improved a webinar (20), and created/improved a Facebook page (17). In total, they collectively changed or created 96 social media tools, reaching no fewer than 228,790 farmers and others.

Although the project was unable to verify specific farm-level management changes as a result of the project, educators cited an increase in engagement among farmers as well as increased attendance at farmer events due to their social media efforts. For example, one educator said, "For the first time, participants are indicating in their registration materials that they heard about our classes through Facebook. In addition, we are seeing much better "reach" numbers in our Facebook insights. A recent post reached 246 people. Last year, we were lucky if we reached 20 when we posted." At least 3 educators said that farmers have changed their practices as a result of learning information through notices of educational events or the content itself posted on social media but were unable to provide specific numbers. One educator said, "We have seen high rates of adoption of no-till, cover cropping, and grazing management practices. Not all of this, of course, is a result of just the e-newsletter; but it has been a very effective tool for communicating to our audience." Another said, "People have used the information I presented and changed practices on their farms. I have not documented how many farmers used the videos and but I do know the number who attended the webinar."

Other Results, Unanticipated Outcomes and Interesting Finding

One interesting and valuable project finding is that some trainees chose *not* to adopt social media tools as a result of the project. For example, one educator said, “The trainings helped me evaluate whether Facebook would be an appropriate tool for my outreach work and I concluded that it would not be (mostly since I can't post frequently enough) so I haven't used it.” Another said, “I don't think my audience of farmers is 'twitter' literate.” And another said, “I was involved in creating a 10 minute video on greens wash water systems. By involved, I mean that I organized the filming, appeared in the video, worked on the storyboard, contributed images, and gave feedback on the video (editing). I do not feel that I have the time in my professional roles to master videography and software, so we let the experts handle that. They did it for less than it would have cost for me to figure it all out plus they have the fancy equipment.” The informed decision-making of these and other educators involved in the training is considered a project success.

Other educators made significant improvements to and value from their social media efforts. For example, one educator said, “I use more photos and tighter text in Facebook posts. I also monitor the insights to identify kinds of posts/timing of posts/topics that get more engagement from readers, and then to build on that.” Another said, “I have seen increased engagement with food businesses and have found social media to be a low-energy way of connecting food business with farms and for the two to have increased dialogue and exchange. I have also found social media to be a nice way of receiving innovative ideas and news, reports, etc. from collaborating organizations and researchers.”

One unanticipated project outcome was that the project coordinator has been asked to provide technical assistance to and/or facilitate numerous webinars and conference broadcasts, presumably as a result of the webinar-based trainings. For example, she was approached by a team of educators to partner on a NE-SARE PDP project that sought to integrate webinars as part of the training strategy. In 2015, she will be assisting in broadcasting a multiple session, multiple location course for farmers. In total, 6 webinars and conference broadcasts have been offered to date with an additional 13 planned for 2015.

6. OPTIONAL – Assessment of Project Approach /Lessons Learned/Future Recommendations

In hindsight, it was unrealistic to expect verification of farmer behavior change from social media adoption among Extension educators. These tools are still relatively new and although many farmers are using social media, it is exceedingly difficult to connect social media use with farm-level management changes. Current built-in social media metrics do help users understand audience demographics and even psychographic information but do not lend themselves well to determining behavior change.

Another observation was that while social media is an online activity and thusly the trainings were offered largely online, educators might have benefitted from more in-person trainings and/or more engaging online efforts. For some, the transition from traditional in-person workshops to online webinars did not find their learning style like this educator, “I learn best in person and hands on, so it has been challenging for me to take full advantage of this information. If it had been offered in an in-person format I probably would have gotten more out of it.” Another would have benefitted from more engaging online education techniques, “While I like the idea of the training, I have found online training a bit too dry.”