

PRECISION AGRICULTURE EDUCATION: USING SOCIAL MEDIA

Amy Winstead

*The Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Auburn University
Belle Mina, Alabama*

John P. Fulton

*Biosystems Engineering
Auburn University
Auburn University, Alabama*

Anne Mims Adrian

*ACES-Ag Information Technology Unit
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Auburn University, Alabama*

Shannon Huber Norwood

*The Alabama Cooperative Extension System
Auburn University
Belle Mina, Alabama*

ABSTRACT

Social media and web-based applications are gaining in popularity for disseminating information and communicating with others. The traditional method of transferring information through print and face-to-face meetings is now often supplemented and/or replaced by web-based outlets. The Alabama Precision Agriculture Program initiated a social media and web campaign as a method of distributing educational information while gaining recognition as a source for precision agriculture (PA) resources. A new, user-friendly website, www.AlabamaPrecisionAgOnline.com was developed to disseminate extension and research information. A PA blog was created as a central feature of the site. A Twitter account and a Facebook fan page were also setup as the basis of the social media campaign providing alternative means to engage clients and communicate new information. Changes and updates in PA can now be quickly transferred to clientele, outreach efforts have expanded and the client base has broadened to include non-traditional members. The social media campaign has proven successful in facilitating networking capabilities and client communication with future intentions of expanding the social networking capabilities to reach more people internationally.

Keywords: social media, social networking sites, communication technology

SUMMARY

The use of social media (SM) and social networking sites (SNS) has rapidly increased in recent years (Bian, 2008; Boyd et al., 2007). Facebook, a popular SNS reports over 400 million active users in 2010. The Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Precision Agriculture Program initiated a web campaign in 2009 which included social media as a component to increase outreach potential and disseminate educational information. Further, the goal of this effort was to deliver current information about precision agriculture to producers and other practitioners while also providing education about modern agriculture practices to a much broader international audience. A 2009 precision ag survey study of Alabama producers revealed that approximately 70% of Alabama farmers use the internet to obtain precision agriculture information. The ACES precision ag website was redesigned and made officially public in March 2009. A new URL, www.AlabamaPrecisionAgOnline.com, was established to improve site recognition. The site provides precision agriculture information through publications, presentation material and reference information. A blog was designed as a central focus of the site to quickly and easily provide timely information to clientele. Twitter and Facebook accounts were setup to provide social media and social networking capabilities. These social media avenues of sharing information have provided links to precision agriculture and others from various locations in the US and internationally. Introduction of the new Alabama Precision Ag website and SM sites has provided additional means in which to reach clientele and broaden the impact of the Alabama Precision Agriculture Program; especially non-agriculture audiences. From June 2009 through December 2009, the Alabama Precision Ag website experienced a 130% increase in hits and an approximate 50% increase in visits. The social media campaign has proven successful in facilitating networking capabilities and client communication with future intentions of expanding the social networking capabilities to reach more people internationally.

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