An Overview of Social Media Tools to Influence Public Opinion

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- **Introduction**

  Social media is becoming ever more widespread, both in the agricultural realm and in society as a whole. It allows for instant, personal communication to your own network of friends, colleagues and acquaintances and arose out of a desire by people to start to make the impersonal online world personal again.

- **What’s the point and who’s using social media anyway?**

  Social media offers a way of direct advocacy and outreach to your audience, of building personal connections with people you might otherwise never have the chance to interact with, and of telling your story in your way. And lest you think that social media is just for young people with time to spare, the numbers say differently. A Nielsen Company study showed that:
  
  - Time spent on social networking sites increased from 3 hours to 5.5 hours per month in the past year – an 82 percent increase!
  - Majority of Twitter users are 35+
  - Approximately 60 percent of Facebook users are 26+
  - People age 45 – 65 are the fastest growing demographic of Facebook users

  And let’s not forget that many anti-agriculture groups and organizations are very active in the social media world as well. PETA, Greenpeace and others have large followings on Twitter and Facebook, making it important that our industry has a presence to get the other side of the story out. That being said,
social media is not ideally suited to everyone, depending on who your audience is, who you’re trying to reach and what your own comfort level is with interacting with others in a public forum.

The list of social media tools and sites is a long one and is being added to all the time as new ones emerge – but here’s a snapshot of some of the most popular ones.

- **Blogs**

Blogs are opinion-based websites, often written in the first person, and evolved out of early online diaries or “web logs”. Today, the line between blog and website is becoming increasingly blurry as some popular sites have become credible online news sources.

Politicians, media, CEOs, celebrities, athletes, pundits and critics – and many others – are bloggers, using the platform as a way to share their thoughts and opinions that they couldn’t otherwise do through a more formal corporate or professional website.

For many people, a blog is their way to indulge in their passion for writing and sharing information about subjects they care deeply about. It’s a hugely popular activity, with over 1.4 million new blog posts going up daily. Of the top 100 most popular websites, 22 are blogs.

- **Twitter**

Twitter is based on sharing information in 140 characters less, under the premise of users answering the question “what is happening right here, right now?”. Updates are global and posted in real time, making it easy to follow events and happenings through the eyes of others as they unfold. Twitter updates are called tweets, forwarding those tweets is re-tweeting, the identifier used to tag or categorize your tweets is called a hash tag (for example, a tweet about the Banff Pork Seminar 2011 could be tagged with #BPS11 for easy searching) and the people who sign up to receive your tweets are your followers.

Twitter is available on the web, through desktop clients and on smartphones like Blackberry and iPhone. Over 27 million tweets are sent daily by individuals from all walks of life. The top five most popular Twitter users are Ashton Kutcher, Britney Spears, Ellen DeGeneres, Barack Obama and Lady Gaga – ranging from 4.6 million to 3.3 million followers.
At first, many new users of Twitter are unsure as to the value of the application from a practical or business sense. Their first question is usually “what’s the point?”. However, once users start to understand Twitter, they often fall into full immersion, interacting with many different people, actively retweeting, and growing their follower count. Eventually, though, most users find their niche and hone their Twitter usage to fit the goals or objectives they have in mind.

Twitter has simply become too big for users to follow every conversation or every active user. In fact, its growth over the last year has been phenomenal. A little over 18 months ago, there were still relatively few users and much of the public had never heard of Twitter. Today, for example, most major media outlets, as well as organizations, retailers and other businesses promote a Twitter feed in addition to their websites, blogs, emails and more.

- **Facebook**

Since its inception in 2004, Facebook, a site that allows users to share information, photos and videos with their friends through personal profiles, has grown to over 400 million active users. Half of all active users log into the site daily and over 100 million active users access their profiles through a mobile phone application.

The average Facebook user spends more than 55 minutes per day on the site. More than five billion pieces of content – web links, news stories, blog posts, notes, photos and more – are shared through the site each week. Increasingly, companies, brands and organizations are using Facebook’s fan pages to engage users as well, using the platform to drive visitors to their own blogs and websites.

- **LinkedIn**

LinkedIn is a networking site aimed at the professional crowd. Although somewhat similar to Facebook, user profiles contain skills, career and education information and the site is used as a networking tooling. LinkedIn has approximately 55 million users globally.

- **YouTube**

Founded in 2005, YouTube is a popular online video-sharing site that has become the world’s most popular online video community. Every minute, 20
hours of video are uploaded to YouTube. Users can embed links to YouTube videos right into Facebook pages, blogs and other websites. This makes it very easy for content to be shared and gave rise to the expression "go viral" to describe a video or other electronic item that has spread rapidly over the internet. Users can also vote for their favourite videos, and track and follow their favourite fellow users.

YouTube content ranges from ultra-short homemade spots to lengthy professionally made productions, news clips and episodes of TV shows. Each file tracks the number of times it has been viewed or downloaded and comes with a popularity ranking, making it very easy to track metrics and evaluate success.

- Flickr

Flickr is one of the leading online photo-sharing sites. People can upload their photos – and more recently videos as well – and indicate whether they’d like them to be publicly available or only to other Flickr users to whom they’ve given permission to do so. Users can tag photos for easy searching, include captions and add comments to photos uploaded by others. As an example of its popularity, on November 1 at 5 pm EDT, the site stats indicated that there had been more than 7,300 uploads in the last minute.

Flickr is integrated with Yahoo, allowing users with existing Yahoo accounts to sign in using that login and password. It also allows users to take their (or others’) uploaded photos from Flickr and turn them into prints, photos, cards, calendars and other items.

- Other Social Media Applications

There are a multitude of other social media applications that allow Internet users to share and comment on information. Digg, Stumble, Reddit, Bebo, Google Buzz, and Friend Feed are just some of the hundreds of content aggregators, sites and social media applications available.

All of the above-mentioned social media tools can be useful on their own. But an important part of social media success lies in linking them together and using them simultaneously or in an integrated way. This ensures reach to a larger audience as well as consistent messaging. The main key to social media success, however, lies in personal connection and interaction. Social media as a field has grown up around letting people reach out and engage others in conversation.
• Hints & Tips

• Think about who you want to reach and what you want to accomplish
• Even though social media is personal, maintain a level of professionalism
• Follow others, retweet, comment
• Consistent presence = readers to your blog, followers on Twitter, fans on Facebook
• Be careful what you tweet, post or blog…
• If you don’t tell your story, someone else will
• Don’t be afraid, we were all newbies once!

If you have questions about social media in agriculture, please contact me.

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