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Branding a Cohesive Identity: The Case of Northern Illinois Alliance

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BY

Ashley Gocken

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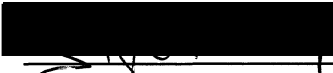
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Abstract

This paper reflects upon a communication action plan that was developed for Northern Illinois Alliance. After examination of its current communication, competitor communication, research from Adayana (a research firm), and discussions with NIA's general manager, it was determined that NIA suffers from a lack of cohesive organizational identity and overall branding. Therefore, organizational identity and branding were used as the framework for the communication action plan. The paper outlines data collection, reasoning for the proposed tactics within the communication action plan, and an overall evaluation from NIA's general manager.

Keywords: organizational identity, branding, brand pyramid, Northern Illinois Alliance

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Introduction

Northern Illinois Alliance is a full service wholesale and retail fertilizer facility located in Crescent City, Illinois. The “joint venture between Minneapolis based CHS Inc., the nation’s leading farmer-owned cooperative, and Elburn Cooperative” was established in 2013 (Northern Illinois Alliance, 2014). NIA provides customers with services such as liquid spraying, dry spreading, liquid blending, twenty-four hour liquid loading access, soil testing, crop scouting, customer application, strip til, financial planning, and farm and field consulting.

Since 2013, NIA has been working to establish itself as a highly competitive and recognizable brand among other recognizable names in the area. Because the organization is fairly new, it is important for the organization to continue to establish its brand identity. Through an analysis of NIA’s external communication and competitor communication, I was able to establish a communication action plan that would emphasize NIA’s overall branding and organizational identity. However, before moving forward with my research, I examined NIA’s current communication tactics to establish how and what it is communicating to its stakeholders.

Research indicated that NIA has struggled to create a cohesive identity for its stakeholders. The main challenges facing NIA in this area are the consistency and accuracy of information across all its communication outlets and finding ways to showcase what it has to offer customers. Because of these issues, my communication action plan focused on tactics that would allow NIA to tell its story, showcase its products and services, and differentiate itself from competitors. This can be done by using communication outlets that engage stakeholders and by providing them with educational materials produced by NIA.

Therefore, this document explains the plan’s recommended public relations tactics and how they can enhance communication with NIA’s stakeholders. First, I will review the literature

on organizational identity and branding, since these are important concepts that contributed to the communication action plan. I, then, explain the methods used to collect the data that identified key messages important to NIA and its stakeholders. Following this discussion, I explain the objective of the communication action plan and the tactics that were recommended to enhance NIA's organizational identity and overall branding. Finally, I provided an evaluation of my project after it was reviewed by NIA's general manager.

Organizational Identity

Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver (2015) explain the role of communication in organizations as “a set of processes through which organizations create, negotiate, and manage meanings” (p. 15). When an organization is creating and managing meaning, it is essentially managing its identity. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) argue identity has become the “subject of rather intensive organizational study” because identity is concerned with both individual and organizational issues (p.63). Understanding these issues can lead to insight about the organization, its stakeholders, its character, and its behavior.

Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) define identity as “subjective meanings and experiences, to our ongoing efforts to address the two questions, “Who am I”- by implication- “how should I act?” (p.6). They argue identity is associated with everything: “from mergers, motivation and meaning making to ethnicity, entrepreneurship, emotions to politics, participation and project teams” (p. 5). Moreover, Henderson, Cheney, and Weaver (2015) argue that identity is one of the main components of the “contemporary industrialized world” (p.16). Therefore, organizations are increasingly focusing time and resources into creating and maintaining organizational identities.

Organizational identity examines how people make sense of an organization. It is concerned with the questions, “who are we as an organization” and “what do you we want to be?” (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006; Evans, 2015). It is defined as “members’ understandings and claims about what is central, distinctive, and continuous over time about the organization” (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010, p. 397). Huang-Horowitz (2015) explains there are benefits for an organization to have a clear, consistent internal identity. This consistency and clarity “increases the loyalty and commitment of employees, ensures cooperation among employees, and serves as a guide for problem solving and decision making, and helps and organization obtain legitimacy” (p.346). Therefore, by defining an internal organizational identity, an organization can emphasize the attributes that make it different from other organizations.

Evans (2015) expands on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) definition of organizational identity by offering the following definition:

those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are *central* to the organization’s character or “self-image,” make the organization *distinctive* from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having continually over time is the shared beliefs of members about an organization’s central, *enduring* and distinctive characteristics (p.44).

In this context, the author is examining how external audiences make sense of organizational identity through communication. Therefore, creating a clear, consistent and valued external identity increases “recognition of the organization (reputation); attracts employees, customers, and other business partners; and nurtures a feeling of trust” (Evans, 2015, p.45). Because of these factors, organizations should be concerned with how their audiences perceive them.

According to Hoffman and Ford (2010) association and differentiation are two rhetorical strategies that help improve audience perceptions of an organization and are essential for identity

maintenance. Association is an important rhetorical strategy for building an identity because it links the organization with attributes that are viewed positively by its audience. Bostdorff and Vibbert (1994) explain three ways an organization can align its values and goals with those of its perceived audiences to enhance the audience's view of the organization. This is accomplished by appealing to an audience's values, having discussions regarding how products or services align with goals in society, and through charitable activities. By showcasing shared values, organizations help build and maintain positive identities.

Organizations can also engage in storytelling to promote and maintain identities. Hoffman and Ford (2010) explain organizations showcase values by telling a story about "who they are and what they stand for" (p.129). "Organizations tell their stories through values and claims that make judgments about people, actions, objects and ideas. Company storytellers support value claims by descriptions, by examples of experiences of employees, and by testimonials of customers and employees" (p. 129). Storytelling helps audiences' identify with an organization and helps them align their values and goals with the organization. This strategy helps the audience better understand the organization.

The other rhetorical strategy that Hoffman and Ford (2010) offer to improve how audiences perceive an organization is differentiation. Differentiation is the opposite of association, but it is also essential to identity maintenance rhetoric. "Using the strategy of differentiation may allow an organization to enhance its existing identity by pointing out the distinction between itself and similar organizations" (p. 131). Because there are so many organizations that have the same products and services, it is important to establish what an organization does better than competing organizations. By identifying key messages vital to an organization, its identity breaks through the clutter of competing brands and there is a better

connection with audiences. Therefore, after differentiating an organization's products and services, it is important for an organization to gain value through branding.

Branding

According to Faircloth et al. (2001) "researchers have focused their efforts on developing a more sophisticated understanding of how strong brands can be created and nurtured" (p.61).

The American Marketing Association defines a brand as a "name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers"

(American Marketing Association, 2015, para. 1). In a society where new brands are created and

forgotten on a daily basis, it is important to understand why and how branding is vital to an

organization's success. The impression an organization's brand makes on consumers plays an

important role in an organization's monetary and community success. Branding's primary goal is

to persuade the organization's target market to choose the organization over its competitors. This

can be accomplished by persuading the target market that the organization can provide a solution

for their needs and problems. Goodson (2012) explains brands are valuable because they outlive

products. They communicate uniformity, credibility, and quality. Therefore, it is important to

focus time and financial resources into building a memorable brand.

Lake (2014) explains successful brands achieve objectives such as "delivering clear messages, confirming credibility, connecting the target prospects emotionally, motivating the

buyer, and obtaining user loyalty" (para. 3). Therefore, successful branding resonates in the

hearts and minds of consumers and has the ability to affect their wants and needs. According to

Yun Yoo (2014) one of the major challenges of branding is to "develop a set of associations that

can resonate with consumers and ultimately influence their brand evaluations in a desired

direction" (p.86). The author explains consumer behavior studies indicate evaluations of brands

are constructed from the consumer's direct experience and from internal and external information about the brand from others.

According to Ashton and Pressey (2011), branding is an important and long-standing marketing tool. From the perspective of an organization and its consumers, branded products and services provide benefits such as identity systems, mechanisms that add customer value, and a source of differentiation between products. The authors explain branding fulfills a social role by communicating values and goals of individuals in society. This can be demonstrated through quality, trust, and the ability to decrease the risk of dissonance when it comes to purchasing decisions. Also, branding provides an organization with the opportunity to create a brand that reflects values important to the organization and relevant to its consumers. Overall, branding is important because it strengthens the relationship between an organization and consumers by demonstrating an organization's values and creating consumer trust.

An organization can also demonstrate its value and differentiate itself by taking on a personality. Brand personality is defined as the ways in which the brand communicates differences from its competitors by assigning human personality traits. Kum et al. (2012) argues brand personality is important in establishing consumer-brand relationships because consumers equate human characteristics with personality. Characteristics can also be associated with company employees or the management team. The authors also argue that brand personality may be associated with a brand's "price, product properties, distribution, packaging, symbols, sales promotions, and advertising" (p. 1292). Therefore, understanding the brand's personality is vital in order to successfully create appropriate and effective messages for the media and consumers. Brand personality allows brand managers to "deliver a consistent brand experience that connects with consumers and leaves a deeper and more sustainable impression" (Brand Personality, 2015,

para. 4). Once a brand personality is identified, it can help guide the creativity of the brand. By associating personality traits with a brand, a consumer is able to recall a distinctive brand image. This helps make the brand more recognizable to consumers. De Chernatory (2001) explains personality features are the most valuable components in designing “brand positioning and are readily translatable into appealing communication imagery” (p.160). Creating a brand personality is vital to successful branding, which helps consumers identify with an organization and affects how consumers view an organization’s purpose. A brand personality can be communicated is by creating a brand pyramid.

Brand Pyramid

When building a brand, organizations are making a promise to their stakeholders regarding their business practices and core values. One way to identify these core values and goals is through a brand pyramid. A brand pyramid is a “simple tiered analytical diagram, hierarchically organized with the most important content at the top. It expresses organizational consensus and can be used as a benchmark to measure behaviors, actions, products, and plans to ensure they are aligned with the brand” (“What is a Brand Pyramid,” 2015, para. 1). A brand pyramid assists organizations by identifying with its stakeholders while examining its competitive advantage and values. It also helps identify key messages that should be communicated to stakeholders (Bullock, 2012). These key messages are important to establish, as they are aspects of the organization important to both an organization and its stakeholders.

Organizational identity and branding are important aspects to communicate in order for an organization to be successful. By focusing on organizational identity an organization can articulate its core values, its competitive advantage, and tell its story both internally and externally. Branding also helps an organization showcase how its values are relevant to

individual consumers. Through branding, an organization can create a brand personality and a distinctive brand image. However, this personality and distinctive image can be articulated through a brand pyramid. This helps identify the organization's core values and plays a vital role in understanding what messages an organization should be articulating to its stakeholders. Based on these concepts, branding and organizational identity research was conducted on NIA's current communication with stakeholders.

NIA's Current Communication

Research conducted on organizational identity and branding demonstrate that NIA's Communication Action Plan needed to identify and clearly communicate its identity while finding ways to enhance its overall brand. Therefore, the main objective of the plan was to enhance communication with stakeholders to achieve a better understanding of NIA. In order to achieve a better understanding of the organization, I needed to determine its expressed organizational identity and what elements of the brand are important to the organization and its stakeholders.

Currently, NIA relies heavily on radio advertisements on a station whose primary audience extends from Central Illinois to Indiana. It advertises its services by creating new commercials every season to ensure they do not become repetitive for listeners. The organization is also a corporate sponsor of the local high school and University of Illinois sporting events. It is also a major sponsor of the county fair. It contributes monetary donations, equipment, and employee time to ensure there are enough volunteers. Facebook and Twitter are also used to engage consumers with the organization. These outlets are used to promote the organization and through them, it shares information about itself and its partner corporations, CHS and Elburn Coop, to keep consumers informed.

Northern Illinois Alliance also utilizes face-to-face communication to establish relationships with its customers. The organization hosts annual Grower's Meetings where customers are invited to luncheons where they are educated on new growing strategies and different products that chemical companies are using to enhance crop effectiveness. It also hosts a Customer Appreciation Day once a year to thank its customers for their business and their loyalty.

Communicating and promoting NIA's corporate social responsibility is an important part of NIA's communication strategy. Its focus is to demonstrate how it works to ensure the safety of the community it serves. As of December 2014, Northern Illinois Alliance was the only facility in the nation to voluntarily sign up for the ResponsibleAg Program. This program promotes "the public welfare by assisting agribusinesses as they seek to comply with federal environmental, health, safety and security rules regarding the safe handling and storage of fertilizer products" (ResponsibleAg, 2014, para. 1). Through this program, the facility is holding itself accountable for the safety of employees, customers, and community members. NIA also engaged in corporate social responsibility through programs started by CHS to support the local community. The organization was able to donate \$6,000 in 2014 and \$55,000 in 2015 to help maintain the safety of the community. NIA's corporate social responsibility is communicated to stakeholders on social media, its website, and through press releases to the local newspaper.

NIA relies heavily on radio advertisements, community sponsorships, social media outlets, and face-to-face interactions with customers for the majority of its communication efforts. However conversations with NIA's general manager regarding the lack of a cohesive message when communicating with stakeholders led to the conclusion that the organization needs to improve upon its overall branding and organizational identity.

In order to improve NIA's branding and organizational identity, the message the organization is currently publicizing on these outlets needed to be examined. It was necessary to determine if these outlets were effective and what messages the organization was attempting to relay to stakeholders. Analyzing competitor communication was also important to establish what outlets they are using to communicate with stakeholders. I could then use these analyses to examine what NIA is doing better than its competitors and what needs to be improved upon.

A brand pyramid was used to determine what messages are important to NIA and its stakeholders. The outline for the brand pyramid structure was provided by the CHS Inc. Enterprise Marketing Communications department. The brand pyramid presented in the communication action plan identifies the organization's promise, personality, emotional, and rational benefits. Within the pyramid, the "promise" is understood as the singular organizational message that it wants each employee and stakeholder to understand. This message focuses on how the organization defines its success. The second tier in the pyramid is dedicated to identifying the organization's personality. The personality of the organization is defined by its culture and communicative tone. It helps the organization determine how to go to the marketplace and articulate its code of conduct. The emotional benefits tier examines how the customer connects with the organization on an emotional level when conducting business. This tier focuses on what customers feel when conducting business with the organization, for example, trust, confidence, or pride. Lastly, the rational benefits tier establishes the differentiating factors that set the organization apart from its competitors. This focuses on what the organization does extremely well. These messages become the key points about the organization and are from the organization's point of view. The key messages that emerge from the brand pyramid are important to use when communicating with stakeholders. If the

organization does not align its messages with its stakeholders, there will be a disconnect between the two parties. Therefore, it is important to establish a coherent organizational identity across all organizational divisions to ensure consistency.

Based on the pyramid, I was able to identify aspects of the organization that are important to stakeholders. The following messages should be taken into consideration in order to engage in effective communication:

- NIA increases customer's efficiency
- Customer confidence in NIA
- NIA provides trust and guidance from management and sales staff
- Employees are from the area
- NIA focuses on customer services as a top priority
- NIA has products and services that match customer needs
- Facility and equipment helps growers with efficiency
- NIA's partnership with CHS and Elburn are important to showcase

After creating the brand pyramid, a conversation with the general manager generated a better understanding as to why NIA has struggled to clearly identify its organizational identity. NIA does not have a practitioner who focuses exclusively on public relations because the organization is an extension of two large corporations. According to the general manager, this is a problem on some occasions because the management team does not have time to effectively create public relations material that can help the organization's overall branding. Therefore, the communication action plan must focus on tactics that are efficient and time aware.

In our conversation, we discussed additional communication tactics that could supplement the tactics already in use. We discussed content marketing as an important contemporary communication tactic and agreed that NIA's communication with stakeholders could benefit from its use. According to the Content Marketing Institute, content marketing is a "strategic marketing approach focused on creating and distributing valuable, relevant, and consistent content to attract and retain a clearly-defined audience – and ultimately, to drive

profitable customer action” (Content Marketing Institute, 2015, para.1). Spencer (2014) recommends organizations focus on distributing information on their own channels, which will help deliver long-term organizational growth. She explains “beefing up” the organization’s own media channels will help enhance brand awareness and audience size. Therefore, when conducting further research on communication that would be effective for NIA, content marketing was one of the main components that drove the planning. By engaging in external communication trends, such as content marketing, NIA could further expand its brand within the community.

In order to determine what content marketing materials would be effective, we had to establish key messages important to stakeholders. One of the main components that guided the communication action plan was research conducted by the research firm, Adayana, when NIA was first establishing its business. At the time, the data was given to top management, but was not distributed to NIA’s public relations firm. Therefore, NIA’s public relations firm has not been able to identify or communicate messages that are known to be important to NIA’s stakeholders. In order to fully understand NIA and what the public desires from it, an in depth analysis was conducted on this research. From this analysis, messages important to stakeholders were identified and then objectives, strategies, and tactics were created to meet stakeholder needs.

The key takeaways from the Adayana research included:

- NIA can attract farmers by offering great customer service and providing farmer education through knowledgeable employees and sales staff.
- Growers in the area have limited knowledge of NIA
 - Most farmers were generally open to learning more about Elburn/NIA.
- Quickly begin to communicate at a personal level with potential farmers/customers
 - Communicate key intentions and products/services. Tell them the Elburn/ NIA story and key benefits of doing business with Elburn/NIA.
- Hire employees that know the local area and can establish farmer relationships.

- Define the DuPont Pioneer relationship and special offerings (This would be Cropland relationship now).
- Since unique products and services are attractive to these customers, utilize any differentiating services that Elburn/ NIA currently has in your lead offer to these participants.

The research also revealed advice that respondents expressed for a new retailer.

- Frequent communication
- Hire a knowledgeable sales team and staff
- Build strong relationships with producers
- Be a reliable and dependable partner for producers
- Profile your main competitors; find out what they are good at and how you can win business

In addition to the Adayana research, it was important to establish NIA's top three competitors and examine their communication efforts to understand the competitive environment in which NIA operates. NIA's three major competitors are Heritage FS, Crop Production Services and Donovan Farmers Co-Op Elevator. Through an analysis of competitor communication, I was able to identify what NIA does better than its competitors and what areas of communication need improvement. An analysis of NIA's current external communications, including its website, social media, and advertising, was used to guide the communication plan and make recommendations for improvement. This revealed what messages are currently communicated to stakeholders and through which outlets. This analysis led to insight into which communication outlets are effective and which outlets could be utilized to enhance NIA's external messages and overall branding.

I found NIA's communication is better than competitors when it comes to consistent messages across all communication outlets. NIA also has a social media presence, unlike most competitors. By using Facebook and Twitter, NIA updates its stakeholders about what is going on at NIA and about its community involvement. Also, in comparison to its competitors, NIA's website contains a better layout and it is easier to navigate.

Research also revealed numerous improvements that NIA could make to enhance its communication. Although its website is easy to navigate, it needs to be more interactive and there needs to be a driving factor that brings traffic to the website daily. The website needs to be constantly updated so visitors receive accurate information. Competitors also distribute newsletters to their customers. Although NIA engages in social media, further analysis of social media revealed most of NIA's customers are not on social media. Therefore, a more traditional form of communication, such as a newsletter, may be more effective in order to target its primary demographic. Table 1. provides a summary of which communication methods the organizations are currently using.

Table 1. Competitor Communication

Communication Tactics				
	Northern Illinois Alliance	Heritage FS	Crop Production Services	Donovan Farmers Co-Op Elevator
Website	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Media	✓	✓	✗	✗
Newsletter	✗	✓	✓	✗
Radio Advertisements	✓	✓	✓	✗
Blog	✗	✗	✗	✓

Key

Utilizing communication outlet



Not utilizing this outlet to communicate

Lastly, a territory management plan, created by NIA's general manager at the start of 2105, was used to enhance research findings and guide communication recommendations. The territory management plan provided understanding on what aspects of NIA's operation are top priorities as it interacts with stakeholders and grows in the community. He provided a SWOT analysis that helped guide the plan:

Strengths

- Employees are from this area and live in the community
- Facility – size and scale to compete with other multi-nationals in the area
 - Upgrades that make it faster and more efficient
- Equipment – great condition and desirable for growers

Weaknesses

- Being a single location with only crop input offerings at this time limits our ability to influence a larger market
- Limited staff during peak times
- Growing our business with limited ammonia and side dress UAN equipment is a major concern

Opportunities

- Facility
- Size and scale to offer customer growers the series they are looking for from full service to direct pick up
- Tools like Top Dress Urea and ATS that can be used to help spread out the nitrogen applications can set us apart from other suppliers
- Growing weed pressure and resistance forces the grower to look for answers and solutions in his fields

Threats

- Competitive area
- Large number of self-applied growers in the area
- Price shoppers
- Low commodity prices have put everyone in a “can't spend model”

Overall, this research allowed me to identify three key factors that should influence communication with stakeholders:

- NIA provides superior customer service and guidance
- Stakeholders are interested in education, technology, and equipment
- Stakeholders are interested in the NIA story and what NIA can offer its consumers.

These messages became the primary guiding factors for the communication action plan and the foundation for how to build the organization's identity into future communication and branding efforts.

Project Design

Communication Action Plan

According to Holt, Fawcett, Francisco, and Schiltz (2015) communication is an important component of every organization. The organization's goals, audiences, and messages may change over time, but the need to maintain relationships with key stakeholders is a constant factor in order for an organization to be successful. The authors explain a communication plan allows an organization to structure its communication and figure out whom it needs to reach in order to be effective. The tangible goal of the project was to create a Communication Action Plan that would identify key messages important to stakeholders, which would enhance NIA's organizational identity and overall branding. Because of the competitive nature of the agriculture business in the area, it is important for NIA to define its organizational identity in order to differentiate itself from its competitors. After defining this identity, the organization can focus on creating a memorable brand. According to Hoffman and Ford (2010), an organization's identity is based on three main components: "the central character of the organization, the claimed distinctiveness of the organization from other organizations, and consistency of these elements over time" (p. 121). Therefore, it was important to create an overall objective and strategies marked by consistency and explicitly differentiating NIA from competing organizations.

The overall objective for the plan was to enhance communication with stakeholders so they have a better understanding of NIA. With the importance of consistency in mind, I created a

strategy that would support the overall objective. The strategy for the plan was to use consistent two-way, in person, written, and oral communication to provide relevant and timely information regarding NIA's story, promise, news, and services. This strategy will showcase excellent customer service, education, and technology, three elements vital to NIA's stakeholders. I then proposed five tactics that would achieve this communication goal.

Tactic 1: Website

After an analysis of NIA's external communication, I found that NIA's radio advertisements tells consumers to visit its website for more information. Therefore, the website needs to be constantly updated to provide accurate information. Along with accuracy, the website needs to be an outlet that provides resources for and interactivity between, NIA and its stakeholders. According to Wagner (2013), one of the most important components of a successful website is interactivity. Interactivity allows users to participate, which leads to users spending more time on the website, visiting frequently, and sharing content on other online platforms. Therefore, the goal of the website should be to attract as much traffic as possible. I proposed that NIA can attract more stakeholders to its website by providing content that is interactive and engaging.

When constructing the website, it is important for NIA to understand which stakeholders will be visiting its website for information. It should be accessible and useful for a variety of stakeholders that show different levels of interest in the organization. I suggested the following stakeholders may show interest in the website if it is updated with accurate information: current customers, potential customers, employees, community members, and the media. When making recommendations, I kept these stakeholders and their needs in mind.

To establish recommendations for the website, I analyzed NIA's current website and its competitors website page-by-page to identify ways NIA can create more effective communication with stakeholders. According to Daily Blog Tips: Building a Successful Website (2014), "whatever you do, you have to be more innovative, original, have a better design, better content than your competitors. Simply try to beat the competition. Use them to learn what works for them, and what doesn't" (para 4). In NIA's case, one competitor has connected its social media sites with its homepage. I suggested adding NIA's Facebook and Twitter feeds to the website to provide visitors with more information. Research on NIA's customers indicated that most are not on Facebook or Twitter. However, by adding this live feed, they have the opportunity to be included in the social media conversation. This will enable them to view social media posts even if they do not have a social media account. This allows for consistency across communication outlets, which helps enhance organizational identity with stakeholders and overall branding. Also, competitors' websites provide visitors with the live grain report on their homepages. I recommended adding the live grain report to ensure customers are not receiving this information from NIA's competitors.

I, then, analyzed NIA's "About Us" page. On this page, there is one paragraph explaining the story of NIA and what it offers. Hoffman and Ford (2010) explain organizations can also engage in storytelling to promote and maintain identities. Previously conducted research by Adayana concluded that consumers do not understand the story of NIA, Elburn, and CHS. CHS is a fortune 100 company and the nation's leading farmer-owned cooperative. Elburn is a successful independent company that has twelve locations in Illinois and Wisconsin. Therefore, I recommended NIA elaborate on the NIA story, what the facility has to offer and, its relationship with Elburn and CHS. By elaborating on these partnerships and offering reasons to conduct

business with NIA, the organization participates in the rhetorical strategy of differentiation by highlighting its competitive advantage. Moreover, the brand pyramid established one of NIA's competitive advantages is that the sales consultants live and work in the community. Therefore, highlighting the biographies of the management team and the sales consultants will help contribute to the NIA story and provide stakeholders with information they value. Lastly, research by Adayana indicated that consumers want to be informed about the successes other customers have had with NIA. I recommended this need could be met by adding videos, pictures, or short stories from the customers' perspective to help establish how NIA can add values to customer farms.

NIA's website also contains a "News" page. On this page, radio spots and press releases are added. This page is consistently updated and is useful for customers and potential customers in understanding NIA news, products, and the services it offers. This page is also useful for media outlets and community members as they are able to obtain information about what is going on at NIA. This page heavily showcases community involvement and corporate social responsibility. Therefore, community members are able to see what NIA has done to help the local community. According to Hoffman and Ford (2010), NIA is engaging in the rhetorical strategy of association. Association is important for building identity because it links the organization with attributes that are viewed positively by its audience. By constantly updating this page NIA is engaging in associating and enhancing its organizational identity.

The next page on the website is the "Agronomy" page. This is a major component of NIA's business and more information should be provided on this page. In Adayana's research, participants disclosed the importance of their cooperative showcasing its new technologies and its competitive advantage. Participants also disclosed the importance of their cooperative having

reliable and the latest equipment for fieldwork. Therefore, I recommended NIA showcase all of the new equipment it can offer its customers to assist with their efficiency. Also, NIA has invited customers to visit test plots this year. It is NIA's responsibility to keep interested parties informed. Therefore, I recommended showing the success of the test plots for customers who missed the event or for those who need to recall the products. This will help them remember what products they need to use for next season to ensure efficiency and profitability. The content from the test plots should also be showed online via photos and videos creating a summary of the results that stakeholders can read about and see on the website will also help underscore the value of NIA's products and services.

Lastly, I analyzed the "Contact Us" page. I recommended NIA add an interactive form so stakeholders can easily contact NIA directly. This is convenient for stakeholders and it allows NIA to use the website as a point of entry. This is an interactive tool, which means visitors do not have to call to find out more information. This form also showcases NIA is keeping up with modern trends in website expectations.

I also proposed potential outcomes if NIA enacts the website recommendations. These additions will help generate more traffic on the website because it will provide stakeholders reasons to visit daily. The additions will also assist in making the website more interactive and engaging for visitors. By keeping the website updated and providing accurate information, all stakeholders can use this outlet to remain informed and find information about NIA. These additions show NIA is listening to the needs of customers and potential customers by elaborating on its story and providing information concerning success stories, products/services, technologies and machinery.

In order for NIA to see the success of these additions, I showcased how NIA could provide an objective measurement of its website traffic. This can be accomplished through Google Analytics. Bullock (2012) explains monitoring website traffic is beneficial for organizational success. If an organization is spending money on a website, it should ensure that it is being utilized by consumers. Monitoring website traffic can result in greater insight into visitor's habits and behaviors. Also, monitoring traffic enables an organization to know how many people are visiting the website daily, who is visiting, and from what area. It allows an organization to see what pages the visitors are interested in and how long they are staying on each page. Monitoring shows what time of day the website is the busiest. Through monitoring, NIA can get to know its visitors and determine which aspects of the website it should invest the most time and resources. A website is able to showcase, in detail, the important aspects of the organization and what it has to offer. There is not significant direct contact between the organization and its stakeholders (only the use of the contact form). Therefore, two-way communication can be achieved via social media outlets.

Tactic 2: Social Media

Research conducted on NIA's Facebook page revealed that 27% of current customers have Facebook, 25% of potential customers have Facebook, and NIA currently has 100 "likes" on its own page. I, then, analyzed how NIA uses this page to communicate with stakeholders to understand what messages are currently being communicated. Facebook is one of the main outlets NIA used to promote the Responsible Ag program. It also is used to promote its promise to growers, for customer involvement such as grower meetings, customer appreciation days and community involvement. It also contains NIA radio spots and press releases, a few customer

success stories, pictures and posts about equipment and fieldwork, and posts about safety around planting and harvest season.

Social media is participatory media. Unlike a traditional organizational website, stakeholders can have conversations with the organization and other interested stakeholders. Hendricks (2014) explains social media is an engagement tool that involves two-way communication. Therefore, posts should be engaging and allow for social media users to participate in a conversation. In order for this outlet to be more effective, NIA needs to increase the size of its audience and this can be accomplished through more interactive posts. Bunskoek (2013) explains that the more interactive a post, the more “likes” and shares it will receive. This results in more users viewing your posts and following your page. Based on this notion, I created an example social media storyboard for NIA that would engage users and allow for participation (see appendix B). Increased interactivity and engagement were the two key goals that guided recommendations for social media messages. I recommended NIA post more frequently to keep stakeholders informed about what is going on at NIA. This can be accomplished by posting more information about the Responsible Ag program, as this is a major accomplishment. I suggested NIA also increase messages from local experts by posting videos or posts from salespersons about successes, products, or services. Also to keep stakeholders educated and informed, NIA should post a question of the week, as this would be engaging for social media followers. Finally, NIA should increase posts that showcase technology, community involvement, and its successes. Facebook should be used as an outlet for NIA to tell its story and what it has to offer. Casas (2014) explains that social media is a powerful tool for storytelling. “We have to harness the power of social networks, not just to ‘share’ content, but to ‘tell it’ and

to ‘narrate’ the brand” (para, 4). Because research revealed that stakeholders are unaware of the NIA story this outlet can educate stakeholders about NIA and what it has to offer.

The other social media outlet NIA uses is Twitter. An analysis of NIA’s Twitter account revealed that this outlet is not used as much as Facebook. However, like Facebook, NIA is not reaching its target audience on this outlet, as many of the followers are not customers.

NIA has 37 followers, but when it tweets, the messages are consistent with its Facebook posts and website content. However, NIA uses this outlet to connect with other businesses in the community such as members of the Chamber of Commerce, chemical companies, CHS, and Elburn Cooperative locations. By connecting with these businesses, NIA’s tweets can be retweeted for their followers to see. Therefore, more people are seeing NIA’s content, which may result in more followers. More importantly, NIA is communicating and building relationships with organizations in the local community.

Twitter provides a fast and effective avenue to respond to conversations with 140 characters or less. According to Ward (2010) Twitter provides an outlet for listening to and finding out more about your stakeholders. For example, an organization can identify likes or dislikes, how stakeholders feel about the brand, and curate suggestions for improvements. Although NIA does not have a large number of followers, I recommended NIA stick with the outlet and continue to grow its audience by posting more frequently and connecting with other business. I also suggested NIA connect its Twitter account to its Facebook account. Then, when NIA updates Facebook, Twitter will be simultaneously updated. Therefore, posts will be consistent across both social media outlets.

Facebook and Twitter can be accessed by customers, potential customers, employees, community members, and the media. Therefore, it is important to post frequently to maintain

communication with various stakeholder groups. According to the Pew Research Center, 71% of online adults use Facebook and 23% of online adults use Twitter. However, maintaining a social media presence is important for younger consumers. I recommended that NIA maintain communication with younger stakeholders and find an additional outlet to communicate with the middle-aged to older-farmers.

According to Hendricks (2014), it is important for an organization to understand its target audience and the most effective time to post on social media. For most businesses, this is Monday through Friday around 10am and 4pm. If used effectively, the potential outcomes for Twitter and Facebook enable two-way communication with stakeholders and NIA will be able to receive instant feedback. Also, messages can be shared quickly and with more potential customers and community members than direct mail.

Similar to monitoring website traffic, NIA can quickly measure social media reach by the number of “likes” or “followers” on the Facebook and Twitter pages. The more “likes” or “followers,” the more potential stakeholders NIA has the opportunity to communicate with. Also, on both social media outlets, the organization is able to see who “likes” the page. Therefore, it is easy to establish if your target audience is using this page to receive information. Also, success can be measured by examining the comments on social media posts. Michaelson, Wright, and Stacks (2012) explain by looking at the comments people write on posts, organizations can better understand the attitudes and behaviors of its stakeholders.

Tactic 3: Newsletter

After an analysis of NIA’s customer list and Facebook friends, NIA’s target audience is not significantly using Facebook or Twitter for information about the organization. Because

NIA's target demographic is the middle-aged to older farmer, a more traditional communication outlet will be more effective in connecting with this audience.

I proposed the creation and implementation of a newsletter to help keep stakeholders educated and informed. Research conducted revealed that competitors are using newsletters as a communication tactic. Competitor's newsletters contain educational material, agricultural trends, technology information, and news about what is happening at their cooperatives.

A variety of stakeholders will be interested in the information found in the newsletter. It is important that NIA's stakeholders are learning about farming trends and technology from the cooperative with which they conduct business. Therefore, a newsletter will be important to customers, potential customers, employees, and community members. I kept all stakeholders in mind when making recommendations about the newsletter.

According to the Content Marketing Institute (2013), 78% of businesses utilize newsletters. In this study, they asked participants how they preferred to receive company updates and information and 90% of participants cited a newsletter. Adding a newsletter would help maintain stakeholder involvement and create a sense of teamwork and oneness across the organization as all stakeholders will be informed about information from NIA. This is also another outlet for NIA to tell its story. NIA could showcase customer success stories and salesman's advice and experiences. The newsletter would educate and inform stakeholders on the NIA story, promise, agricultural information, trends, technology, and products and services. All interested stakeholders would be informed and have the opportunity to be educated by NIA. The newsletter would also help articulate key messages about NIA's commitment to safety by showcasing the Responsible Ag program. I also recommended the outlet showcase community involvement and the outlet could act as a recruitment tool to advertise job opportunities to secure

adequate talent during the busy season. Lastly, the newsletter should have a message from top management about the direction of NIA and what is happening at the cooperative. This will help keep stakeholders informed and create transparency.

I recommend NIA distribute the newsletter every quarter in order to enhance communication with stakeholders. This will allow stakeholders to be more informed as they are receiving information about their cooperative. However, the success of the newsletter may be difficult to measure. Most likely NIA will direct mail the newsletter. Therefore, it can be difficult to obtain an accurate number of stakeholders that read the newsletter. However, linking digital versions of the newsletter to NIA's website will allow it to be tracked by the website monitoring tool. NIA will be able to see how many times the newsletter is viewed online. Also, some stakeholders may not want the newsletter via direct mail. Emailing the newsletter can be another distribution method. It is efficient and cost effective and NIA will be able to see who opens the email and who does not.

With a newsletter, NIA is able to reach its target demographic through a more traditional outlet. This outlet allows NIA to elaborate more on important events and information that occur within the organization and the farming community. However, because a newsletter is a more traditional form of communication, there is a lack of engagement and participation. Therefore, there is little to no feedback regarding the information within the newsletter. Using a more interactive outlet, such as a blog allows stakeholders to seek out information from their cooperative and participate in the conversation through comments on blog posts.

Tactic 4: Blog

According to Eridon (2015), it is important for businesses to blog in order to drive traffic to their websites, develop customer relationships, and to position brands as industry leaders. In

Adayana's research, participants expressed their desire for education from their cooperatives. Therefore, I proposed NIA implement a blog to keep stakeholders educated and informed because it can be updated frequently and it is interactive. Since a blog is based online, anyone is able to access it to find information and therefore, it can interest a variety of stakeholders. The potential stakeholders for a blog could be customers, potential customers, employees, community members, and the media if they are looking for opinions from local experts. Since customers want to be given information from local experts, this is an outlet that should provide customers with information and tips that will help their operation be more efficient. I recommended NIA use this outlet to keep readers updated on products and agricultural trends. This outlet will be interactive and allow readers to provide NIA with immediate feedback. With a blog, NIA is starting a discussion and engaging customers, which is what customers report wanting from their cooperative. In order for this outlet to be effective, NIA can advertise the blog on its website, through social media, and in its newsletter to enhance readership.

One of the potential outcomes of the blog is more interaction between NIA and its stakeholders. A blog can also be constantly updated rather than a quarterly distributed newsletter. Also, most of NIA's competitors do not have blogs. Implementing a blog will show NIA is looking to engage its stakeholders in more depth, start discussions important to its stakeholders, and provide relevant and timely information. Through a blog, NIA can also engage the millennial demographic. Eventually, millennials will take over farming operations and it is important to develop a relationship with this demographic to ensure they maintain business with NIA.

Like the website and social media, NIA can measure the blog's activity to see if it is a successful communication outlet. NIA will be able to monitor how many people visit the blog daily and the amount of time they spend interacting with it. The more views the blog posts

receive, the more successful the blog will be. Also, blog visitors are able to comment and give feedback about the information NIA is providing. Visitors will be able to advocate for information they want and give feedback on if the information is helpful. Therefore, NIA will know exactly what information to provide the readers.

Tactic 5: Educationals

According to Craig (2015) many companies struggle to explain the benefits of products. This can be solved by educating customers. NIA currently uses educationals as a communication tactic. Some of the main educationals are grower meetings, test plots, and customer appreciation days.

However, NIA could increase the number of educationals and focus on another demographic. Using educationals as a communication tactic is different from the previously proposed tactics as it allows for face-to-face communication with stakeholders rather than written and computer mediated communication. Educationals allow stakeholders to feel more involved with the organization and they allow for direct communication with the management team and sales consultants.

Therefore, I recommended NIA continue to educate customers by updating them on the latest technologies, products, and services. This may lead to customers buying more products and services. However, I suggested NIA start to engage the millennial demographic. According to research conducted by the public relations firm, Colle McVoy, “millennials represent the new face of agriculture, an industry expected to grow by 70 percent as the world population grows to more than 9 billion by 2050” (Hannerman, 2015, para. 1). Someday, the younger generation will take over the farming operation. Therefore, it is important to develop a relationship with them. This can be done through sponsorship of Farm Safety Days, school events, and community

events. These events will allow NIA to tell its NIA story and articulate its promise and business to a younger demographic. Also it would be beneficial for NIA to create a storyboard that can be displayed at the educational and community events that help articulate its story. It should be kid friendly and focus on what NIA does and how it serves the community.

One of the main potential outcomes of increasing educational is targeting a new demographic. Therefore, there will be more potential customers and more educated stakeholders. Also, feedback is one of the main outcomes of educational. At these events, NIA can ask for feedback from attendees to see what it is doing well, what it can improve upon, and what information stakeholders want to learn about. The success of this event can be measured by the number of people that attend events and through the feedback that is received.

Evaluation

Upon completion of the communication action plan, it was reviewed by NIA's general manager. We then had a meeting to receive feedback regarding recommendations I made for NIA's communication moving forward. The general manager felt I was able to identify key messages that are important to NIA and its stakeholders. One tactic he was impressed with was the increase in educational and targeting the millennial demographic. He agreed that the millennials need a place to go to get information and NIA should be this outlet. It is important for millennials to develop a relationship with a cooperative early on and educational and community events are an opportunity to develop this relationship.

Another tactic that he felt would be extremely beneficially was a newsletter. Because NIA's target demographic is not using social media regularly, he believed a newsletter would allow NIA to interact with its target demographic. He stated, by not having a newsletter, NIA is

missing out on opportunities to communicate what it has to offer and how it can help its customers improve efficiency throughout the year.

Lastly, he agreed that NIA's website should be more interactive. He felt the live grain report and social media feeds would help with this interactivity and drive stakeholders to this outlet to find information. He also understood that the public relations firm which writes the radio commercials directs interested parties to visit the website for more information, but they do not update the website appropriately to accommodate the commercials' messages. By updating the website consistently, he felt it would be used more often and it could be a resource for its stakeholders.

At this current time, budget constraints do not allow NIA to hire someone to focus solely on its communication. Therefore, blogging may be a difficult outlet to undertake as salesmen are not familiar with this outlet and they do not have the time to consistently blog. However, the general manager explained a new salesman will join them at the beginning of the new year. The new salesman is 25 years old and has social media experience and he has indicated he would be happy to help with social media and starting a blog.

Overall, the general manager felt it is difficult to pin point how to target customers, as they are all different. He explained, some customers prefer a brochure/newsletter and some want to attend educationals. Basically, it just boils down to the customer and their preferences. However, he felt that communicating on a variety of outlets would help combat this issue.

To end our conversation, I asked the general manager if there were any areas that could be improved within the communication action plan. The next piece of information that needs to be gathered is knowing/understanding the competition. He would like to know more about the competition's communication and what they have to offer customers. By understanding the

programs they are offering, he felt NIA could match these programs or stay one step ahead of them. Now that we know about their communication practices, it's time to find out exactly what competitors are doing. We can examine what they are communicating now, not just how.

Overall, he was pleased with the communication action and hopes to start using as many tactics as possible after January 1, 2016.

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Appendices



Communication Plan

*A comprehensive communication plan
designed to examine and enhance
communication and brand strategy*

Executive Summary

The following is a comprehensive communication plan for Northern Illinois Alliance designed to examine and enhance communication and brand strategy. The plan's overall objective is to increase long-term enterprise value by enhancing communication with stakeholders to achieve a better understanding of NIA.

In 2013 Adayana, a research firm, conducted primary research concerning potential customers needs from their cooperative when NIA was establishing its business. At the time, the data was given to top management, but was not distributed to NIA's public relations firm. Therefore, it was not used by NIA's public relations firm to identify or communicate messages known to be important to NIA's stakeholders. In order to fully understand NIA and what the public desires from it, an in depth analysis was conducted on this research. From this analysis, messages important to stakeholders were established and then objectives, strategies, and tactics were created to meet stakeholder needs.

In addition to the Adayana research, it is important for this plan to establish NIA's top three competitors and examine their communication efforts in order to understand the competitive environment in which NIA operates. Through an analysis of competitor communication, this plan reveals what NIA does better than its competitors and what areas of communication need improvement. This research also reveals what communication outlets NIA's competitors are utilizing, which help identify dead zones in NIA's communication efforts. The territory management plan, created by NIA's general manager, was also used to enhance research findings and guide communication recommendations. The territory management plan provided understanding as to what aspects of NIA's operation are top priorities as it interacts with stakeholders and grows in the community.

The final factor that guided this plan was an analysis of NIA's current external communications including its website content, social media efforts, and advertising. This revealed what messages are currently being communicated to stakeholders and through which outlets. This analysis led to insight into communication outlet effectiveness and which outlets need to be leveraged to enhance NIA's external messages and overall branding success.

This communication plan provides NIA with communication tactics that will assist in making the brand more clear, consistent, and recognizable for stakeholders. It will highlight the importance of investing resources in communication with stakeholders and organizational branding. This can be accomplished by utilizing consistent branding practices at all levels of the organization and effectively communicating NIA's story, products/services, and contributions to the community across various communication outlets.

In the following section, the data collection methods are showcased to explain how key messages were identified to determine success and organizational value. Next, is a Communication Action Plan. Within the plan, an overall objective to enhance communication is proposed. Strategies are then proposed to support the overall objective. Stakeholders are identified for each strategy along with rationales for their importance to successful implementation. Lastly, this plan provides recommendations as to how NIA can use each strategy to enhance communication with its stakeholders and add value to its overall branding.

Part 1: Research Analysis

The following research was used to establish key messages by identifying aspects of the business important to NIA and its stakeholders. Identifying important aspects of the business assisted in providing recommendations to enhance NIA's overall communication and brand strategies.

Northern Illinois Alliance Brand Pyramid

Building a brand is important to every business. Branding helps consumers identify with your business and it affects how consumers view your business and its purpose. Therefore, when building a brand you are making a promise to your stakeholders regarding your business and the core values that you abide by when conducting business.

One way to identify these core values is through a brand pyramid. A brand pyramid assists organizations with identifying with its customers, while examining its competitive advantages and values. It also helps identify key messages that should be communicated to stakeholders. Listed below are the questions I used during by meeting with the general manager to establish its brand pyramid.

1. Rational Benefits

- What are the differentiating factors that set your organization apart from the competition?
- What do you do really well? (This is from the organization's point of view).
 - These aspects become the key messages about the organization.

2. Emotional Benefits

- How does the customer connect with the organization on an emotional level when conducting business with Northern Illinois Alliance? (What people feel like when doing business with NIA).

3. Personality

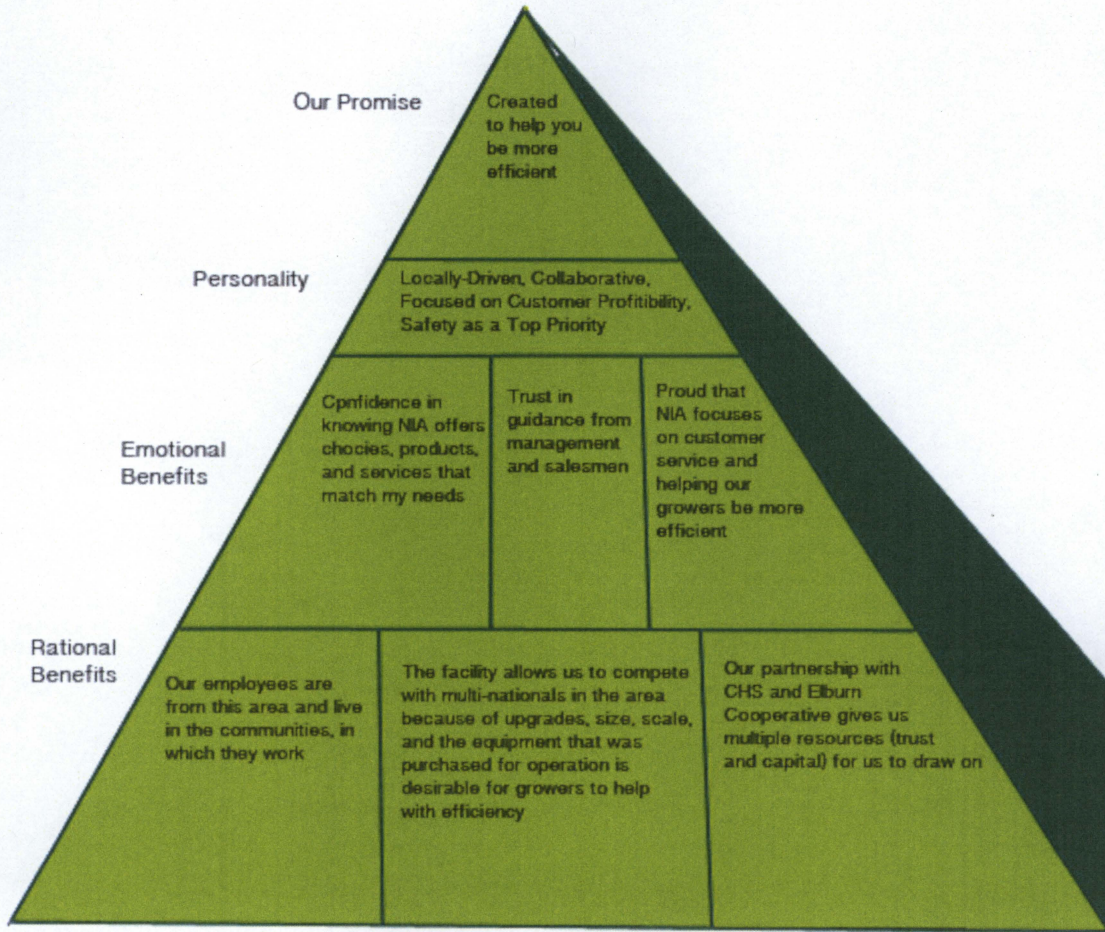
- What is the culture and tone of Northern Illinois Alliance?
 - This helps the organization determine how to go to market and articulate its code of conduct.

4. Promise:

- This is the organization's singular message that it wants each team member and customer to understand.
- How NIA contributes to the success of the organization.
 - This acts as a "gut check" to determine if the organization is doing things correctly.

The answers to these questions led to the following brand pyramid:

Northern Illinois Brand Pyramid



Brand Pyramid Summary

The brand pyramid helps identify organizational aspects that should be used when communicating with stakeholders. These aspects were identified as important to NIA and its stakeholders. Therefore, these messages should be taken into consideration when engaging in communication. From the pyramid, the following messages can be identified:

- NIA increases customer's efficiency
- Customer confidence in NIA
- NIA provides trust and guidance from management and sales staff
- Employees are from the area
- NIA focuses on customer services as a top priority
- NIA has products and services that match customer needs
- Facility and equipment helps growers with efficiency
- NIA's partnership with CHS and Elburn are important to showcase

Adayana Research

An analysis of the Adayana research revealed key messages important to stakeholders. These key messages were used in the communication action plan to make recommendations for NIA's communication moving forward. While the brand pyramid was built from questioning NIA, this data showcases the consumer's point of view.

Fertilizer Key Takeaways:

- Highly fragmented supplier market, with Heritage and CPS holding a leading market share.
- Differentiators in the fertilizer market include customer service, price, products and service, and expertise. Most respondents cited their top suppliers as having great customer service and a variety of products at a fair price.

Crop Protection Key Takeaways:

- Because this area has issues with weed resistance, new products and services to address this problem is a major reason to switch suppliers.

Seed Key Takeaways:

- Demonstrating expertise and knowledge while providing good advice and service is the key factor that drives supplier differentiation in both corn and soybean seed suppliers. However, corn producers have a strong need for superior customer service.
- The primary reason for a producer to switch suppliers is predominately based on new products and new technology.

Key Takeaways: Differentiation

- NIA can attract farmers by offering great customer service and providing farmer education through knowledgeable employees and sales staff.
- Growers in the area have limited knowledge of NIA (tell your story).
 - Most farmers were generally open to learning more about Elburn/NIA.
- Quickly begin to communicate at a personal level with potential farmers/customers
 - Communicate key intentions and products/services. Tell them the Elburn/ NIA story and key benefits of doing business with Elburn/NIA.
- Hire employees that know the local area that can establish farmer relationships.
- Define the DuPont Pioneer relationship and special offerings (This would be Cropland relationship now).
- Since unique products and services are attractive to these customers, utilize any differentiating services that Elburn/ NIA currently has in your lead offer to these participants.

Advice for a New Retailer:

- Frequent communications
- Hire a knowledgeable sales team and staff
- Build strong relationships with producers
- Be a reliable and dependable partner for producers
- Profile your main competitors; find out what they are good at and how you can win business

Key Competitors

NIA has three major competitors: Heritage FS, Crop Production Services, and Donovan Farmers Co-Op Elevator. An analysis of NIA's three competitor's communication was conducted which revealed their preferred communication outlets. This analysis focuses on how NIA is communicating in comparison to its competitors. The Communication Tactics chart below shows which communication methods the businesses are using to communicate with stakeholders.

Key



Utilizing communication outlet



Not utilizing this outlet to communicate

Communication Tactics				
	Northern Illinois Alliance	Heritage FS	Crop Production Services	Donovan Farmers Co-Op Elevator
Website	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social Media	✓	✓	✗	✗
Newsletter	✗	✓	✓	✗
Radio Advertisements	✓	✓	✓	✗
Blog	✗	✗	✗	✓

Territory Management Plan

NIA's general manager created a territory management plan in the beginning of 2015. This plan was analyzed to enhance research findings and guide communication recommendations. The territory management plan provides understanding as to which aspects of NIA's operation are top priorities as it interacts with stakeholders and grows in the community. The general manager provided a SWOT analysis and an analysis of his territory within the plan.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- Employees are from this area and live in the community
- Facility – size and scale to compete with other multi-nationals in the area
 - Upgrades that make it faster and more efficient
- Equipment – great condition and desirable for growers

Weaknesses

- Being a single location with only crop input offerings at this time limits our ability to influence a larger market
- Limited staff during peak times
- Growing our business with limited ammonia and side dress UAN equipment is a major concern

Opportunities

- Facility
- Size and scale to offer customer growers the series they are looking for from full service to direct pick up
- Tools like Top Dress Urea and ATS that can be used to help spread out the nitrogen applications can set us apart from other suppliers
- Growing weed pressure and resistance forces the grower to look for answers and solutions in his fields

Threats

- Competitive area
- Large number of self-applied growers in the area
- Price shoppers
- Low commodity prices have put everyone in a “can't spend model”

Part 2: Communication Action Plan

Based on the information and research presented in Part 1, I was able to identify key themes important to stakeholders. The key messages include:

- NIA provides superior customer service and guidance
- Stakeholder interest in education, technology, and equipment
- Stakeholder interest in the NIA story and what it has to offer consumers.

Through these key themes, I was able to establish an overall communication objective for NIA, strategies, and tactics to enhance communication with stakeholders.

Overall Objective for NIA Communication Plan:

To enhance communication with stakeholders to achieve understanding of NIA's story, promise, news, and services.

Strategy:

Use consistent two way, in person, written, and oral communication to provide relevant and timely information regarding NIA's story, promise, news, and services

- Provide consistent information across all communication outlets
- Showcase excellent customer service, education, and technology

Tactic #1: Website

Website: (See Appendix A for Website Questionnaire)

- Because all of NIA's advertisements and rolling stock directs consumers to visit its website, this outlet needs to be constantly updated to provide accurate and timely information. The website needs to provide an outlet for resources and interactivity between NIA and its stakeholders.
- The goal of the website should be to attract as much traffic as possible. NIA can attract stakeholders to its website by providing them with information that engages customers.

Stakeholders

- When constructing your website it is important to understand which stakeholders will be accessing your site for information. It should be accessible for a variety of different stakeholders that show interest in the organization. The following stakeholders may show interest in your website if it is updated and with accurate information.
 - Current customers
 - Potential customers
 - Employees
 - Community
 - Media
- NIA needs to consider how the needs of the audiences are being met by website content.

Recommendations

The following are recommendations for NIA's website. I provide examples of NIA's current website (page by page) and make suggestions as to what could be improved based on the research analysis found in Part 1.

Page 1: NIA Current Homepage



Competitors' websites have connected their social media accounts with their homepages.

- NIA should add Facebook and Twitter feeds to provide website visitors with more information.
 - Social media research conducted on customers indicated most of your customers are not on Facebook or Twitter. By adding these feeds, they will be included in your social media conversations. This will allow them to view your social media posts even if they do not have a social media account.

Competitors' websites also provide visitors with the live grain report on their homepages.

- Add the live grain report to ensure your customers are not receiving this information from your competitors.

Page 2: About Us Page


About Us **Products & Services** **News** **ALLIANCE** **Agronomy** **Contact Us**

The Northern Illinois Alliance – A joint venture between Minneapolis-based CHS Inc., the nation's leading farmer-owned cooperative, and Elburn Cooperative, an integrated agriculture supply cooperative headquartered in Sycamore — offers agronomic retail products and services.

Offer patrons 30,000 ton of dry storage, 15,000 ton of liquid storage and 50 car-rail siding.

Current service offerings include:

- Blending of dry fertilizer
- 24 hr access for loading of 32 & 28% Nitrogen
- Croplan Seed Dealer

EMPLOYEES



Tim Gocken, Manager – Tim is the general manager for Northern Illinois Alliance's Crescent City full service wholesale and retail fertilizer facility. He graduated from Eureka College with a degree in Accounting. Tim was the manager at the current location for the wholesale dry and liquid operations from 1994 thru 2010. When CHS formed a joint venture and constructed a new wholesale/retail facility in Whitesville, IN he accepted the position and managed that facility from 2010 thru 2013. CHS and Elburn Coop formed a Joint venture to create Northern Illinois Alliance and he returned home to Crescent City to manage the operation.

Mobile 815-383-5936
Email: tim.gocken@nilalliance.com

On this page, there is one paragraph explaining the story of NIA and what it offers.

- Elaborate on the NIA story and what the facility has to offer.
 - Previously conducted research by Adayana concluded consumers do not understand the story of NIA, Elburn, and CHS.
- Explain this partnership to them and the benefits of doing business with you. This is where you can explain your competitive advantage.
- One of your competitive advantages is your sales consultants live and work in the community. Therefore, keeping the biography of management and sales consultants is necessary to inform website visitors about the NIA team. This will help contribute to telling your story.
 - Also, consider making a video that can be used on this page to tell your story and your management and sales team story.
- Research also indicates that consumers want to be informed about success stories that other customers have had at NIA
 - Customer needs can be met by adding videos, pictures, or short stories from customers to help keep other customers informed.

Page 3: NIA Products & Services Page



SERVICES

- Liquid spraying
- Dry Spreading
- VRT
- Liquid Blending
- 24-hour Liquid Loading
- Dry Blended Products
- Soil Testing
- Crop Scouting
- Custom Application
- Strip Till
- Financing Tools
- Field Planning
- Farm Consulting

Above: 3 million gallon UAN storage with 24 hour loading

Below: Chemical loading with blending capabilities



PRODUCTS

- UAN - 32 + 28%
- DAP
- Potash
- Ammonia
- AMS
- Gypsum
- 40 Rock
- Hydra Hume
- Starter Programs
- Controlled Released Nitrogen



Fleet of 16 ton tender trucks



Full line of spreading and spraying equipment.



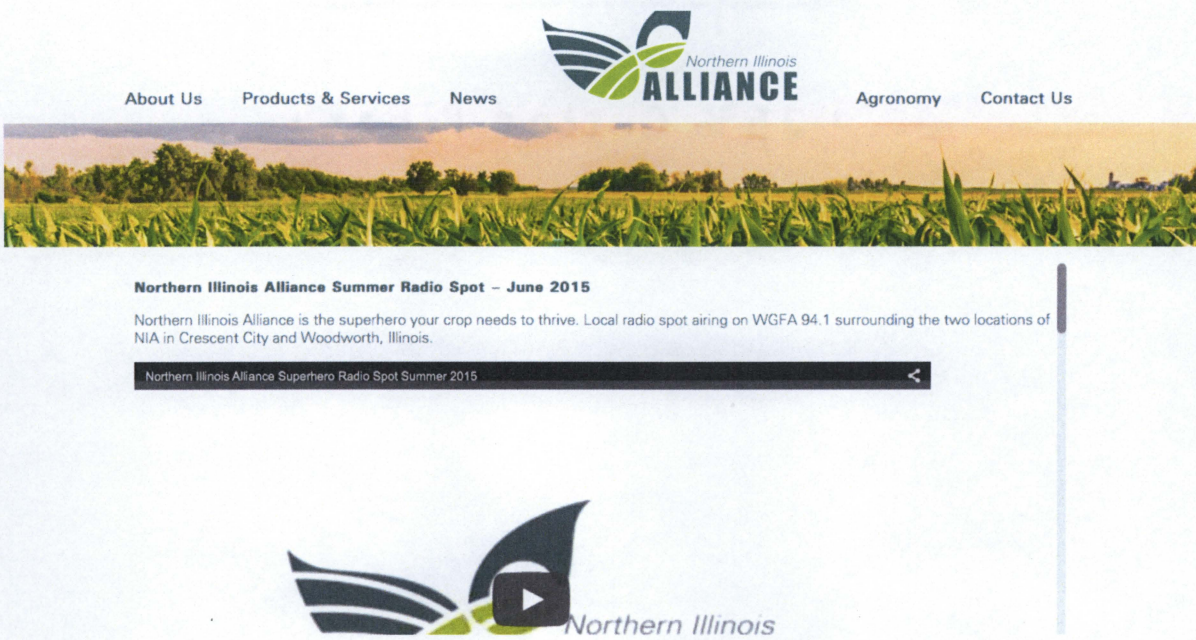
1000, 1450, 2000 and double 1450 NH3 nurse tanks available.

After an analysis of NIA’s advertising, it is evident that NIA is directing stakeholders to its website for more information (products and services pages).

- Therefore, this page needs to be constantly updated to keep customers informed and to be consistent with your latest advertisements.

Additional Considerations

- In research conducted by Adayana, participants indicated they were interested in Pioneer products. Pioneer products turned out to be undesirable to your customer base.
- Advertise your new partnership with Cropland, as this is what your customers are interested in.

Page 4: NIA News Page

- Radio spots and press releases are added to this page of the website.
- This is updated and useful for customers and potential customers in understanding NIA news and products/services offered.
- This page is also useful for media outlets and community members as they are able to obtain information about what is going on at NIA.
 - This page heavily showcases community involvement and corporate social responsibility. Therefore, community members are able to see what NIA is doing to help the community.
- By keeping this updated, all interested stakeholders will find this page useful.

Additional Considerations

- Compile a media list to send information to ensure all outlets are receiving your news.
- Therefore, when sending news to media outlets you already have a compiled list of sources. This is a quick and efficient way to inform the media of important information.

Page 5: NIA Agronomy page

Agronomy a major component of your business and more information should be provided.

- In the Adayana research, participants disclosed the importance of their cooperative showcasing its new technologies offered to customers.
 - Therefore, it is important to showcase your technologies and your competitive advantage
- Customers also disclosed the importance of their cooperative having reliable and the latest equipment for fieldwork.
 - Showcase all the new machines and equipment you can offer to your customers
- Also, test plots have been a major event you have invited customers to this year.
 - It is NIA's responsibility to keep interested parties informed. Therefore, showcase the success of your test plots for customers who need some refreshing or for those who missed your events.
 - This will also help them remember what products they need to use for next season to ensure efficiency and profitability.

Page 6: NIA Contact US Page



- Add an interactive form for stakeholders to contact you directly. This is convenient for stakeholders and enhances your website as a communication tool.
- This is an interactive tool which means visitors do not have to call to find out more information. This form can save you time and is a fast and effective communication tool.

Potential Outcomes from Website Recommendations

- These additions will help generate more traffic on the website because you are providing stakeholders reasons to visit your website daily.
- These additions will assist with making your website more interactive and engaging for visitors.
- By keeping your website updated and providing accurate information, all stakeholders can use this outlet to remain informed and find information about NIA.
- There will be also be consistent messages across all communication outlets, such as radio advertisements and social media.
- NIA is also listening to customers' and potential customers' needs by elaborating on its story, success stories, products/services, technologies, and machinery through its website.

Measurement of Website Traffic

Through monitoring, you are able to get to know your visitors and what aspects of the website you should invest the most time and resources into

- Google Analytics
 - Monitoring website traffic is beneficial for organizational success because you can ensure it is being utilized by consumers.
 - Monitoring your website traffic can result in greater insight into visitors habits and behaviors.
 - Also, monitoring traffic enables you to know how many people are visiting the website daily, who is visiting, and from what area
 - Monitoring also allows you to see what pages the visitors are interested in and how long they are staying on each page. You can then add the appropriate content that interests visitors.
 - You can also monitor the time of day the website is the busiest. Understanding what time of day your website receives the most activity can give you an indication as to when to promote a new campaign or post new content that will be seen by website viewers.

Tactic #2: Social Media

This tactic focuses on social media. I provide research that was conducted on NIA's Facebook and Twitter accounts to help make recommendations for future success using the outlets.

Facebook

This outlet should be interactive and engaging for users

Research on NIA's Facebook Page

- 27% of current customers have Facebook
- 25% of potential customers have Facebook
- NIA currently has 100 likes on its Facebook page

Stakeholders

Social media can be accessible to a variety of stakeholders. Therefore, it is important to post frequently in order to maintain communication with various stakeholder groups.

- Customers
- Potential customers
- Employees
- Community
- Media

Uses of this outlet by NIA

- One of the largest tactics the organization used to promote the Responsible Ag program
- Promote its promise to growers
- Uses outlet to showcase radio spots and press releases (adds consistency with website)
- Showcase involvement in the community (donations, Responsible Ag, fair involvement, new signs its placed)
- Customer involvement
 - Grower meeting and customer appreciation days
- Showcase working in the field and pictures of equipment
- A few success stories (keep adding more)
- Safety posts around harvest

Recommendations:

- Keep your stakeholders informed by posting more frequently. (See Appendix B for a social media story board that contains example Facebook and Twitter posts).
- Create more posts that inform stakeholders about what is going on at NIA
 - Post more about the Responsible Ag program – this is a major accomplishment for NIA
 - Increase messages from local experts
 - Videos or posts from salesman about successes, products, or services

- Add a question or product of the week. This will allow interactivity between the sales team and social media users. This will also help keep social media users educated on what NIA has to offer.
- Keep reinforcing promise to stakeholders through interactive posts.
- More posts showcasing technology, local experts, community involvement, and successes. Allow this to be an outlet to tell your story.
- Increase audience size through interactive posts. The more interactive the post, the more likes and shares the posts will receive from stakeholders.

NOTE: After an analysis of NIA's customer list and Facebook friends, NIA's target audience is not using this page for information about the organization. Because NIA's target demographic is the middle aged to older farmer, a more traditional outlet will be more effective in engaging this audience. However, maintaining your social media presence is important for your younger consumers. Maintain your communication with younger stakeholders and utilize other outlets to provide communication for your middle aged to older farmer, such as:

- Quarterly newsletters (Vistacomm as a vendor for newsletters)
- Radio advertisements

Twitter

Research on NIA's Twitter Page

- 37 followers and does not use this outlet as much as Facebook
- However, messages are consistent across all outlets
- Not reaching target audience on this outlet, as much of the followers are not customers
- This outlet is allowing NIA to connect with other business in the community
 - Members of Chamber of Commerce
 - Chemical Companies
 - CHS
 - Elburn Cooperative

Recommendations

- Keep this outlet and continue to grow audience by posting more and connecting with more businesses.
- Connect Twitter to your Facebook account. Therefore, posts will be consistent across both social media outlets and done simultaneously.
- Keep this outlet for the connections you have already made. However, find alternative ways to relay messages to target audience, such as:
 - Newsletters, radio spots, grower meetings, etc.

Potential Outcomes from Facebook and Twitter

- Enables two-way communication. You are able to receive instant feedback from stakeholders.
- Supplemental communication tool to keep stakeholders informed and bring potential customers to the website.
- Messages can be shared quickly and with more potential customers and community members than direct mail.

Measurement of Social Media (Facebook and Twitter) Success

- Measurement can be conducted through the number of “likes” or “followers” on your Facebook and Twitter. The more “likes” or “followers,” the more stakeholders you are communicating with.
- Also, you are able to see the user who likes your page. Therefore, it is easy to establish if your customers are using this page to receive information.
- You are also about to measure success by examining attitudes and behaviors by monitoring the comment section of posts. Through comments you are able to see what users are saying about your organization and what it has to offer.

Tactic #3: Newsletter

The following tactic proposes implementation of a newsletter to help keep stakeholders educated and informed. Research revealed competitors are using newsletters as a communication tool. Because most of your customers are not using social media to receive your communication, this is a more traditional outlet that will enable them to receive your messages.

- NIA currently does not have a newsletter.
- Competitors create newsletters for their customers.
- Competitors' newsletters contain educational material, trends, technology, and news about what is happening at the cooperative.

Stakeholders

A variety of stakeholders will be interested in the information you are distributing. This is important because you want your stakeholders to learn information about farming trends, technology, and education from the cooperative they conduct business with. A newsletter will keep all stakeholders informed.

- Customers
- Potential Customers
- Employees
- Community Members (inform by linking the newsletter to your website)

Recommendations:

- Add a newsletter as a communication tool.
- Adding a newsletter would help maintain stakeholder involvement and create a sense of teamwork and oneness across the organization.
- This is another outlet to "tell your story."
 - Showcase customer success stories
 - Salesman experiences and successes
- It would educate and inform customers on the NIA story, promise, agricultural information and trends, technology, products and services, etc.
 - All interested stakeholders would be informed and have the opportunity to be educated by NIA
- The newsletter would also help to articulate key messages about NIA's commitment to safety.
 - Showcase the Responsible Ag program
- Also it could be an outlet to showcase involvement in the community
- The newsletter could also act as a recruitment tool to advertisement job opportunities to secure adequate talent during busy seasons.
- Provide a message from top management about the direction of NIA
- Distribute every quarter by mail or email.

Suggested Vendor

- Vistacomm as a vendor for newsletters

Potential Outcomes of Newsletter

- Enhanced communication with stakeholders, as they are more informed about NIA and what it has to offer.
- Also, stakeholders are receiving messages/information from their cooperative as opposed to other competing cooperatives.

Measurement of Readership of Newsletter

- Most likely you will direct mail the newsletter. Therefore, it can be difficult to obtain an accurate number of stakeholders that read the newsletter.
- However, linking the newsletter to your website will allow it to be tracked by your website monitoring tool. You will be able to view how many times the newsletter is viewed.
- Also, some customers may not want you to direct mail their newsletter. Emailing customers a newsletter can be another way to distribute your information. It is also quick and cost effective.
 - You are able to see who opens the email and who does not.

Example Newsletters (See Appendix C)

The following organizations provide their stakeholders with superior newsletters. In the newsletters, they provide messages from top management about the organization, financial information, and educational information for their stakeholders. When implementing this tactic use the following organizations' newsletters as a guide.

- CHS, Inc.
- Heritage FS/Growmark
- Sun Rise Cooperative in Hyvonna

Tactic #4: Blog

The following tactic proposes implementation of a blog to help keep stakeholders educated and informed.

- NIA currently does not have a blog
- In Adayana research, participants expressed their desire for education from their cooperative. This can be used as an educational tool.

Stakeholders:

Because a blog is based online, anyone is able to access your blog to find information. Therefore, there can be a variety of interested stakeholders.

- Customers
- Potential Customers
- Employees
- Community
- Media (looking for opinions from local experts)

Recommendation:

- Add a blog as a communication tool.
- Use a wordpress or blogspot template to begin operation.
- Customers want to be given information from experts that they trust. Provide customers with information and tips that will help their operation be more efficient.
- Keep readers updated on success, products, and trends in agriculture.
 - What is NIA doing really well for customers
 - What are current customers doing that is making them successful
 - Feature a farmer or farm family of the month
- This outlet will also be interactive and allow readers to provide NIA with immediate feedback.
 - NIA is starting the discussion and engaging customers
- Advertise this outlet on website, social media, and newsletter to enhance readership
- When implementing a blog, create a publication schedule. This will help to ensure the blog is consistently updated.
- Also, make sure to have keywords in the blog headline so the content is searchable in a web browser. Online users will then be able to access your blog for information they are searching for.

Potential Outcomes of Blog

- Another communication outlet for stakeholders to interact with NIA.
- Along with a newsletter, this outlet would be a quick access tool for stakeholders.
- A blog can also be constantly updated rather than a newsletter that is distributed quarterly.
- Most of your competitors do not have a blog. This shows you are technologically advanced and engaging in an outlet not utilized by other cooperatives.

- Engaging the millennial demographic. This demographic is important too. They will take over the farming operation eventually and you want to have a relationship with them.

Measurement of Activity on Blog

- Like your website, you are able to monitor how many people visit your blog a day and the amount of time they spend interacting with it.
- The more views, the more successful your blog.
- Visitors are able to comment. Therefore, they can give you feedback on the information you are providing.
 - Visitors can advocate for information they would like to learn.
 - Also, they can give you feedback on the usefulness of the information. Therefore you know exactly what type of information stakeholders want.

Example Blogs

- The following blogs provide their visitors with advice and educational information. The information engages users through lists, pictures, and videos.
- <http://www.smallfarmcentral.com/blog>
- <http://farmbusiness.blogspot.com>
- <http://www.thesocialsilo.com>
-
- <http://farmingamerica.org>

Tactic #5: Educationals

The following is a tactic NIA uses. However, NIA could increase the number of educationals held and focus on another demographic.

- Grower Meetings
- Test Plots
- Customer Appreciation Days

Stakeholders

- Customers
- Potential Customers
- Millennials
- Community

Recommendations:

- Engage current customers. Keep them updated on the latest technologies, products, and services
 - May lead them to buy more products and services
- Engage millennials: This is an important demographic too. Someday the younger generation may take over the farming operation. Therefore, it is important to have a relationship with them.
 - Farm Safety Days
 - School Events
 - Community Events
- Tell the NIA story and articulate NIA's promise to growers

Potential Outcomes of Educationals

- Feedback: At these events, ask for feedback from attendees to see what you are doing well, what you can improve upon, and what information stakeholders want to learn about.
- More educated stakeholders
- Target a new demographic

Measurement of Success

- The number of people that attend events
- Through feedback at events

Additional Consideration

- Create a storyboard that can be set up at educationals and community events that help articulate the NIA story. Make it simple and kid friendly.
 - What NIA does
 - How NIA serves the community

Communication Plan Summary

The overall objective for this plan was to enhance communication with all stakeholders to achieve understanding of NIA's story, promise, news, and services. The strategies for this objective were to use two-way, in person, written, and oral communication to provide relevant and timely information. This can be accomplished by providing stakeholders with consistent information across all communication outlets. Through implementation of the recommended tactics, (website, social media, newsletters, blog, and educational), NIA can achieve better communication with stakeholders and enhance its overall organizational identity and branding by crafting messages important to stakeholders.

The following messages were identified as important:

- Consistency and accurate information across communication outlets
- Customer services as a top priority
- Increasing customer efficiency
 - Machinery and equipment
 - Products and services
 - Facility
- Local experts
 - Trust
 - Success Stories
- Education on products and services
- Tell the NIA story

Appendix A Website Questionnaire

These website goals can help you identify the purpose of your website.

Website Goals

1. Who comes to your website today (audience) and why do they come there (customer needs)
2. What do you want to accomplish through your web presence (primary and secondary objectives)
3. How do those objectives support your overall business goals/ objectives?
4. How can your web presence support/promote your competitive advantage?
5. How is the website connected to other marketing and sales efforts and what part does it play (informational, transactional, lead generation)
6. How should the website integrate with other online efforts (social media sites, customer resources)?
7. What are the success metrics for your new website?

		<p>March- Agriculture Day (Use infographic) - Happy #AgDay2016! Share this post to celebrate and recognize the hard work farmers do! #ThankAFarmer http://www.thescialsilo.com/2013/03/19/national-ag-day-10-reasons-farmer-infographic/</p> <p>http://www.seametrics.com/blog/the-history-of-farming-infographic/</p>	<p>It is our goal to have our employees return home safely every day! Always make safety a top priority!</p>	<p>It's #GrowingSeason! Learn how #CHS can help you feed your crop and grow your income.</p>	<p>#CHS has a network of cooperatives and farmer-owners to source grain for domestic processing, feeding livestock and producing renewable fuels #CHS shares market information daily to help customers make the best buying and selling decisions. Learn how #CHS can assist you</p>	
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<p>Feed</p>	<p>#HappyNewYear from CHS! Wishing you a safe holiday!</p> <p>#CHS operates wholly owned and joint ventures feed mills which provide livestock producers and horse owners with Payback and Equis brand. Check out our brands!</p>	<p>Did you know we supply feed to more than 650 retail locations. Look for our Payback, Running Horse, Rancher's Choice and Country Vet branded products</p> <p>#AgricultureFunFact Did you know livestock farming feeds billions and employs 1.3 billion people?</p> <p>#FunFact! Just how big in the ag industry? 1 and 5 people on earth work in a division of livestock farming!</p>	<p>Do you have horses? Check out CHS Nutrition products #Equis Feed brand.</p> <p>#Equis Feed contains highly digestible ingredients, supplements for wellness and immune balance, and lower feeding rates.</p> <p>Save time and money by using Equis Feed brands. Our products allow for lower feeding rates. Our feed goes a long way. #savetime #savemoney</p> <p>#FunFactFriday! Did you know May is National Beef Month? How are you celebrating?</p>	<p>It's time for the fair! Are you feeding your livestock #Payback products?</p> <p>Good luck to all FFA and 4-H members participating in the fair!</p> <p>#FairWeekFunFact! FFA was founded in 1928 to help future generations prepare for the challenges of feeding a growing population.</p> <p>#FunFactFriday! Did you know 4-H is the nation's largest youth development and mentoring program? \$-H empowers 6 million young people!</p>	<p>October : It's Pork Month! We are proud of all the hard working producers! Thank a pork producer or tell us your story. #PorkMonth</p> <p>Did you know ranchers depend on #CHS for livestock feed?</p> <p>#CHS is the country's largest marketer of distillers dried grains and solubles. DDGS are exported for large scale feed operations.</p>	<p>Happy Holidays from (your business unit's name)! Wishing you a safe and blessed holiday!</p> <p>Our #Payback branded dry feed for beef, dairy, sheep, swine, goats, and poultry provides consistent results that deliver ranchers a profit edge. Keep your livestock well-nourished this winter with #Payback products.</p> <p>Is there a puppy under the Christmas tree this year? Make sure and feed your new family member #CHS pet food brands. #CountyVet #Rancher'sChoice</p>
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				Make sure to keep your livestock hydrated and nourished during the warm temperatures of fair week. #Payback		You can expect high protein sources, precise levels of quality vitamins and minerals, soy-free formulas, great taste and price from #CHS products
Grain	#HappyNewYear from CHS! Wishing you a safe holiday! Did you know the agriculture industry employees more than 24 billion people? Check out the careers CHS has to offer!	AgricultureFunFact! Did you know 1 in 3 acres on farmers are planted for export?		A single cooperative can accomplish so much, but imagine what a large number of cooperatives can accomplish! #CHS #globalconnections #CHS connects growers to feed companies all the around the world. See how #CHS can assist with distributing your grain.	Let #CHS help you store your grain this season! Through our farmer owned cooperatives and farmer-owners, we distribute grain for domestic processing, feeding livestock and producing renewable fuel.	Happy Holidays from (your business unit's name)! Wishing you a safe and blessed holiday!
Energy	#CHS values #propane safety. We make safety a priority and offer programs to assist our	#CHS is a leader in formulating premium fuels. We strive to keep our customers connected to	Consumers and businesses fuel up at 1,400 #Cenex branded retail petroleum outlets.	For 80 years, #CHS branded lubricants have showcased a high performance under tough	Don't let your machinery get stuck in the field during harvest! Use our Cenex and	Happy Holidays from (your business unit's name)! Wish you a safe and blessed holiday!

	<p>customers.</p> <p>Make sure you are safe this winter. Check your chimney, vents, and tank for blockage caused by snow and ice. #CHS #propane #safety</p> <p>We hope spring is just around the corner! Make sure to prepare your machinery for the busy spring season! #Lubricants #CHS</p>	<p>quality fuel</p> <p>#CHS strives to create a dependable supply gasoline, diesel fuels, and products to serve our customers growing needs.</p> <p>#CHS refineries in Laurel, MT & McPherson, KS produce 140,000 barrels per day. We are investing resources to increase production and dependability of our products.</p> <p>#CHS is committed to complying with emissions requirements by investing in upgrades that will squeeze more fuel out of every barrel of crude oil</p>	<p>#Cenex high performance fuel goes the extra mile in car after car or fleet after fleet</p> <p>It's that time of year again - #grilling season! Remember #propane #safety when using propane to heat your grill!</p>	<p>operating conditions. Let us assist you with all your operating machinery needs</p> <p>Don't let your machinery get stuck in the field this growing season! Use our Cenex and Farm Oyl brands and private label lubricants for all your farming needs</p>	<p>Farm Oyl brands and private label lubricants for all your farming needs</p> <p>It's #HarvestSeason. Just out #CHS lubricants to keep your machinery running smoothly.</p> <p>Make sure you remember safety during #HarvestSeason. CHS lubricant products to prevent accidents and breakdowns.</p>	<p>#CHS provides a wide variety of #propane products and services to help retailers and customers manage costs related to the fluctuation of propane market prices.</p> <p>#CHS is one of the nation's largest #propanke wholesalers. We have access to propane supply at 150 terminals in 40 states. Find out how CHS can assist you with your propane needs.</p>
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		<p>Trust your agricultural equipment, machinery, over the road trucks, and vehicles with CHS. We will keep you are running smoothly with our Cenex and Farm Oyl brands and private label lubricants</p>				<p>#Cenex, the energy brand of #CHS is dedicated to heating homes across the country. Locate our #Cenex propane distributors to assist you with all your #propane needs. http://www.cenex.com/locations?distributorType=4</p> <p>Don't let the cold temperatures get you down. Let #CHS assist you with all your #propane needs.</p>
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Appendix C Example Newsletters

CHS Newsletter

- Below are snapshots of CHS' newsletter. This showcases the information they find most relevant to relay to stakeholders.
- CHS sends a newsletter every two months, as well as a quarterly newsletter
- Their newsletters highlight leadership, changes, and finances.



Young leaders on the move

Your CHS Experience, a cooperative leader development event held Feb. 19-21 in Puerto Rico, provided a unique opportunity for current boards of directors and next-generation leaders to learn from each other. More than 20 young couples were nominated by their cooperatives to attend as a continuation of their participation at *CHS New Leaders Forum*, held every year in conjunction with the CHS Annual Meeting.

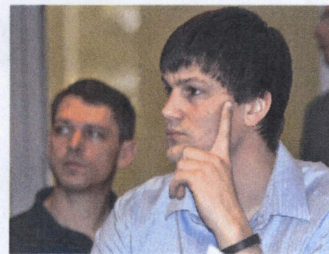
The New Leader portion of *Your CHS Experience* was designed for young producers to interact with



cooperative leaders and CHS management, allowing them to influence the content of future development events tailored to next-generation leaders, and gain a broader perspective and knowledge to take back to their member cooperatives.

The young producers identified key challenges such as succession planning, land rent, increased regulations impacting farming practices, finding employees with ag expertise and reaching the consumer with their farm story.

"The challenges our future producers are experiencing can all be helped through the cooperative system, which is why it's increasingly important to keep them engaged in CHS," says Region 4 Director David Kayser.



Brock Bisallion of Jackson, Minn., was among the attendees at the New Leader portion of *Your CHS Experience* held this past February in Puerto Rico.



David Horsager, author of "The Trust Edge," leads young producers through his workshop on improving leadership.

"The challenges our future producers are experiencing can all be helped through the cooperative system, which is why it's increasingly important to keep them engaged in CHS," says Region 4 Director David Kayser. "We can actively lobby on their behalf and we can help them share their stories. We have more power together as a cooperative than alone as one."

"The conference was one of the most powerful events I have ever attended to enhance our



Brock Bisallion of Jackson, Minn., was among the attendees at the New Leader portion of *Your CHS Experience* held this past February in Puerto Rico.

business and personal lives," says Ryan Martin, New London, Wis. "The most important thing was being in a small group of young producers where we could learn and communicate with others who have similar situations and concerns."

IN THIS ISSUE

CHS Insights highlights recent CHS Board of Directors initiatives, provides updates on strategic direction, and encourages dialogue on ways to help CHS owners and customers grow.

- 25** • Young leaders on the move at *Your CHS Experience*
- 26** • CHS Directors visit Capitol Hill
• Second-quarter financial results
- 27** • Leading through change: International Business Advisor and Author Ram Charan led *Your CHS Experience* attendees through a common-sense approach to maximize board effectiveness
- 28** • From safety to boardroom priorities, it all takes planning
• Regional perspectives

Non-qualified equity redemption policy approved

The CHS Board of Directors has announced revisions to its non-qualified equity redemption policy affecting the company's eligible cooperative and producer member-owners.

For fiscal 2013 and 2014 the CHS Board authorized the allocation of a portion of patronage for those years as non-qualified equity, specifying that non-qualified equity would not be included in the company's annual equity redemption program. At its April meeting, the CHS Board approved a resolution further clarifying the role and handling of non-qualified owner equity, specifying that:

- Non-qualified equity, with the exception of that held by liquidated member cooperatives, is not considered permanent capital on the CHS balance sheet.
- Non-qualified equity held by individual eligible producer-members will be managed

in the same manner as qualified equity. As such, estates and producer-members who attain age 70 will be eligible to apply for redemption of non-qualified equity.

- CHS will identify the amount of non-qualified equity redeemed annually to eligible producer-members and periodically, at the discretion of the CHS Board, pay a proportionate amount to eligible member cooperatives on a pro-rata basis.

"As a Board, ensuring that CHS remains strong and continues to help you grow is always our primary objective," says CHS Board Chairman David Bielenberg. "We look forward to continuing to deliver on that promise by maintaining a sound balance sheet that enables us to invest in the future; provide quality products, services and market access; and return direct economic value to you."

CHS reports net income of \$471.5 million for first half of fiscal 2015

CHS posts net income of \$471.5 million for the first six months of its 2015 fiscal year.

Earnings for Sept. 1, 2014, through Feb. 28, 2015, represented a 6 percent decrease from \$502.3 million for the same period of fiscal 2014, primarily attributed to lower earnings within the company's energy businesses, which were partially offset by improved performance by the company's Ag segment.

Revenues of \$17.9 billion for the first half of fiscal 2015 were down 14 percent compared with \$20.7 billion through the second quarter of fiscal 2014, largely due to lower average selling prices for commodity energy, grain, fertilizer and processed grains the company handles.

For the second quarter of fiscal 2015 (Dec. 1, 2014 - Feb. 28, 2015), CHS reported net income of \$92.8 million compared with \$260.1 million for the same quarter of fiscal 2014. Revenues for the quarter of \$8.4 billion declined from \$9.7 billion the same period a year ago.

Earnings within the Energy segment declined for the six-month period, primarily due to significantly lower petroleum refining margins during the second quarter, as well as lower propane earnings.

	CHS Inc. Earnings by Segment (\$ in millions)			
	For the Three Months Ended Feb. 28		For the Six Months Ended Feb. 28	
	2015	2014	2015	2014
Energy	\$14.1	\$229.1	\$291.3	\$355.5
Ag	58.0	38.0	200.4	157.2
Corporate and Other	18.4	23.2	34.4	47.3
Income before income taxes	\$90.5	290.3	\$526.1	560.0
Income taxes	(2.4)	29.7	54.9	56.3
Net income	92.9	260.6	471.2	503.7
Net income attributable to non-controlling interests	0.1	0.5	(0.3)	1.4
Net income attributable to CHS Inc.	\$92.8	\$260.1	\$471.5	502.3

The company's Ag segment - which includes its grain marketing and fertilizer businesses, renewable fuels, local retail operations, and soybean processing and food ingredients - reported increased earnings through the second quarter. Within this segment, wholesale fertilizer margins increased while local retail operations earnings improved due to higher grain volumes and margins.

CHS processing business reported increased income. Renewable fuels earnings were flat, while grain marketing earnings declined, primarily due to decreased logistical

performance which was partially offset by improved export margins.

CHS reports results for its business services operations and its two food processing-related joint ventures under the Corporate and Other category which experienced lower profitability through the second quarter of fiscal 2015, primarily due to lower earnings from company finance, risk management and insurance businesses, its equity investments in wheat milling and vegetable-oil foods joint ventures.

Directors challenged to lead through change

"Our world has changed. Globalization, digitization and consumer power are top trends impacting today's business," said Ram Charan, international business advisor and author.

Charan was a keynote speaker Feb. 20 at *Your CHS Experience*, a three-day board development event in Fajardo, Puerto Rico. Charan has more than 30 years of experience counseling top companies, boards and CEOs worldwide, and according to *Fortune*, he's "the most influential consultant alive." Charan has written 18 books, including "Boards that Deliver" and "Boards that Work." His book, "Boards That Lead," co-authored with Dennis Carey and Michael Useem, is a guide for directors and CEOs who are rising to leadership challenges and making their boards more competitive.

"Charan has worked with top public companies of our time," says Chairman Dave Bielenberg. "His practical, common-sense approach provided cooperative leaders in attendance with some great ideas to maximize the effectiveness of their boards."

CHS drew upon the book, "Boards That Lead," for the theme of *Your CHS Experience*. During his presentation, Charan challenged the more than 250 board members and young leaders in attendance by asking, "Are you driving change or being driven by change?" He explained that

opportunities and risks, and honing our leadership and business skills."

Charan emphasized the importance of a high return on investment of board member time. He instructed attendees to "focus on the decisions that only a board can make" to ensure time is devoted to the right topics. He suggested boards strategically plan a 12-month agenda. "A huge amount of management time should be spent preparing for a successful meeting," Charan said.

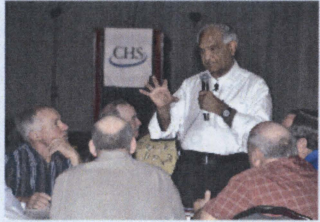
Board meeting topics should focus on what "help the management needs" and be actionable with quality discussion and decision-making, said Charan. He advised boards to stay focused on the big ideas and away from the minutia. "What items in the boardroom make the dialogue very productive and effective?" he said.

"Leaders build nations; leaders build industries; and leaders build companies," Charan said. "You don't have to invent solutions; effective directors ask questions."

Attendees shared what they learned during a "Boards That Lead" workshop led by Joel Ebbert, executive consultant, strategic alignment at CHS. *Your CHS Experience* also featured David Horsager, author of the national bestseller "The Trust Edge: How Top Leaders Gain Faster Results, Deeper

TOP 8

THINGS A BOARD MUST DO



During his keynote presentation at *Your CHS Experience*, a cooperative leader development event held February 2015, renowned international business advisor and author Ram Charan challenged attendees to evaluate the effectiveness of their boards by analyzing the following eight objectives:

- 1 Stay in tune with the speed of external change.
- 2 Make board decisions, such as:

NEWS FROM REGION 1



Curt Eischens
Asst. Secretary-Treasurer
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"By continuing to maximize efficiencies across the company, we can do an even better job for our owners."



David Johnsrud
Director
david.johnsrud@chsinc.com

"Always mindful of the importance of a strong balance sheet, we continue to look forward to expand our relevancy for our owners."



Alan Holm
Director
alan.holm@chsinc.com

"We continually review projects and opportunities to grow domestically and internationally in ways that make sense for CHS and our owners."



Perry Meyer
Director
perry.meyer@chsinc.com

"We are committed to bringing long-term value to our members. To do this, we need to recruit and retain top employee talent."

From safety to boardroom priorities, it all takes planning

According to the National Safety Council, farm accidents claim more than 560 lives and cause nearly 16,000 injuries a year, most of which are preventable. CHS has historically maintained a

this spring, the CHS Board of Directors implores you to keep safety top of mind, always.

"It's important to remember

Just as farmers plan for their year ahead, the CHS Board of Directors is crafting a 12-month plan for the upcoming year. Within this plan, directors and staff are building short- and long-

Heritage FS Newsletter

- Their newsletter highlights education, which should be a focal point in your newsletter.
- Heritage FS sends a newsletter monthly.



Crop Solutions that Work

July 31, 2015

HOW TO VERIFY CORN POLLINATION SUCCESS

A number of stress factors or injuries can interfere with corn pollination. Once corn ovules, or developing kernels, start to swell, the success of pollination can easily be determined. Prior to that time period, here is an easy way to determine the success of pollination:

The time period for this test is between pollen shed and blister formation. Select the corn ear you would like to check. Carefully remove the husks. With the tip of the ear pointing down, shake the ear. Silks will fall from ovules that have been successfully fertilized. Silks that remain attached indicate ovules that have not been fertilized (pollinated).

Tip: With a sharp knife, make a longitudinal cut the length of the corn ear. You may also carefully cut through husks at the base of the ear. This will make the husks easier to remove. With practice, you will be able to determine how deep to make the cuts.



Tip: With a sharp knife, make a longitudinal cut the length of the corn ear. You may also carefully cut through husks at the base of the ear. This will make the husks easier to remove. With practice, you will be able to determine how deep to make the cuts.



INSECTS IN WEEDS RESULT IN POOR WEED CONTROL

Insects commonly feed within stems of weeds. Normally, this weed stem feeding is not of great consequence and few people even notice. However, when insects feed within weed stems and translocated herbicides are then applied to eliminate these weeds, poor control may result. The insect feeding interrupts the normal translocation of the herbicide, allowing the weed to survive, branch out, and regrow. Challenging weather conditions this year have resulted in numerous fields where large weeds are present, and reports of insect-weed interactions are beginning to come in.

Glyphosate is the primary herbicide that is affected in the weed-insect interactions. Over the years, growers habitually applied glyphosate to larger weeds because it worked, and because delaying the glyphosate application allowed more late-emerging weeds to emerge, hence better overall weed control. Information from the University of Illinois (2003) showed that only 8 percent of 3 inch tall weeds were insect infested. By the time the weeds were 6 inches tall, 65 percent of the weeds were infested, and 87 percent of 12 inch tall weeds were infested by insects.

continued on page 2



Contributing Editor:
Eric West
 Field Sales Agronomist

INSECTS IN WEEDS RESULT IN POOR WEED CONTROL

continued from page 1

Because of our traditional heavy dependence on glyphosate products for soybean weed control, we have seen a common recurrence of poor control of larger weeds with late glyphosate application. While weed genuine resistance to glyphosate or other herbicides is certainly a very real and increasingly frequent source of this poor weed control, another source of poor weed control is the presence of insects tunneling in the center of the weed stem.

Giant ragweed is the most common weed that is poorly controlled when insects tunnel in the plant. However, other weeds have also been observed to experience poor control when insects feed within the stem. We have seen this happen with marestail, lambsquarter, smartweed, and waterhemp, among others. The insect species tunneling in the stems have also varied, with stalk borers being the most common, followed by *Dectes* borers, European corn borers and several other caterpillars and weevil larvae.

The key management practice influencing control of the weeds mentioned here is timing. If pre-emergence herbicides have been applied, or the weeds are controlled while they are small, the insects either have not yet done

CORN DISEASE LESION MIMICS

Through the past several seasons, isolated corn fields, or hybrids within corn fields, have exhibited leaf symptoms that closely resemble those caused by diseases. These symptoms often show up on individual plants within the stand, or may extensively affect certain hybrids in a plot or field. Affected plants may be uniformly covered with these spots, or just individual leaves may range from partially, to uniformly, covered. Although symptomatic plants may actually be infected with an infectious disease, in many cases this is what is referred to as disease lesion mimics (DLM).

Disease lesion mimics are genetic mutants. Researchers recognize 50 chromosome points (loci) that are responsible for the symptoms. Initially, these lesions were thought to result from defects in genes or genetic pathways, resulting in cell death that mirrors effects of pathogens on the plants. This is why the "syndrome" received the name: Disease Lesion Mimics. It was later determined that these mutations are stable and could be inherited in either a dominant or recessive manner, depending on the particular mutant.

Lesions, resulting from DLM, may have a varied appearance, often closely resembling symptoms of infectious diseases. Also, depending on the particular mutant, the symptoms may either be discreet and confined on the leaf (non-expanding), or may expand to cause extensive necrosis. Fortunately, most of the symptoms we've observed are not severe enough to greatly impact yield. However, extensive necrosis of leaf surfaces has the potential to be yield limiting.



Symptoms of Disease Lesion Mimic (DLM) on Corn



Image: Brittany Kalsheur





**Crop Solutions
that Work**

SHOULD INSECTICIDE BE ADDED TO THE MIX?

In this edition...

**HOW TO VERIFY CORN
POLLINATION SUCCESS**

**INSECTS IN WEEDS
RESULT IN POOR WEED
CONTROL**

**CORN DISEASE LESION
MIMICS**

**SHOULD INSECTICIDE BE
ADDED TO THE MIX?**

Fungicide application is a costly decision. Insecticides are relatively inexpensive. If there is to be a trip across the field anyway, doesn't it make sense to add an insecticide to the fungicide mix for just a few dollars more? Cheap insurance!

If pest insects are at threshold levels within the crop field, adding an insecticide to the fungicide mix can make good sense. However, here are some reasons why you may wish to reconsider that decision:

- Every exposure of pest insects to insecticides increases the chance of the pest developing resistance to the insecticide. Unnecessary insecticide use should be avoided.
- In many fields right now, there are insects that have a beneficial function. Some are predators, some are parasites. Many of these are very secretive little insects and you have to look for them to know that they're there. When you apply insecticides to stop the pest insects, you're also killing the good insects. The reproductive potential of the pest insects often greatly exceeds that of the beneficial insects. Advantage... Pest insects.
- It's really a secondary issue for those of us charged with protecting crops, but the public would like the assurance that we're using pesticides wisely, and no more than necessary.
- Insecticides are not very expensive, but they do have some cost. With reduced prices for commodity crops, isn't it a good practice to save money where you can?

Some of the beneficial insects that have been observed in fields recently include: Lady beetles (several species) & their larvae, spined soldier bugs (a beneficial stink bug), green and brown lacewings & their larvae, hover-fly larvae, ground beetles & their larvae, damsel bugs, minute pirate bugs, plus numerous wasp and fly parasites of insects and their eggs. When you use insecticides, a major beneficial insect community can be disrupted.

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