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POSSIBLE ROLES FOR SOCIAL NETWORKING IN AGRITOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Introduction

The diversification of on-farm income sources is an important financial risk management strategy for many agricultural businesses. As one example, some ag business owners are now motivated to invite paying visitors onto their farms and ranches so they can experience agriculturally-based tourism or agritourism. Agritourism is gaining in popularity among travelers—both in Colorado and in other states (Thilmany et al. 2007; Bernardo et al. 2004). For example, data from the 2007 Census of Agriculture show that while the proportion of all farms with recreational income decreased slightly, total sales from recreational income sources on US farms increased by 143% in real terms to \$566.8 million from 2002 to 2007 (NASS, 2007).³ Average sales per farm from recreational activities increased from \$8,318 in 2002 to \$24,276 in 2007. The same trend is apparent in Colorado where average recreational income per farm increased from \$16,009 to \$48,472 in 2007, representing a significant income stream to those operations that have adopted this diversification strategy.

Different types of events and activities have the potential to draw a variety of visitors to an operation or region. In order to understand the motivations of travelers and provide information to Colorado's farmers and ranchers on how people plan for and participate in agritourism, Colorado State University (CSU) has been conducting on-going research on this growing industry. In 2007, researchers in CSU's Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics conducted an Internet survey of travelers to and within Colorado to examine their travel behavior and preferences for agritourism. Summaries of this research can be found in Sullins & Thilmany, 2007; Thilmany, Sullins, & Ansteth, 2007a, 2007b; Onozaka, Sullins, & Thilmany, 2008; Thilmany, Ansteth, & Sullins, 2007.

To probe consumer trip planning strategies a little further, a second set of event-based intercept surveys was conducted at three different sites in 2009. Motivated by the increasing popularity of social networking sites and consumers' stated preferences for word-of-mouth recommendations to guide their choice of travel activities (TIA 2010; Sullins & Thilmany,

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³ Recreational sources include income from recreational services such as hunting, fishing, farm or wine tours, hay rides, etc. In the 2002 census, this category was referred to as Recreational Services. The 2007 definition was more inclusive of activities than 2002.

Extension programs are available to all without discrimination.

2007; Longwoods International 2005), this study examines trip planning tools, motivations for travel, and marketing effectiveness among agritourists. Other information such as activity participation, travel expenditures, and demographic information was also collected. One-page surveys were administered to visitors at: 1) a harvest festival at Grant Family Farms in Larimer County; 2) Sheep Wagon Days in Moffat County; and 3) the Cruiser Bike Fest in Routt County as a control event.

This fact sheet outlines the approaches and effectiveness of social networking tools by several agriculturally-based businesses, and evaluates how social media could drive visitors to agritourism events. This is an interesting extension since the past study was conducted before these tools were adopted by many households. Whenever possible, comparisons between survey results obtained in 2009 to those reported in a 2007 CSU study are made. This information should help small agribusiness owners and operators more effectively develop cost-effective marketing strategies and plan events in order to reach and retain a growing agritourism customer base.

Social Networking and Viral Marketing

Social networking services such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace are websites devoted to establishing online communities by allowing members to connect to other members and explore similar interests. The content and appeal of these sites are derived and increased by the networking benefits of a greater number of new users. It is therefore in the best interest of users to encourage their friends and associates to join these sites. In turn, social networking sites offer convenient, multimedia avenues for users to connect and share with others. Depending on the site, this can include sharing pictures, videos, files and music, as well as public and private discussions, blogs, and forums. Although these sites initially catered to individuals, they are continually evolving and adding business-friendly features that allow businesses to capitalize on the social connections that lead to word-of-mouth information and referrals upon which travelers frequently depend. For more information on specific social networking sites, please refer to “Social Networking and Marketing for Colorado’s Agricultural Producers” (Phillips et al., 2009).

In other markets, social networking and viral marketing campaigns have proved successful for numerous national and international brands and prod-

ucts where entire marketing departments and budgets are dedicated to creating the perfect conditions to launch a viral expansion loop (Brymer, 2009)—a self-replicating process whereby a product or service experiences exponential popularity over a short amount of time. Popular chain letters and emails are an example of this. Direct marketers of agriculture products, services and experiences often don’t have the time, expertise and capital to engage in such activities. Additionally, their target audience is likely different from, for example, Quicksilver and Burger King, who launched two of the more successful viral marketing campaigns (Altoft, 2008). This raises the question of how effective social networking can be for agribusinesses.

These same strategies are becoming tools for the agricultural and food industries as well. According to an article in the October 2009 edition of Dairy Herd Management, social media may also be a way for producers to share their side of the story on public issues related to food. One case they share is Shannon Seifert, owner of Orange Patch Dairy in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, who uses a digital video camera to shoot videos around the dairy, loads them on YouTube, and then connects with parents of preschoolers who visited the farm. She was quoted, “We gave each of the kids a flyer to take home with our blog on it. The kids can go online and track the life of “Joey” the calf, whom they met in person.” The article’s expert, Michele Payn-Knoper (a principal of Cause-Matters Corp. and social media advocate) noted that, “People are hungry for information about food.”

Case Studies

Over the course of 2009, several agribusinesses in Colorado established an online presence through websites, blogs, and social networking sites in an attempt to measure consumer participation generated through these media. Website traffic was monitored with visitor tracking applications and consumer intercept surveys were conducted at several agritourism events.

The following describes the businesses evaluated during this study.

Grant Family Farms

Grant Family Farms is a large organic farm located in Larimer County with over 3,000 acres in vegetable and animal production and a 2,100+ member CSA. During the 2009 growing season, they

committed a full-time employee to a variety of marketing initiatives, including maintaining active conversations on Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter. These sites were updated almost daily. The CSU team partnered with Grant Family Farms to post a market coupon on the social networking sites in order to drive customers to the farmers' market stand. Google Analytics was added to their website in order to track referring traffic, visitors to the farmers market stand were documented and an intercept survey was conducted at Harvestival. Grant Family Farms is a member of their local business alliance, Be Local Northern Colorado.

Wolf Moon Farms

Wolf Moon Farms has five acres in vegetable production, a fifty-member CSA, two paid employees and ten working members. For the purpose of this study, one working member was assigned to maintaining the website and social networking accounts in exchange for free produce. The MySpace and Twitter accounts were mostly neglected over the course of this study. Google Analytics was installed on their website to track visitors to the site. Wolf Moon is also a member of the Be Local Northern Colorado network.

Villard Ranch

Villard Ranch is one of the largest lamb operations in Colorado, covering approximately 22,000 acres. Villard Ranch hosts and promotes the annual Craig Sheep Wagon Days, a historical celebration of sheep ranching lifestyles and sheep drives. The owner maintains the website and Facebook profile for both Villard Ranch and Sheep Wagon Days. They do not have MySpace or Twitter accounts. Their website service, makemysite.net, records web traffic with an internal tool comparable to Google Analytics. An intercept survey was conducted during Sheep Wagon Days to explore the importance of social media in driving traffic to the event. Villard Ranch is a member of their local business alliance, Northwest Colorado Products.

Native Hill Farm

Native Hill Farm is a two-person market farm operation with one acre in production. They have minimal information posted on their website, a small customer base, and they do not belong to any business alliances. For the purpose of this study, they allowed us to establish a Facebook Page that posts their logo and a link to their website, only as a control group. Google Analytics was installed on their website.

Be Local Northern Colorado

Be Local Northern Colorado is a business alliance serving businesses mostly located in North Central Colorado. They host an indoor farmers market and business networking events, print a local business coupon book, and conduct "Buy Local" campaigns. For a nominal fee, businesses can join this alliance, participate in their activities and benefit from their campaigns. They've recently joined the world of social networking by establishing Facebook and Twitter accounts, which are maintained by an intern. Their website is dynamic and features businesses on the homepage on a rotating basis. For this study, their primary role was as a real-world network while their webpage was a driver to member sites, allowing us to examine the importance of such community organizations and their network activities.

Cruiser Bike Ride-Oktoberwest

In September 2009, the Steamboat Chamber of Commerce hosted a Cruiser Bike Ride as part of their annual Oktoberwest festival in Routt County. This community event was free and open to the public. It was not associated with Northwest Colorado Products (the local business alliance), the Community Agriculture Alliance (the local ag alliance) or any other forms of agritourism. It was not advertised on social networking sites, and website traffic for this event and its affiliates was not recorded. However, data from the intercept surveys conducted in downtown Steamboat Springs served as a control group for the other two survey sites that were linked to organizations and social media promotions.

To Tweet or Not to Tweet?

In order to measure the degree to which online traffic generates consumer interest in a product or service and then directs business activity such as purchasing a product or attending an event, CSU researchers had Grant Family Farms and Wolf Moon Farms establish accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace—the top three social networking sites in terms of the total number of users (Kazeniak, 2009).

Table 1 outlines the businesses which participated in this study, their social networking activity, website traffic generated from social networking, and some survey results. Note that the farthest right column represents how significant various social media tools

TABLE 1: Social Networking Activity and Website Traffic Among Studied Agribusinesses and Agritourism Events

Facebook	# Fans	Posts/Week	Interaction/Post	% Traffic To Website from . . .
Grant Family Farm	700	10.4	1.2	19.1
Be Local No. Colorado	422	1.0	2.2	16.3
Harvestival	235			
Sheep Wagon Days	70	8.2	0.2	
Wolf Moon Farms	53	2.3	0.6	14.8
Villard Ranch	38	8.5	0.3	1.6
Native Hill Farm	12	0.0	0.0	28.3
Twitter				
Grant Family Farm	391			2.7
Be Local No. Colorado	87			2.9
Wolf Moon Farms	3			0
MySpace				
Grant Family Farm	14			0
Wolf Moon Farms	2			0

were in directing consumers to a website. In general, Grant Family Farms dedicated the most time to social networking, had the most fans, generated the most online activity, and drove the most traffic from the social networking service to its website. As size of operation and time spent online decreased across firms, so did the number of fans, online activity, and website traffic. This indicates that high levels of online activity initiated by the business owner will spur high levels of consumer activity in response, but will also wane if such relationships are not continually maintained. As the study progressed, it became clear that MySpace was not the proper avenue for agribusinesses to pursue social networking and marketing.

The next step was to determine how such interactions translate to direct sales or event attendance. In order to gauge this, a link to a market coupon was posted on Grant Family Farms social networking sites offering \$2 off a \$10 purchase. Unfortunately, none of the coupons was redeemed and, according to

Google Analytics, no one even clicked on the link posted on all three social networking sites. Upon further reflection, we decided that a coupon for market products is not an adequate incentive for CSA members. In anticipation of their Harvestival event, Grant Family Farms raffled free tickets to people who posted on their personal social networking profiles about the upcoming event. This activity was not formally recorded, however, members did participate and several sets of free tickets were given away.

The intercept surveys conducted at the event sites asked participants to mark which trip planning tools they used. The total results are in Table 4. One option was “Read about it on Facebook, MySpace, or Twitter”. Survey results from the three events indicated that the use of social networking services as a trip-planning tool is minimal at this time. Of those surveyed, 5% of Harvestival attendants, 5% of Bike Cruise riders, and 2% of Sheep Wagon Days attendants marked the social networking option, but we expect that word-of-mouth promotion through these services

will increase as consumers learn that agribusinesses are advertising their products and events through social networking media.

Cross Promotion and Organizational Support

As the research team started collecting website traffic data through Google Analytics and similar tools, it became clear that social networking sites were not the only potential driver of traffic to a business' website. Links from other businesses, organizations, and directories are a significant source of website traffic, for example localharvest.org or a local business alliance. Website traffic data from Grant Family Farm, Wolf Moon Farms, Native Hill Farm, Villard Ranch, and Be Local Northern Colorado were sorted and pooled together to determine the most significant sources of website traffic for the businesses under study. One of the local business alliances, Be Local Northern Colorado, was the largest driver of website traffic to Wolf Moon Farms webpage, and also significantly contributed to Grant Family Farms website traffic. The aggregate results of cross website traffic analysis are presented in Table 2.

In addition, survey participants were asked if they recognized the logo of their local business and agriculture alliances (pictures were provided). More than a third of those surveyed (35%) recognized their local business alliance (Be Local Northern Colorado or Northwest Colorado Products) and 12% recognized another local alliance (Northern Colorado Cultural Tourism Alliance and Community Ag Alliance). Given these results, business owners should seek to collaborate with each other and with other organizations on cross-promotional efforts. Business alliances, in particular, can be a valuable ally in any marketing efforts.

How Do Agritourism Events Draw Travelers?

Discovering what motivates people to travel has implications for how business owners can promote their products and services by helping them to understand how visitors learn about a region's events and activities; how long they might stay and what additional activities would be appealing to them. Most of those interviewed for the 2009 intercept surveys (65%) traveled to the region for a specific event; however, when analyzed separately, in- and out-of-state visitors traveled for very different reasons. Seventy-four percent of in-state travelers listed the event as the primary reason for travel, compared to only 23% of out-of-state travelers (see Table 3). Among the out-of-state travelers, half said they had traveled to visit friends and family. In previous research on agritourism, fewer travelers overall (20% of out-of-state travelers, compared to 9% of Colorado residents) traveled to visit friends and family, but 56% percent of all travelers said they were on a leisure vacation.

A breakdown by event shows that Harvestival attracted the most event-specific travelers (80%), while 46% of attendees at Sheep Wagon Days came specifically to experience a little bit of cultural history. Only 13% of participants in the Cruiser Bike Fest attended to show off their bikes, while the remainder cited personal reasons, or that the event was an add-on to an already planned vacation (50% and 25% respectively). Thus, ag adventurers are relatively more likely to have made plans for a specific event, which has some advantages and disadvantages. Because of their generally more remote locations, it is not likely that ag-based businesses can depend on casual visitors. This means that getting pre-event promotions out to the media and potential visitors is essential. On the

TABLE 2. Cross Website Traffic, Ranked by Average Percent of Referring Traffic Generated

Traffic Source	Average Percent
Associated Businesses	30.4%
Associated Organizations	24.7%
Social Networking Sites	19.1%
Online Directories	17.3%
Blogs	4.2%
Press and Media	2.6%
Associated Events	1.8%

other hand, being a destination for travelers generally means the visitors will have a higher level of engagement at the event, thus visitors give the venue their full attention for a number of purposes (for example, education, relationship building, spending for the travel day).

Trip Planning and Travel Duration

In the case where events do drive tourists to a region, knowing how consumers identified and planned around these events is informative to those promoting and planning the experience for travelers. In 2009, one third of travelers cited past experiences as their number one way to decide what to do on future trips, while another third followed a recommendation

from a friend or family member (see Table 4). Even more so, previous CSU research on agritourism found that nearly 59% relied on past experience, while 21% went by recommendations. This speaks to the importance of word-of-mouth promotion tactics for agritourism, which would include social media promotion that feels like a recommendation to the traveler (for example, a blog entry showing travelers enjoying themselves at an event being promoted). Although business owners and operators should dedicate much of their time and energy to ensuring a positive experience for their current customers, they should also encourage their clients to share the good word to potential new customers. Some approaches may be perceived as more authentic or credible. For example, one might establish “refer-a-friend” programs, encouraging

TABLE 3: Reasons for Travel to Region, 2009 CSU Intercept Survey Results

	All responses		Out-of-state		In-state	
	Number of responses	Percent of all responses	Number of responses	Percent of all responses	Number of responses	Percent of all responses
Specific Event	108	65%	7	23%	101	74%
Visit Friends & Family	25	15%	15	50%	10	7%
Personal Reason	17	10%	0	0%	17	12%
Vacation/Leisure	14	8%	5	17%	9	7%
Business Trip	3	2%	3	10%	0	0%
Total	167	100%	30	100%	137	100%

Note: Respondents were asked to select one primary reason for travel.

TABLE 4: Trip Planning Resources, 2009 Intercept Survey Results

	All Participants	Out-of-State	In-State
Past Experience	34%	31%	35%
Recommendation	31%	33%	30%
Direct Mailing	6%	3%	7%
Other	6%	6%	6%
Personal Web Search	4%	3%	5%
Social Media Site	4%	8%	3%
Travel Brochure	3%	11%	1%
Travel Publications	3%	0%	3%
Newspaper or Radio	3%	0%	3%
Billboard/Signage	2%	3%	2%
Other Internet Communication	2%	0%	3%
Visitor Center	1%	0%	1%
Colorado Tourism Office	1%	3%	0%

Note: Respondents were asked to mark all that apply, which may result in totals over 100%. No respondents indicated the use of a national travel site, a travel agency, or a travel association.

customers to post their positive experiences online, and participate in social networking activities.

Both CSU consumer agritourism surveys illustrate that consumers report increasingly less reliance on print media and traditional travel planning tools (although these may be more important in advertising one-time events). For example, 1% of respondents cited direct mailing as a means of trip planning in 2007, compared to 6% of all 2009 intercept respondents. Yet, 11% of 2009 out-of-state travelers said they used a travel brochure for information, which is significantly higher than the 1% reported by travelers in CSU's 2007 agritourism research. Overall, the 2009 survey results showed that fewer travelers used more traditional trip planning tools such as travel agencies, travel associations, travel centers, and welcome centers, when compared to survey results obtained in 2007. This suggests it is likely that travel websites and social networking will become increasingly influential trip planning tools. Agribusiness owners should keep this in mind when considering how and when to engage in online activity.

Popular Agritourism Activities and Venues

To better understand the interest, awareness and popularity of different agritourism choices,⁴ all

visitors were asked what activities they had participated in, and most said they had visited farmers markets, followed by rodeos and fairs, and then wineries and microbreweries. The only differences in ranking between in-state and out-of-state travelers were that the latter reported visiting farms and ranches and ag heritage sites more than in-state travelers. One might imagine that this is partially driven by the unique aspects of such farms and ranches in Colorado, whereas other types of activities might have closer substitutes in the out-of-state traveler's home region. On average, people said they had participated in five of the nine agritourism activities listed (Table 5).

The predominance of farmers' markets attendance by survey participants was expected since the majority of Harvestival attendees were invited to the event because of their involvement with the Grant Family Farms CSA. Farmers markets were also the top-ranked culinary activity among our 2007 survey respondents (Thilmany, Sullins and Ansteth, 2007). Rodeos and fairs were also ranked more highly among 2009 travelers than they were among those surveyed in 2007 (where on farm and ranch activities were the most popular). Overall the 2007 respondents ranked on farm or ranch activities first, followed by food/culinary experiences, and then heritage activities; whereas the

TABLE 5: Popular Agritourism Activities, Ranked by Percent Participation, 2009 Intercept Survey Results

Event	Total	Out-of-state	In-state
Farmers Market	88.7	83.3	89.6
Rodeos, Fairs	73.1	73.3	72.7
Winery, Microbrewery	64.0	63.3	63.6
Corn maze	50.0	46.7	51.3
Harvest Festival	49.5	43.3	51.3
Farm or Ranch Visit	47.3	53.3	46.8
U-pick, Farmstand	36.6	36.7	37.0
Ag or Heritage Museum	34.4	46.7	32.5
Cheese or Cider Making	25.3	26.7	25.3

⁴ The 2009 intercept survey asked if travelers had ever participated in agritourism events. Agritourism was not defined on the survey and, when asked the definition, most surveyors simply responded "agricultural tourism". Given this information, 38% of respondents indicated that they had indeed participated in agritourism activities; however, 99% of respondents marked at least one activity when presented with a list. This demonstrates that people are interested in agritourism, whether they know it or not. This may also suggest a discrepancy in tourism surveys and studies in which the word agritourism was used in a question. As with most local food and agriculture issues, there is also a need for education to help the general public understand and to create a desire to be involved.

2009 respondents ranked culinary above on-farm or ranch experiences.

Recommendations for Future Agritourism Endeavors

As agritourism grows in popularity among travelers, and agricultural business owners have more agritourism offerings available, there will be plenty of opportunity to learn more about what travelers look for in an agritourism experience and how farmers and ranchers can meet those expectations. Both the 2007 and 2009 surveys asked travelers to indicate aspects that would have improved their visitor experience. Many respondents (23%) indicated that better directional signage would improve their visit, followed by more shopping opportunities. Surprisingly, in-state respondents were more interested in directional signage (24%) compared to out-of-state visitors (20%), but maybe those from farther away had more planning materials with them for the trip. In general, visitors to Sheep Wagon Days were the most interested in shopping (22%), compared to Harvestival attendees who thought that overall quality of the experience could be improved. Among the lowest visitor concerns were the availability of package tours, better advertising, and proximity to other tourist attractions.

When comparing the two surveys, it is clear that directional signage still negatively impacts the visitor travel experience in some areas of Colorado—in the eyes of those who live in Colorado, as well as those who visit from out of state. Out-of-state respondents on both surveys felt that their event's proximity to other attractions was a limiting factor. Further, interpretive signage was much more important to the 2007 respondents than to those surveyed in 2009—perhaps because the 2009 visitors were attending events that did not rely on interpretation and were more festival-like in nature, or at operations they were already familiar with. Among other factors influencing their trip, 2007 respondents also noted that the presence of other infrastructure and additional activities was very important to their trip satisfaction, including more child-friendly activities and accommodations, pet care and shopping opportunities (Sullins and Thilmany, 2007).

The demand for more infrastructure and other activities around an agritourism event, coupled with success of cross-promotional and relationship marketing, indicates the potential success of agritourism

events and activities that are planned and coordinated together. An event that lasts several days and involves several agritourism sites and activities may attract more outside travelers than a one-day event, exposing more people to the appeal of agritourism and pulling outside dollars into a local economy. Planning and marketing costs can also be shared across firms and business/agricultural alliances. Colorado's agribusiness owners should consider capitalizing on consumer interest in "local foods" and "getting back to the land" by offering unique on-farm, culinary, and ag heritage experiences. Collaborating with similar businesses to provide a more inclusive event will draw more participants. Finally, partnering with a local business/agricultural alliance will assist with getting the word out to a wider range of audiences, which utilize a variety of trip planning resources.

Lastly, the role of social media in growing and promoting agritourism businesses is difficult to quantify but appears to be effective in cultivating a customer base and connecting that base with other like-minded individuals. Building this sense of community then becomes the underpinning of the agritourism enterprise and creates the base from which to spread information about events or special promotions of interest to this linked community. It likely requires that an agritourism operator establish a large online community from which s/he can then initiate viral marketing that imitates the word-of-mouth recommendations upon which consumers seem to rely when making trip planning decisions.

Resources to Begin your Own Social Media Plans

For those enterprises who believe that, for their business model, communicating about agriculture and their business online is vital, there is an increasing number of technical assistance sites to draw upon.

- Ohio Farm Bureau's social media guide to producers who are just starting out on Twitter and Facebook is available at: <http://ofbf.org/uploads/social-media-guide.pdf>.
- For a list of farmers, ranchers, and other agriculture-supporters who are using Twitter, check out the "Follow Farmer" list at <http://www.dataforag.com/followfarmer.a5w>. It's approaching 700 names so far!
- For a great example of a farmer-created Facebook page, visit www.facebook.com/Farm2U.

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