Science Policy News

Engaging the Public and Policymakers through Social Media

by Vivian Bernau and Brian Pfeiffer

Social media influences many aspects of our daily lives: it’s where we connect with friends and family, strengthen relationships with colleagues, find new music, and—increasingly—digest local, national, and global news. Social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram are available around the world, and people (including your grandma, your boss, and your congressman) are connecting all the time.

These sites offer platforms for developing your own “brand” in your area(s) of expertise—whether that’s cover crops, plant breeding, or science policy, and each platform has its own respective audience. Facebook is the platform most widely used by a diverse user base; offering access to a good range of demographics, these connections are typically friends and family—limiting the wider reach of posts. Instagram is great for reaching a youth audience, but content is mostly image based. LinkedIn can be a good platform for connecting with influential business groups, but many users are minimally active and use the site mainly as an online CV or résumé. Twitter is a more open platform compared with Facebook, in which you can instantly connect with someone across the world with shared interests. For these reasons, Twitter is the best platform for connecting with professional colleagues, policy experts, and newsmakers.

Your personal brand is a product of the content you post, and there are a few guidelines to follow when thinking about your posts. First of all, if you are using Twitter (or any social media) for professional purposes (e.g., connecting with colleagues, promoting your research) think of it as an extension of your workplace and content professional. Secondly, use plain short sentences to keep your message simple, aiming to convey multiple ideas in one post or several short ones. You can also reframe the same audiences in different posts. Lastly, don’t engage in conflict discussions—these can only hurt your online image and are rarely resolved. Always choose positive ways to promote your ideas over attempting to disprove others.

Increase Your Visibility

The best way to increase the visibility of your social media presence is to use images. Attractive images can double the number of views a post gets, and is also a good tool for promoting your message. However, refrain from posting any content if you’re unsure of how the humor will be taken. Tagging your influencers, whether individuals, companies, or larger conversations (e.g., #AgChat) can help to build relationships and encourage the sharing of your content with a wider audience (i.e., retweet). Finally, a good rule of thumb is to spend no more than 20% of your time self-promoting your ideas. Engage in the online community and establish interactions with other users. Ask questions and ask for advice.

To begin building your social media brand and advocating for your research, identify other individuals with similar interests, study their tactics, and strategies. For example, ASA and CSSA Member Shawn Conley, @badgerbean, demonstrates excellent use of images while tagging his funding agency and key influencers @WISoybean. Another great illustration is ASA and CSSA member Bill Tracy, @BillT, a thought-provoking editorial from the Des Moines Register challenging policy assumptions in agriculture.