

## SOCIAL ACCEPTANCE OF AGRICULTURE: APPROACHES TO THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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### Abstract

*Continuous technical progress in the memory, processor and transfer technology creates new opportunities e.g. in the mobile exchange of information in words and pictures. This allows new innovation rates, expanded options and necessities of image work also regarding agricultural items providing image-forming information. In a multi-method approach following the idea of participating observation workshop-sessions, media monitoring, case studies and two surveys contributed to a set of nine theses. Those can serve as guidelines for making use of Social Media in order to actively take influence of the image of agriculture in appearing in the mirror of consumers and society.*

*The theses lead to some basic rules for farmers and farmers' associations on how to benefit by making use of the opportunities that Social Media provide for the PR the agricultural sector. In the project underlying this contribution the theses have been undergoing a process of reviewing an discourse by deduction, experts validation in workshops and empirically by online surveys of consumers and experts attitudes. To a certain, not little, amount traditional PR done by professionals in organizations has to be adjusted in order to fit to the new options and new limitations that online media and social networks provide. Individual farms and farmers have to play a role in making use of Social Media for PR purposes. And there has to be established a kind of co-operation between the individual PR and the professional PR carried out in associations and other institutions.*

*As a result, it must be recognized that the degree of assured knowledge about Social Media, their environment, conditions, opportunities and challenges, their interrelationships and implications is obviously low, the knowledge can claim provisional validity. Nevertheless, it would not be an option to stay away and do nothing. From a well-known paradigm of communication, which postulates the impossibility not to communicate follows the need to active communication. Merely observing Social Media from the sidelines is not an option for an active economic branch.*

*Keywords: Social Media, Image, Communication, Information, Public Relations,*

### 1. Introduction

Social acceptance of modern production methods and farm structures is a basic requirement for a productive and economically efficient agriculture in highly developed societies. As since in the 1990s information and communication technologies are changing the ways of perceiving the world, dealing with information, exchanging opinions and also creating images Social Media is providing a meaningful floor for arguing publicly also on agricultural and food items today. Participants in these public arguments represent a variety of social groups and layers, of food markets' supply or demand side and of economic, political or non-governmental interest groups. Image and acceptance of agricultural production methods regarding plant production and animal husbandry including environmental and ethical aspects as well as questions of food quality are exposed to those public discussions and influenced by this public discourse.

## 2. Focus and objectives

This paper deals with options and mechanisms to be considered in the agricultural sector looking at communication with the society via Social Media. Its objectives are the do's and don'ts as results and conclusions of studying the suitability of Social Media platforms for active Public Relations (PR). How can farmers and their associations develop access and set practical steps on their way into Social Media in order to constructively support (long-term) communication goals for the sector? What can be seen as helpful in drawing a realistic and acceptable picture of the farmers and their image to be seen in the mirror of society and consumers? The focus is directed towards the farmer in Germany as participant in Social Media discourses. Moreover it derives requirements for the professional communication of farmers associations.

## 3. Methods and phases

"Computing is not about computers any more. It is about living" (NEGROPONTE 1995, p 6). Since in the 1990s this statement has been largely confirmed. Nevertheless the scientific penetration of the consequences of "being digital" is still by no means completed. The state of knowledge in this field is provisional to a high degree. Due to the dynamics of new technical solutions taking place on a disruptive institutional playground where players like Apple, Google, Facebook or Microsoft and others set frames, standards and rules. Moreover a variety of emerging new options and opportunities contributes to an highly innovative environment. A theory framework providing a coherent and consistent set of methods and tools is not at hand. Long term studies and comprehensive models are insufficient, often even not appropriate to provide users of Social Media with helpful topical findings.

Keeping in mind these methodological restrictions a study has been conducted in a Period from April 2014 to January 2015. The project design comprised 4 Phases. The following overview shows the methods following the principles of participating observation applied in the different project phases:

- In an explorative initial phase the project team supported by six students, representing the generation of digital natives, desk research and online observations has been done. Particularly when it came to directly dealing with social networks e.g. by monitoring and evaluating, classifying and drawing conclusions the often intuitive access to and - use of - digital media proved as helpful and stimulating the discussion.
- Brainstorming methods performed in three workshop sessions lead to guidelines for the practical work and a set of 15 experience-based hypotheses. (April-May)
- In a passive fieldphase media-analyses took place in order to explore options and mechanism of selected Social Media platforms: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, specific blogs, websites and some more. Selection criteria had been figures regarding users, extension and position in the internet. The relevance of these platforms for agricultural items was derived from the topics dealt with, the time-period of discourses upon those topics, the resonance in terms of responses, questions or comments. (June-September)
- In the beginning of an active fieldphase conclusions drawn from the results of the previous passive fieldphase have been presented and discussed in a workshop with professional PR-officers from varying farmers associations and with online-experts in the field of agricultural items. As a result the set of hypotheses has been shortened and refined. (October-December)
- Two surveys integrated statistical methods that allowed for topical description of use of Social Media and useful recommendations for making use of Social Media.
- Accompanying a set of case studies had been conducted in the active fieldphase. Exemplarily the case study regarding monitoring tools is sketched out in chapter 7.

#### 4. Nine theses

During the course of the project all hypotheses had been discussed, evaluated, developed, shortened and refined into a set of nine theses. Each thesis then led to implications for the "smart farmer in the network" on the one hand and on the other hand for the "communication professionals" in associations and organizations.

T 1: "The network community expects the unexpected."

This demands from the farmer in the network (farmer) to be creative and deal with "fresh messages" and from professional associations' PR (associations) it requires adjustments of given PR toolboxes following the multichannel nature of Social Media.

T 2: "The transmitter (of something) must be able to let go (a discussion / an issue)."

This means for the farmer to never mind if discourses turn into completely different fields of interest and associations are supposed not to expect too much in terms of communication goals.

T 3: "Network communication cannot be optimized in one-dimensional models (in order to achieve expected results)."

This means for the farmer not to be disappointed when the "homo economicus" is hard to find in Social Media discourses. For associations it is a particular challenge to provide central mass-media-compatible messages and implement suitable communication strategies on Social Media.

T 4: "Focused Communication in Social Media needs "seismographs" in the network."

For the farmer it is mostly impossible to establish a reliable functioning, large-scale, prospective observation of topics in Social Media on an individual farm or personal base; although exceptions are possible. For associations professional Social Media monitoring is a prerequisite for a sound communication strategy.

T 5: "Who's Who: authenticity counts."

Frequently Social Media messages are particularly effective for the farmer, when transmitted at a personal level, not reasoning objectively but through emotional appeal. Joy, anger, sadness, envy and pity achieve attention. And for associations this clearly is a restrictive limitation to the scope and possibilities for action in the organization bound PR.

T 6: "There are simple priority rules in Social Media. Emotion prior to information - person prior to organization."

For the farmer it is important that trust plays a role - and that is not, or at least not based solely on the factual level. As consequence for associations the real farmer is needed to create communication relation based upon personal trustworthiness.

T 7: "The marginal costs of dissemination of existing information are not an obstacle."

This means for the farmer that nearly everyone could receive the message and – with whatever intentions – take part in discourses. For associations the focus is to be set on content, wording, format and timing of PR measures in Social Media more than on cost of proliferation.

T 8: "The transmitter must not wait until the target group comes to him. He must go where the target audience is."

Hence the farmer has to use antennas and seismographs to find topics and places to engage in developing and ongoing discourses. For associations to actively make use of communication, co-operation and networking to identify potential hotspots as early as possible.

T 9: "Better linked well than invented bad by yourself."

For the farmer this means to focus on his "core competencies" and legitimate interests; at the same time stay curious and open, make connections to other opinions, information and formats. For associations it leads the way to make use of the division of labor in dealing with Social Media.

## 5. Two surveys

In order to understand how society and consumers behave at the present use of Social Media in the agricultural sector, two surveys were conducted during the study based upon the technical platform of LimeSurvey. The first focused on "the average consumer", however it was directed towards Social Media users. The invitation for participation was launched via Facebook and spread by sharing and posting. In data analysis a difference was made between "with agricultural background" (+a; total n = 277) and "without agricultural background" (-a; total n = 230). A first part of the survey focused on personal information. Table 2 shows these basic information regarding the samples of participants.

Table 1: Survey Sample „Consumers“

Total	n = 503, of whom n = 233 <i>without</i> link and n = 270 <i>with</i> link to agriculture
Use of Social Media	95 % with <i>Facebook</i> -Account, 10 % make use of <i>Twitter</i> , 31 % make use of <i>YouTube</i>
Frequene of Social Media use	88 % daily and more often online in social networks
⊖-Age	31 years old (arith. MW), 27 years old (Median)
Education level	71 % High school + college entrance
Profession	40 % employees, 14 % self employed, 38 % in vocational education, (often atudents)
Gender	55 % female, 45 % male

Source: own

The online-questionnaire was divided into three chapters: a) Image of agriculture, b) user-behaviour in Social Media in general and c) regarding agricultural items and d) socio-economic data. Six multiple choice questions – with more than one answer allowed - were directed towards the Image of agriculture. "Farmers in Germany...

- ...produce healthy food."
- ...cause environmental impact."
- ...operate industrial mass production."
- ...handle animals with care."
- ...keep and protect cultural landscape."
- ...provide jobs in rural areas."

Main results in brief: Regarding the image of agriculture in Germany the 73 % of the –a and 81 % of +a participants were looking on the sector as "a modern, far technologized agriculture". Only little

approval was given to classifications like “small-scale agriculture”, “organic farming” or “import-oriented”.

- 83 % of –a but only 60 % of +a assessed the image of the German agriculture as good or very good. That means that 40 % of the +a see a bad or even very bad image.
- The open question regarding topical Items was answered to a large extend with terms of animal welfare, sustainability, organic, genetic engineering and plant protection.
- Multiple choice questions regarding the image of agriculture in Germany lead to statements as: “farmers produce healthy food”, “... operate industrial massproduction” and “... safeguard jobs in rural areas” by slightly more than 50 % of –a. Particularly in the aspect of industrial massproduction there is a significant difference to +a (30 %). The statements “farmers cause impact on environment” (-a < 20%), and “... handle animals with care” (-a 23%) gained less approval. One important result seems to be that – a participants on the one hand critically look at industrial mass production, animal husbandry and handling of cultural landscape, but on the other hand appreciate the production of healthy food and protection of the environment by farmers.

The next block was directed towards the question: How can interested consumers gain information on agriculture? Assumed you wanted to learn more about agriculture, which type of communication would be best for you (only one answer out of five)?

- Information by media (tv, broadcasting, etc.)
- Personal talking to the farmer
- Information by school, studying, presentations etc.
- Information by Social Media
- Information on Packing

For –a participants the most important sources of information are regular media (tv, broadcast, etc.: 33%). Information on packing (23 %) and personal talking to the farmer (22 %). For +a participants the options „personal talking to the farmer (33 %) and regular media (28 %) are the most important sources. It is noticeable that in both groups of participants the option „information by Social Media is only approved by little (-a: 13 %; +a: 12 %). This might be a clue not to look on Social Media independently from other media.

Asking for the purpose of using Social Media the participants were allowed for one or more out of six motivations:

- A. Keeping and maintaining contacts
- B. Exchange of opinions in peer groups
- C. Getting informed about topical news
- D. Online gaming
- E. Self promotion and PR
- F. Planning joint events

As main results both groups, +a and –a, A. and C. showed about 80 % approval. Only B. there can be stated significant difference. While –a chose B. by only 39 % +a revealed 57 % approval. 42 % of –a and 84 % of +a confirmed that they are gaining information on agricultural items in Social Media. Overall (-a and +a: N = 175) the participants answered that they were not aware of these options (35 %) or were not interested in it (23 %). Another task dealt with the way of presenting agricultural information sites in Social Media. Particular attention was requested on a realistic representation of modern agriculture with

an objectively representation of the relation between agricultural production standards and pricebuilding for food (-a: 88%; +a: 90 %). Allover a majority voted for a more massive presence of agriculture in Social Media (-a: 73 %; +a: 90 %)

In a second survey - in addition to the consumers' - experts, namely highly active users resp. authors, who professionally deal with Social Media in relation with agricultural items, have been asked for their assessment of the present time public handling of Social media. Table 3 gives the basic information regarding the sample of 53 participants of this survey.

Table 2: Basic information of participants in an experts' survey

Total	n = 53
⊖-Age	37 years
Knowledge level	77 % sound to excellent knowledge about Social Media, 23 % average knowledge
Professional background	34% interest groups/associations, 30% farmers, 11% publishers, 8% consulting, 8 % industry and retail
Gender	42 % female, 58 % male

Source: own

The focus of the expert survey was to assess the following theses on the application of Social Media.

- A. "There are simple priority rules in Social Media. Emotion prior to information - person prior to organization."
- B. "The transmitter must not wait until the target group comes to him. He must go where the target audience is."
- C. "It is not only about image, it is about reputation."
- D. "The farmer should take part in Social Media as a human with many facettes"
- E. "Social Media is not made for thin-skinned."
- F. „Social Media must not be looked at isolated from other media."

As a general result, all theses received broad support (on average, 75% chose the option "totally agree" and "to agree"). Particularly B. and F. gained high rates of approval (> 80 %). On the other hand A. has been seen more differenziated. 26 % were marked "not convinced", 13 % rejected the thesis.

The experts interviewed in this study also assessed what needs to be particularly observed in the use of Social Media by agricultural enterprises. In this case, 53% of respondents chose the aspect of "authenticity", 30% marked the "timeliness" preference, while significantly lower levels of "interesting" and "unexpected" accounted for.

## 6. Monitoring

Monitoring and the resulting communication activities align with the following questions: (1) What is the perception? (2) Where does the discussion take place? (3) What is the discourse about? (4) How does the discussion go? (5) What is the context of the discussion? (6) Which priorities does the discussion reveal? (7) Which part of the content is self-determined which one is foreign determined? (8) What are

the drivers of the discourse? (9) Is there a risk potential? (10) Who achieve my communication actions? (11) Does my reasoning have impact?

Currently the issue of animal welfare determines relevant parts of the social and political agenda. A case study shows that topics relating to animal welfare in general are discussed very emotionally. The Social Media serve as a forum also for personal unqualified assertions. Based on the monitoring tool SELECT (Strategic, Evaluation and Language processing of Emotions, Connotation and Trends) this case study was able to provide key insights for the development of a communication strategy, namely, that first campaign like no communication is necessary, but the active communication should be initially focused on key groups in the network.

## **7. Conclusions and discussion**

Social Media provide the agricultural sector with new options and also challenges of using Social Media for creating and maintaining images by the means of PR. Social Media open opportunities and also come along with risks in handling these highly dynamic tools. From the research point of view there is a lack in a sound theoretical framework on the one hand. On the other hand research has to be done to provide the sector, the farmers and the associations with recommendations to make use of the opportunities. However the result do have a limited validity in terms of timeline, of topically given and rapidly changing preconditions and in terms of substantive scope.

## **8. Summary**

Social media and their fast development have meaningful impact on public communication structures and processes also in the agricultural sector. Hence is important to understand basic communication models and their necessary expands to make use of Social Media in order to pursue communication objectives. Despite the lack of a coherent and consistent theory of Social Media communication research on how to make use of it has to be done. The multi-methodical approach applied in the underlying study lead to nine theses that line up basic requirements resp. barriers for active communication strategies and PR concepts as well on the farmers' level as on the professional level of associations. I.a. Workshops with PR and Social Media professionals and surveys regarding consumers and experts attitude towards Social Media show a whole lot of opportunities to build, improve and maintain positive images of agriculture. However, also severe risks might appear when it comes to implement Social Media strategies and single measures. A case study underlined the fact that particularly in highly emotional items such as conditions and methods applied in animal husbandry systematic monitoring is a precondition for identifying potentially upcoming "shitstorms" and for developing suitable strategies that are able to cope with the challenges of controversial and emotional discourses. The basic fact that Social Media discourses take place either way leads to the inevitable necessity to act and react in those networks. There is no way to avoid online media in the field of individual and branch communication for agriculture. Consequently it is important to be aware of the opportunities and the threats of establishing as part of overall communication concepts.

## **9. Closing remarks**

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