



Bridging the Producer Identity Gap

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A series of research projects were conducted to assess how farmers and ranchers communicate their identities and understand the identities of other producers. Focus was given to relationships between those with different agricultural production practices. This fact sheet will discuss the importance of identity, an overview of what research was conducted, a summary of the findings and advice for bridging the gap between different producer groups.

Why Identity Matters in Agriculture

Farmers and ranchers have a deeply entrenched sense of identity tied to their occupations (Abrams et al., 2013), which they often view as a lifestyle rather than a job. Part of this stems from the familial nature of agriculture and operations being passed down from one generation to the next (Arnold, 2017). On one hand, this deeply entrenched occupational identity gives producers a concrete understanding of who they are, but on the other hand, they can also take criticisms personally as an attack on their character (Bell et al., 2004; Stock & Forney, 2014; Van Dijk et al., 2016). Moreover, how producers identify themselves influences every decision made for farming and ranching operations (Hyland et al., 2016; Lequin et al., 2018; Sulemana & James, 2014; Van Dijk et al., 2016). Producers, like most people, make decisions based on their identities and to maintain consistency (Bell et al., 2004).

These identities, and more specifically the differences in producer identities, are an important factor in how producers interact with one another (Läpple, 2013; Rosin, 2013). Social capital, built through social interactions, is essential in the functioning of society and communities (Bennett, 1968). In this instance, social capital has the potential to help producers share information and resources. This is particularly beneficial for new producers and because of the increasing age of farmers and ranchers, new producers are an important part of agriculture's future in the United States. Nevertheless, social capital of entire communities can be undermined by a handful of bad relationships (Sharp & Smith, 2003).

Of note is online engagement. Agricultural organizations often recommend producers engage online to help spread the word of agriculture, though not all of those who are involved

in agriculture are willing to engage online, often because they do not want to upset others (Shaw et al., 2015; Rockers et al., 2020; White et al., 2014).

This research focused specifically on traditional and alternative producers. Coexistence between different types of producers has been identified as a key challenge by the USDA because producers of all kinds serve a role in meeting increased agricultural production needs, while also meeting varying consumer preferences (USDA, 2015).

Data Collection

The project was conducted in four parts: (a) a content analysis of Facebook pages, (b) in-depth interviews, (c) roundtable discussions with producers and (d) a survey of producers.

The goal of the content analysis was to understand how agricultural producers in the state communicate their identity and how they portray other producers. Facebook pages of 364 operations were reviewed. They were sorted between traditional and alternative production practices.

In the second stage of the project, in-depth interviews were conducted with traditional and alternative producers from across the state. They were asked about their identities, their perceptions of other producers and their relationships with other producers.

The third stage of the project consisted of five roundtable discussions where groups of producers could share their thoughts and concerns about agricultural production in the state.

The final stage of the project was a mailed survey to agricultural producers in the state. They answered questions about what type of production they engaged in, if they discuss agriculture on social media, mentoring in agriculture and their perceptions of agricultural identity.

What we Found

Across all four research projects, there were four key findings: (a) producers are not engaging much online, (b) they believe producers should be free to make their own decisions,

(c) they rely on sources of information that are close to them and (d) being an agricultural producer is a core piece of their identities. Supplemental tables and references for research papers are provided to list specific results from each stage of the project, but the four key findings are explained below.

Lack of Online Engagement

Very few agricultural operations had a Facebook presence that could be found through the content analysis. This was backed up by the survey that showed most respondents did not have personal social media accounts or accounts for their operations. However, producers who participated in interviews indicated they interacted online with agriculturists across the nation. Many of the survey respondents and content analysis subjects who were online were not posting regularly and many were not engaging with others online about agricultural topics. This is important because many agricultural organizations want their members to engage the public online (Shaw et al., 2015; Rockers et al., 2020; White et al., 2014). Producers indicated they communicated about agriculture every single day; however, it was not necessarily online.

Live and Let Live

In general, producers in these studies believed they and other producers should be able to make the operational decisions they believed to be correct without interference from the government or other entities, including other producers. Although producers may not want to buy or produce the products produced by the other group, they generally supported others' desires to farm as they saw fit.

Although they believed producers should be free to make their own decisions, many of the non-mainstream interview participants felt they were being judged by their peers and community members. In the content analysis, there was not much comparison between types of producers, though the comparisons that did occur generally portrayed the other group in a negative light. It is possible while comparisons might not happen often, it being negative when it occurs has an outsized effect on perceptions of producers feeling accepted by others in their communities (Sharp & Smith, 2003).

Sources of Information

Interpersonal connections were the most commonly cited source of information by producers in this study, including family, neighbors and other producers. In general, the more closely associated to the individual producer, the more likely they were to value that source. That said, there were other sources of information, including agricultural organizations and trade publications. The producers in this research reported having mentors, but not all of them reported being mentors to others. More research is needed to understand what is happening, but it is possible a smaller number of individuals are mentoring compared to the number who are mentored.

Producer Identity

Being a producer was a key component of the identities of producers (Abrams et al., 2013). They felt a sense of responsibility to the land, their operations and their families (Arnold, 2017). They wanted to be successful, but success

meant a lot of different things: financial viability, efficiency, innovation, longevity of operations, and pure enjoyment and passion (Phillip & Gray, 1995; Van Dijk et al., 2016). They were proud of the communal identity agriculture gave them and were concerned with being a judicious and kind neighbor. Most producers in these studies were conscious not to speak poorly of other producers or criticize production practices.

This sense of identity being tied to their occupation is relevant to the stress of their careers. Many producers were concerned about the mental health of other producers, which fits into a growing narrative of farmer mental health being discussed in research and mainstream media (James & Hendrickson, 2010; Milner et al., 2013; Tiesman et al., 2015). And in the interviews, a sense of isolation was found among some participants, calling farming "a lonely occupation."

Advice to Bridge Groups

There are three recommendations for trying to bridge different groups of producers: 1) Focus on the positive and commonalities, 2) Incentivize online engagement and 3) Keep trying.

Focus on the positive and commonalities. Exclude those who cannot engage in productive discourse. All it takes is a small number of negative individuals to make people feel disliked in a community. Any collective efforts to foster relationships and social capital in producer communities, such as USDA's priority of coexistence, should emphasize the need to reduce negative communication, such as calling a different group of producers lazy, because only a few negative interactions can undermine much more numerous positive interactions (Sharp & Smith, 2003). Focusing on commonalities instead of their differences can also help keep engagement positive (Mathias et al., 2017; Said, 2019).

Incentivize online engagement. Agricultural organizations want their members to engage online to help tell the stories of agriculture, but there is not always a clear incentive to engage, particularly for producers who are afraid of offending friends and neighbors. Producers need to know why engaging online would be beneficial to them and their industry. Training can be a way to ease some concerns, but fostering connections can also be an incentive for participation given the often-lonely nature of agricultural production. And ultimately, it is okay if not everyone engages online. Not everyone is going to want to do this and not everyone is going to be capable of doing it well.

Keep trying. Agricultural production is a complicated, diverse industry. Getting everyone on the exact same page is unlikely to ever truly occur, but if they can engage with each other positively, that is better than tearing each other down. But this is going to take time and effort.

For More Reading

For more information about the results of the content analysis:

King, A. E. H., & Settle, Q. (2020). Examining the social properties of Oklahoma agricultural Facebook pages: A quantitative content analysis. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 104(4).

For more information about the results of the interviews, King, A. E. H., & Settle, Q. (2021). Cultivating identity,

sowing relationships, fertilizing success, and harvesting coexistence: Understanding Oklahoma producer identity and relationships. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 105(2).

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Summary of Roundtable Results

Theme	Description
Regulations	DOT, soil conservation, Veterinary feed directive, Country of Origin Labeling, import/export issues, regulations tend to hurt agriculturists rather than help.
Limited government funding for programs	They were unaware of agencies and services available.
Increased cost of inputs	This led to a need for off-farm income.
Feral hogs	They cause damage to crops and property.
Stagnant practices	Neighbors tend to be doing the same things, lack of innovation in industry.
Increase in age of farmers	Difficult for new farmers to get started.
Farmer mental health	Stress is at an all-time high, concern for peers.
Separation between farmer and public	They believe the public is disengaged from farmers and agriculture.

Summary of Survey Results

	Yes	No
Is agricultural production the primary source of income for your household?	41.0 %	59.0 %
My agricultural operation is a family operation.	89.7 %	10.3 %
Type of operation		
Conventional	94.1 %	5.9 %
Organic	22.2 %	77.8 %

	Mean
I rely on agricultural producers from across the United States for information.	2.56 %
I rely on producers across Oklahoma for information.	2.15 %
I rely on producers in my area for information.	1.83 %
1 = Strongly agree, 5 = Strongly disagree.	

Please indicate on which platforms you have PERSONAL social media accounts:		
Platform	Yes	No
Twitter	10.3 %	89.7 %
Facebook	45.5 %	54.5 %
Instagram	13.3 %	86.7 %

Please indicate on which platforms you have YOUR OPERATION has social media accounts:		
Platform	Yes	No
Twitter	10.3 %	89.7 %
Facebook	45.5 %	54.5 %
Instagram	13.3 %	86.7 %
Do you actively talk about agriculture on social media?		
	Yes	No
Do you actively talk about agriculture on social media?	14.6 %	85.4 %

On my PERSONAL social media accounts, I actively engage (or just engage?) with _____.						
	Never	Seasonally	Monthly	Once a Week	2-3 times a week	Daily
other agriculturists about agriculture	68.8 %	12.5 %	0.0 %	9.4 %	6.3 %	3.1 %
other agriculturists about topics other than agriculture	75.0 %	6.3 %	6.3 %	9.4 %	3.1 %	0.0 %
the public about agriculture	68.8 %	15.6 %	0.0 %	12.5 %	3.1 %	0.0 %
the public about topics other than agriculture	62.5 %	9.4 %	6.3 %	15.6 %	3.1 %	3.1 %
On my OPERATION'S social media accounts, I engage with _____.						
	Never	Seasonally	Monthly	Once a Week	2-3 times a week	Daily
other agriculturists about agriculture	72.4 %	3.4 %	3.4 %	13.8 %	6.9 %	0.0 %
other agriculturists about topics other than agriculture	71.4 %	7.1 %	3.6 %	10.7 %	7.1 %	0.0 %
the public about agriculture	75.0 %	10.7 %	3.6 %	7.1 %	3.6 %	0.0 %
the public about topics other than agriculture	71.4 %	3.6 %	10.7 %	3.6 %	10.7 %	0.0 %

I mentor at least one other agricultural producer.		
	Yes	No
Family member	59.5 %	40.5 %
Non-family	37.1 %	62.9 %
I have or have had at least one mentor in agricultural production in my life.		
	Yes	No
Family member	78.4 %	21.6 %
Non-family	62.9 %	37.1 %

In your opinion, how do agriculturalists' work ethic compare to other occupations and industries?	
1.44 1 = much stronger 5 = much weaker	
M	
I feel a sense of responsibility to the land that my agricultural operation is on.	1.18 %

I feel connected to my neighbors.	1.67 %
I am invested in my community.	1.63 %
My community is invested in agriculture.	1.85 %
I go out of my way to help neighboring producers.	1.83 %
I am concerned about the mental health of agricultural producers in my area.	2.68 %
I am concerned about the mental health of agricultural producers in the United States.	2.40 %
Agriculturists of every sector have the right to operate as they see fit.	1.63 %
I feel under attack for my version of agriculture by other producers.	3.67 %
My operation is often a topic of discussion among others in my area.	3.23 %
I consider my neighbors to be competition.	3.87 %
I am opposed to forms of agriculture that are different than mine.	4.33 %
Agriculture is portrayed accurately by media outlets.	3.88 %
Media outlets accurately portray the kind of agricultural production I engage in.	3.38 %
The government interferes too much in our everyday lives.	1.80 %
Sometimes government needs to make laws that keep people from hurting themselves.	3.33 %
Government should put limits on the choices individuals can make so individuals don't get in the way of what is good for society.	3.61 %
It is not the government's business to try to protect people from themselves.	2.24 %
1= strongly agree, 5 = strongly disagree	

Which is your preferred term for referring to yourself in your agricultural work?	
Answer	%
Farmer	35.9%
Rancher	30.8%
Agricultural Producers	12.8%
Agribusinessman	7.7%
Agripreneur	0.0%
Other	12.8%
Demographic Characteristics of Respondents	
Descriptors	%
Highest level of education completed	
HS or GED	7.5 %
Some college but no degree	17.5 %
Associate's degree	5.0 %
Bachelor's degree	40.0 %
Master's degree	20.0 %
Doctoral degree	5.9 %
Professional degree	5.0 %
Marital Status	
Married	80.0 %
Widowed	10.0 %
Divorced	5.0 %
Never married	5.0 %

Sex	
Male	92.3 %
Female	7.7 %
Race	
White	82.9 %
American Indian or Alaskan Native	12.2 %
Political Party	
Republican	71.1 %
Democrat	15.8 %
Independent	10.5 %
Other	2.6 %

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