

Using Twitter to Deliver 4-H Show Announcements

Abstract

Twitter, a free social media tool, can be used to help run a large Extension event. In Minnesota, beef and dairy show committees and 4-H participants are using real-time tweets delivered to participants' cell phones to keep state fair livestock shows running smoothly.

Ann Nordby

Web manager
University of
Minnesota Extension
St. Paul, Minnesota
nordby@umn.edu

#Your-class-staging-now!

Introduction

At large events such as 4-H state and regional livestock shows, communicating with all participants to keep the show running smoothly can be challenging due to noise and distance, even when a loudspeaker system is in use.

Extension is using social media tools to connect with audiences (Cornelisse et al., 2011). Twitter is a free social media tool that sends short messages called "tweets." Anyone can choose to receive them by text message with no Twitter account, or by smartphone Twitter app. In this way, 4-H participants in any location can get operational announcements, such as livestock show staging updates and judging results, in real time.

Background

Every year, nearly 6,000 Minnesota 4-H members take their projects to the Minnesota State Fair; about half of them are livestock. About 1,000 are beef or dairy cattle. Our post-fair surveys indicate that 95% of 4-H state fair beef participants and their families carry cell phones or smartphones, and 71% of them use text messaging daily. This mirrors national statistics (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2013a).

In 2011, Minnesota Extension launched MN4HAnnounce on Twitter for all 4-H state fair participants, their families, staff, and volunteers. It sends time-and-place messages to repeat and augment the published schedule and loudspeaker announcements. In 2012, we piloted MN4HBeef, a species-specific Twitter account with deeper announcements for state fair beef show participants. In 2013,

we added MN4HDairy, for state fair dairy shows.

Description of the Method

We tested this use of Twitter in 2011 at a regional competition with a few hundred participants.

Promotion of the service to make people aware of it is key.

- We introduced Twitter to 4-H staff at our annual statewide conference in February 2011.
- In the summer, using email LISTSERVs, Facebook, and state fair participant handouts, we invited staff, volunteers, participants, and families to follow MN4HAnnounce. We explained how to "fast follow" using text messaging without an account, or just "follow us on Twitter."

At the 2011 Minnesota State Fair, MN4HAnnounce tweeted 314 announcements over 12 days for all exhibitors, such as "Exhibitor Orientation+Judging at 5:15pm, Erickson Hall Stage 4-H building for Clowning, Computer, Entomology, Forest Resources, & Geology."

For the 2012 Minnesota State Fair, in addition to MN4HAnnounce, communications staff worked with the 4-H Beef Committee to develop MN4HBeef, determining what announcements to send to beef exhibitors, their families, 4-H volunteers, and staff as they arrived at the fairgrounds, prepared for shows, participated in shows, and prepared to depart. In 2013, working with the dairy committee, we added MN4HDairy.

We classify tweets as scheduled (time and content are known beforehand, Figure 1), planned (content is known but exact time is not, Figure 2) or ad hoc (neither time nor content is known ahead of time, Figure 3).

In the weeks before the fair, scheduled tweets are programmed into Hootsuite, a social media management software tool. Hootsuite sends them automatically at the scheduled time during the fair.

Figure 1.
Examples of Scheduled Tweets



We compile a spreadsheet of planned tweets to copy, paste, and send as needed. This avoids typographical errors.

Figure 2.

Example of a Planned Tweet



Figure 3.

Examples of Ad hoc Tweets



User Satisfaction

Each tweet is sent to all followers of that account. It's important to minimize the number of tweets. In 2011 post-fair surveys, respondents who had signed up for MN4HAnnounce said they had received too many messages. Nearly one-third didn't sign up because they were concerned about the number of messages they might receive. So in 2012 we reduced the number of messages from 314 to 282, and the number of survey respondents who said they had received too many messages went down to four.

In 2013 MN4HBeef 64% of survey respondents found the service "very useful" or "somewhat useful." Fifty-two percent said they were "very likely" to use it again. They received 98 tweets during the 4 days of livestock shows.

Staffing

Supervised by communications staff, two student workers managed these Twitter accounts and other social media. Starting 2 weeks before the state fair, they were trained on organizational communications and Hootsuite social media management software. The beef and dairy livestock committees approved the tweets. The student workers made posters to promote the service during the fair and acted as ambassadors for the accounts during the fair. They were in the livestock office during shows to send tweets that echoed the loudspeaker announcements. For example, "Now staging: registered Simmental steers, registered Limousin steers on deck."

Take-Up

Only Twitter account holders can be counted—those who follow by text message are not. All three of these accounts are public, so followers may include Twitter users who are not state fair participants.

Table 1.

Followers with Twitter Accounts, Post-2013
State Fair

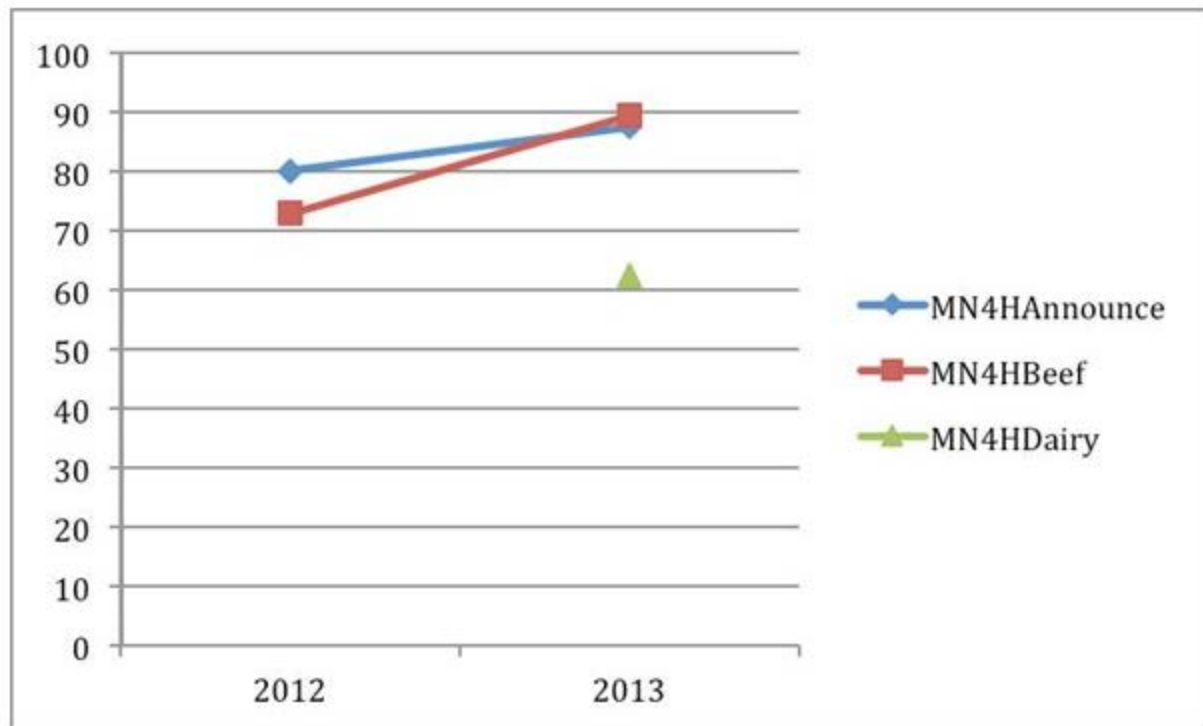
	Followers	Fair Participants
MN4HBeef	209	568
MN4HDairy	89	469
MN4HAnnounce	407	5752

Benefits and Limitations

Livestock committees reported that Twitter aided communications and helped the shows run smoothly. They plan to use it again next year. Post-fair survey respondents (most of them 4-H parents supporting their child at the fair) said they were "very likely" or "somewhat likely" to use it again, in high numbers, as seen in Figure 4.

Figure 4.

Somewhat Likely" or "Very Likely" to Use It Again



Note: 2011 data not available.

Twitter is free for all users (except for any texting or roaming charges). Anyone with a cell phone can elect to receive or stop receiving tweets at any time, and no Twitter account is needed for "fast

follow" text message recipients. Parents who don't want their children to use Twitter as a social medium may find this attractive. Cell phone service can be unreliable, and text messages may be delayed by the provider during periods of heavy use.

Smart phone users sometimes prefer to use text messaging: 61% of Americans own smart phones, but only 15% use Twitter (Pew 2013a and Pew 2012).

Conclusions

Twitter can be an effective tool for sending announcements to large numbers of event participants, regardless of location and ambient noise. To be most effective, tweets must be well planned and in sync with other communications, and the audiences must be aware of the service and how to use it.

References

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