

## Collaborating with Your Clients Using Social Media & Mobile Communications

### Abstract

Many Extension educators are still learning how to effectively integrate social media into their programs. By using the right social media platforms and mobile applications to create engaged, online communities, Extension educators can collaborate with clients to produce and to share information expanding and enhancing their social media and mobile efforts, while meeting their outreach goals more efficiently. This article demonstrates techniques Extension educators can employ to allow clients to become producers of information using social media and mobile tools.

**Eli Typhina**  
Graduate Research  
Assistant  
[eatyphin@ncsu.edu](mailto:eatyphin@ncsu.edu)

**Robert E. Bardon**  
Associate Dean of  
Extension and  
Engagement and  
Professor  
[rebardon@ncsu.edu](mailto:rebardon@ncsu.edu)

**Laurie W. Gharis**  
Assistant Extension  
Professor  
[lwilson@ncsu.edu](mailto:lwilson@ncsu.edu)

North Carolina State  
University  
Raleigh, North  
Carolina

### Introduction

Extension has built and nurtured strong networks over the years among universities, citizens, government agencies, and companies, but the mode through which these networks will grow in the future must account for the conversations that are and could take place via social media (Langcuster, 2014). Multiple articles have described how social media platforms and mobile applications can be useful for Extension (Gharis, Bardon, Evans, Hubbard, & Taylor 2014; Nordby, 2014; Fox, Leeds & Barrett, 2014), yet many Extension educators are still learning how to most effectively integrate social media into their programs. This article focuses on techniques Extension educators can use to allow clients to become producers of information by interactively sharing and receiving information with Extension educators in ways that allow the online community to develop collaboratively.

### Getting Started with Social Media & Mobile Communications

Educators interested in applying social media and mobile communications to their outreach efforts may start by identifying the responsiveness of clients to the new media. This can be accomplished by incorporating survey questions on social media into program planning and evaluations, needs assessments, or other long-range Extension planning surveys. Questions should be designed to identify:

- The preferred platform of the client

- What content to post
- The frequency of posting
- The time clients are most receptive to communications

Survey questions should be designed with open-ended and closed-ended questions so that responses can be compared and affirmed (Table 1).

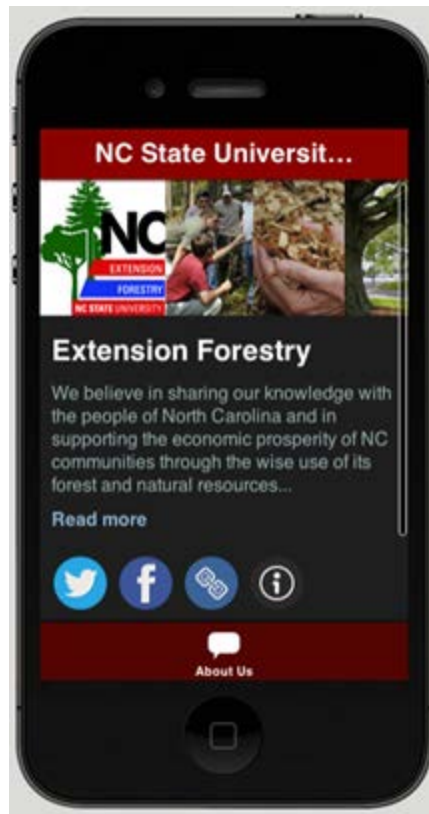
**Table 1.**  
Example Questions Identify Extension Clients' Communication and Social Media Needs and the Purpose of the Question

Example Questions	Purpose of Each Question																		
List three topics you would like to learn about from Extension.	Use responses to identify which platform to use and content to post.																		
<p>How often should we contact you with information?</p> <table border="1" data-bbox="354 957 1101 1150"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Daily</th> <th>Weekly</th> <th>Monthly</th> <th>Quarterly</th> <th>Yearly</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Topic 1</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Topic 2</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table>		Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Yearly	Topic 1						Topic 2						Use responses to identify rate of posting.
	Daily	Weekly	Monthly	Quarterly	Yearly														
Topic 1																			
Topic 2																			
If you could have an Extension educator with you, what location and time would be most helpful for you?	Responses will help you identify how mobile your platform needs to be, if you should use locative features, and what time clients are most receptive to communications.																		
Reflecting on how you communicate with friends and family, what communication media could Extension use to communicate best with you?	This open-ended question may reveal surprising trends that a close-ended question may not.																		
Common Communications: Select the media you would like Extension to use to communicate with you.	Following the open-ended question with a close-ended question																		

<p>face-to-face phone call e-mail computer/mobile e-newsletter paper newsletter Video chat via</p> <p>Social Media: Select the media you would like Extension to use to communicate with you. blog Facebook Pintrest LinkedIn YouTube videos wiki Video chat via</p> <p>Mobile Technology: Select the media you would like Extension to use to communicate with you.</p> <p>Twitter Instagram Mobile application that combines blogs, Facebook, and other information in one location</p>	<p>will help you compare and affirm responses.</p>
<p>Indicate the number of times you read the Extension blog, <a href="http://about.extension.org/blog/">http://about.extension.org/blog/</a>, per month.</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4 or more times per month</p> <p>Indicate the number of times you read the e-newsletter, Weekly Gardener's Tips, per month.</p> <p>0 1 2 3 4 or more times per month</p>	<p>Knowing which of your current communication media are most used will help you hone your communication plan.</p>

Extension educators should create and receive feedback on a social media plan. The plan should include platforms that will be used, what will be posted, when posts will be made, and how often feedback will be provided, along with a justification from the surveys as to why each platform is suitable. Mobile technology media may be included through a mobile application portal and/or group texting services. A mobile application portal is different from a regular application in that content that already exists on the Internet is linked to the application. For example, an application portal may include tabs showing a social media feed, a tab with current events, and a page with Extension educator contact information (Figure 1). Educators should conclude their social media plan with a detailed list of the software and technology needed to successfully use selected platforms.

**Figure 1.**  
Example of an Application Portal



## Make an Effective Social Media Page

Besides staying organized (Forleo, 2014) by blocking off regular intervals of time for social media efforts, creating folders for quick access to useful content, and using content management websites, Extension educators should focus on components that build a digital relationship with clients. This relationship is similar to face-to-face relationships in that each party presents and exchanges information about themselves and what they know. Table 2 displays the four principles for creating a digital relationship through social media (Kent & Taylor, 1998; Reber & Kim, 2006).

**Table 2.**

The Four Principals of Creating a Digital Relationship. Adapted from the work of Kent & Taylor (1998) and Reber & Kim (2006)

Principle	Purpose	How
Create a dialogic loop	Simulate back and forth dialogue similar to in person conversations	Provide features and content that allows both educators and clients to interact. allow clients to post on the wall give them surveys and polls provide contact information to encourage offline dialogue Complete the dialogic loop by responding back to clients every week, even if it is to simply thank them for commenting on a post.
Let them know you like	Build a relationship	Offer content that shows Extension's ideologies, practices, and initiatives. Content can include fun client/staff videos, useful reports, biographies/videos

a friend		of staff at work, press releases of events, and mission/vision statement with accompanying images or videos showing educators acting in accordance.
Visually appeal to clients through images and video	Show personality and generate traffic	Use images and short videos (1 to 2 minutes or less) that tell the "story" of Extension (e.g. use a picture of a staff member examining a plant with a client instead of just an image of a plant). Stay relevant by changing profile and cover images to reflect the seasons, holidays, or events. Pay special attention to the profile image, this small square image shows up next to every post, so make sure it is memorable and recognizable.
Give clients a reason to return	Social media sites are digital conversations, and where there is no conversation, there is no reason to visit.	Continue the conversation by providing updates on pertinent and valuable information, limited time question and answer forums with experts, event notices and re-caps with images from completed events, and volunteer opportunities. Post a request for clients to reply with "what they would like to hear; what they would like to talk about; and what they might find interesting, enjoyable, and valuable" on the social media page (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

## Getting Followers to Collaborate

Getting followers to collaborate requires more than providing a link; it's a call to action. There are several things educators can do to build an interactive following (Davidson, 2014; Maluniu, et al., 2014). These include the following.

- Ask clients to like or to follow the social media page.
- Search for clients on social media platforms, and send a request for them to like or join the page or feed.
- Use hashtags to connect a post to similar posts within that social media platform. For example, tagging a photo on Instagram as #garden, allows people searching that hashtag to be introduced to a new feed.
- Search for people with similar interests and topic areas, and like or follow their pages, as well as their followers' pages. Typically when people are followed, they will follow back once they see overlapping content interests.
- Directly request in posts that followers "retweet" on Twitter or "share" on Facebook content that

they find valuable.

- Use social plugins to prominently display social media accounts on webpages and email.
- Cross post links in all social media feeds and profile descriptions, such as posting the Twitter handle on Facebook.
- Display social media links and a call to join everywhere, including on posters at the office and at the end of email signatures. Consider using QR codes so smart phone users can easily scan the information.
- Request and include links to social media pages when writing for others. For example, request a link be included in the biography when writing a blog entry, posting on a forum, or writing an article.

## Keeping Followers Involved

The work does not stop by simply gaining a following. Keeping the online community involved requires getting to know the followers, engaging the followers, and collaborating with the followers. Techniques can be seen in Table 3.

**Table 3.**  
Techniques Used to Keep Clients Engaged on Social Media

	<b>Action</b>	<b>Recommendation</b>
Know your followers	Track and make note of what time, day, and type of content is liked by followers. This information helps determine what should be posted and when for an optimal readership.	Post during peak social media reading times, such as 9 am, noon, 3 pm, and 6 pm. Start with these times until survey data is collected on communication preferences or until there are enough analytics on the social media site. Post regularly or schedule posts to go out using a content management system.
Engage your followers	Keep clients engaged and in conversation through challenges, questions, and valuable content.	Provide challenge participants with real prizes, such as plants or a gift certificate or provide non-tangible items, such as a digital award. Post challenges regularly, monthly or quarterly, and request that winners post themselves with their prize on their social media page and tag the awarding organization in their post. Ask clients to participate in fill-in-the blank posts, such as "Post your response: _____ is a household ingredient can you use to deter deer from eating your tulips" (Ayres,

		2014). The pages that typically get more likes and shares are those that post images, videos, and infographics, as well as those that keep information positive. Make information fun and unique by designing and posting an infographic (make one at <a href="http://piktochart.com/">piktochart.com/</a> ). Provide valuable and timely photos, videos, and links to information that can include recipes, how-to guides, and breakthroughs in science.
Collaborate with your followers	Collaborate with clients to post and share content.	Create a space with a shared investment in the advancement of mutually created knowledge. Crowd source questions, ideas, and how-to guides to facilitate clients learning from each other. Ask event volunteers and attendees to take images and video and upload it directly to the social media site. Streamline the process with a poster explaining how to sign a digital waver and upload images using QR codes.

## Conclusion

By following the recommendations in this article, educators will be able to work collaboratively with their clients to keep material engaging and social media tasks under control. Educators should remember to identify the responsiveness of clients to new social media and mobile applications, build a digital relationship with their clients, encourage collaboration through social media postings, and continue to engage clients through challenges, questions, and spaces with mutually created knowledge.

### Acknowledgements

This publication is supported by The Renewable Resources Extension Act National Focus Fund Grant no. 2011-46401-31144 from the USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture.

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