IPNI Connects With Social Media for Agriculture

For many years, agricultural information exchange has been successfully accomplished by traditional media such as magazines, newspapers, radio, and television, and by time-honored and effective methods such as field days, grower meetings, extension publications, and an array of other techniques. In recent years, however, technology awareness and computer literacy have increased rapidly across all demographics and various forms of social media are being used more and more by people looking for news, education, and other information related to agriculture. Social media can be defined as internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. It is the blending of technology and social interaction that creates value in these types of media.

Education and outreach efforts by industry and university extension personnel have often been identified as valuable or successful based on the face-to-face interaction with clientele. For example, a well-known precision agriculture extension specialist at a major university sees social media as a means of enriching his efforts, not a hindrance to them. He says: "If I restrict dialogue only to a one-on-one conversation, then only that person can take advantage of it." By sharing the information exchanged during one face-to-face encounter through his social media network, the specialist has the opportunity to serve potentially millions of other growers asking the same questions or facing similar challenges. Social media tools also provide growers a quick and easy way to build relationships and to interact with other people in agriculture that they might never have connected with otherwise.

There are many different forms of social media, including web, social, and micro blogs (a blend of the term web log), podcasts, video, and other file-sharing sites. Some specific applications that the International Plant Nutrition Institute (IPNI) is currently using are YouTube and Twitter. YouTube is a video-sharing website where users can upload and view videos. IPNI has created a "channel" on the YouTube site where all of our posted videos are collected. The web address is www.youtube.com/PlantNutritionInst. You do not need an account to view videos, only to post your own. All of the videos are also available through the IPNI website: www.ipni.net. The value of using YouTube is that viewers with no knowledge of IPNI can find the videos and be directed back to the IPNI website to become familiar with the Institute. For example, only 23% of the viewers of one of our posted videos, "The Right Way to Grow Wheat", were referred from the IPNI website. The majority of viewers find our videos by using a YouTube search or by viewing related videos. YouTube also facilitates downloads of our videos to mobile devices, such as smart phones and iPads, which have become a more frequent means of viewing our material over the past several months.

Twitter is a microblogging service that allows users to post and read text-based messages of up to 140 characters. The messages or "tweets" are usually visible to the public. However, authors may restrict delivery to only their subscribers or "followers". Users can send or receive messages via the Twitter website or mobile devices. The IPNI twitter account can be accessed at www.twitter.com/PlantNutrition. A tweet from IPNI will typically be a short statement about a new posting on the website and a link to the full article or news item, such as: "*Better Crops with Plant Food* (2010, No. 3) is loaded with articles on spatial variability. #ag http://info.ipni.net/Y53U6"

The value of using Twitter to call attention to these postings is that it draws immediate visibility to an item that might not be seen otherwise by people who don't frequently visit the website. Another advantage is that a user can "retweet" any message to their list of followers, broadening the distribution beyond IPNI subscribers. As is done in this example tweet, an additional way to increase the number of viewers is by appending the message with a "hashtag". In the case of IPNI tweets, the hashtag is #ag. This link makes the tweets searchable to others within the agriculture community who might be following related users, but are not familiar with IPNI.

Another social media service available from IPNI is our RSS web feed, which we use to update subscribers on newly released information associated with our website. Readers can subscribe to timely updates by simply clicking the RSS icon located on any web browser while viewing our website. IPNI's RSS feed is simply: http://www.ipni.net/news.rss

Social media techniques provide a quick and responsive network for people involved in agriculture to gather and exchange information. This enables immediate dissemination of important emerging issues and the sharing of positive information among producers and consumers of agricultural products. IPNI is committed to providing science-based plant nutrition and fertilizer use information to industry, farmers, agricultural and environmental leaders, scientists, public policymakers, educators, and other important audiences. So, follow us on Twitter @PlantNutrition, and subscribe to our RSS web feed to receive all the latest updates.

BETTER CROPS
WITH PLANT FOOD
International Plant Nutrition Institute
3500 Parkway Lane, Suite 550
Norcross, Georgia 30092-2844
www.ipni.net

Steve Phillips
IPNI North American Program
Director, Southeast United States