

Incorporating

Social Media

in extension

by Madeline Fisher

It's probably a safe bet that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg—today's crown prince of social networking—will never be mistaken for a turfgrass scientist.

Yet, turfgrass scientist and ASA and CSSA member John Kaminski is often taken for an authority on social media. Kaminski, an assistant professor at Pennsylvania State University, was tapped to speak in a web and social-networking symposium at the ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Annual Meetings in Long Beach, CA last fall. Around the same time, *Golf Course Industry* magazine featured him on its cover as "The Social Networker," proclaiming him "the unrivaled master" in the turfgrass community of tools like blogs and Twitter.

How this happened, Kaminski isn't quite sure. "I never thought of myself as being an expert in social media," he says. "I always thought, 'Oh, I dabble in it, I enjoy it, I understand it.'" But

during the Annual Meetings, Kaminski realized he *is* something of an expert, at least compared with his colleagues in agronomy and crop science. Now he's hoping to bring them along. "I want people to embrace it," he says—not because social media is fun, or hip, or the latest thing, but because it's transforming the way people share information, whether we want to admit it or not. Although still important, printed publications, fact sheets, and other time-honored communication tools are also becoming a bit outmoded, Kaminski says. People today want the *very* latest information. And increasingly, they're using the rapid delivery systems of social media to get it.

"We're in an age of information overload, and I don't say that in a negative way," he says. "I think it's

good for people to be able to get information quickly, if they want it."

ASA and CSSA member Vince Davis, a University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign soybean extension specialist, is seeing the same trends among the growers he works with in Illinois. In a survey Davis presented at the Annual Meetings, he and ASA and CSSA member Shawn Conley of the University of Wisconsin-Madison found that Wisconsin and Illinois soybean growers are adopting new communication technologies, like internet-enabled "smart" phones, just as quickly as the general public. And while their use of Facebook and other social-networking sites is low, Davis believes this will change, especially as a younger generation of farmers takes over.

"So, I think from an extension standpoint and a university standpoint, and even somewhat from a Tri-Societies standpoint, there has to be a presence there and a conscious effort to try





Photo by Bruce Fritz (USDA-ARS)

to stay relevant," he says. "I certainly don't think we're at the point where [social media] is the only thing we should be doing in extension. But I think it would be a poor choice to ignore these things, even at these early stages of adoption."

It's easy to ignore things we don't understand, however, and by all accounts many of us still don't get social media. An internet search of the phrase "What is social media?" reaps scores of hits, including a recent paper in the journal *Business Horizons* in which the authors write that "there seems

to be very limited understanding of what the term 'social media' exactly means." They go on to define it as a group of internet-based applications that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content. The free web encyclopedia, Wikipedia (itself built from user-generated content), adds that "a common thread running through all definitions of social media is a blending of technology and social interaction."

That is, unlike magazines, newsletters, and other traditional media in which editors, professors, and other "gatekeepers" run the show, sites

like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr allow anyone to join, create content, and interact. Moreover, while an extension fact sheet may stay the same for months or years, the information on social media sites changes constantly. New blog posts typically appear weekly or daily, Facebook may get updated several times a day, while messages on Twitter, called "tweets," flash by in real time.

More Work or Time Saver?

Keeping up with this stream seems like it would require sitting at the computer for hours on end, but Davis and Kaminski maintain that in fact the opposite is true. When an email message appears, the recipient has to deal with it in some way, they explain, even if it's simply to delete it. With a tool like Twitter, in contrast, "the end-user has control over what they receive, from whom, and how often they want to get it," Davis says, noting that several of his growers prefer to receive information from him via Twitter for this very reason.

"I personally can't stand email anymore," Kaminski adds. "I get back from a business trip and I'll be inundated." He now reserves email for his most important business, while relying on Twitter to feed him all the "other stuff."

What kind of stuff? Kaminski's first foray into social media was the blog "Turf Diseases" (www.turfdiseases.org), which he launched with four other research-



ers around the country to keep golf course managers up to date. When the disease, dollar spot, emerges during the golf season, for example, Kaminski and his fellow bloggers may write on 1 June that it was found in Maryland and then report its appearance the following week in, say, New Jersey or Connecticut. "So we can provide them with a heads up: This is coming down the line," Kaminski says, without having to call every golf course manager individually, or filling their email inboxes with unwanted messages.

Oregon State University extension specialist Mary Corp created her blog "CerealCentral" (<http://osucereal-central.blogspot.com>) for a similar reason: To offer Eastern Oregon wheat growers timely updates on pests such as stripe rust, as well as reminders on upcoming intervals for spraying fungicides. A survey indicated that her extension clientele values these updates more than any other information she provides. And while many still prefer to receive them by email, Corp likes the blog because it creates a searchable archive.

"A blog post is always there on the web, whereas an email, after it lands in someone's inbox, either stays there or gets deleted or filed," said Corp during her talk at the web and social-networking symposium in Long Beach. Plus, the posts constantly attract new visitors, who find them through Google or Yahoo searches. "So putting this information on a blog versus emailing it out to my email lists allows people who are just out there looking

Defining Some Common Social Media Terms

Blog: Shorthand for "web log," a blog is a frequent, chronological publication of information on the web, often including photos, graphics, and video. "Bloggers" typically write daily or weekly, offering their opinions, describing timely events, and highlighting interesting news in their fields. Blogs also allow readers to comment and interact—an important feature distinguishing blogs from static websites. Popular platforms for hosting blogs include Blogger.com and WordPress.org.

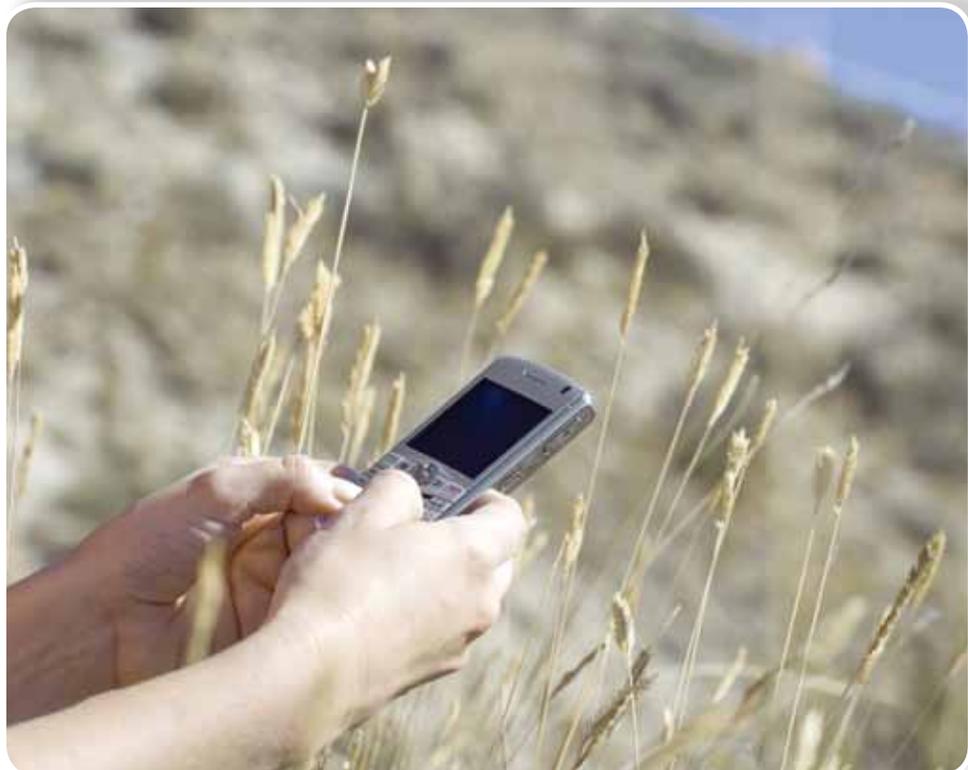
RSS Feed: RSS and other "feeds" allow publishers of websites to distribute their content, as opposed to waiting for visitors to find it on their own. On the flip side, readers who subscribe to an RSS feed receive automatic updates on new content without having to remember to check the site. RSS feeds can also be used to stream information from one website to another.

Facebook: Founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg and his Harvard classmates, Facebook (www.facebook.com) is a social-networking site where individuals and organizations set up profiles describing their interests, link to other profiles, exchange messages, and receive updates on the activities of others in their network. In short, Facebook allows people of like interests around the globe to connect personally and professionally over the web.

LinkedIn: Often called the "professional" Facebook, LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com) is a social-networking site for business people and other professionals. Subscribers set up a business profile and connect with other professionals to create a network. They can then use the site to post their résumés, review the profiles of hiring managers, look for potential employees, seek recommendations, and get introduced to new contacts through their existing ones.

Twitter: Perhaps the most misunderstood of all social media, Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a "micro-blogging" service that gives subscribers just 140 characters to say their piece. Users subscribe to, or "follow," other users, reading their messages ("tweets") on computers or other devices with internet. What distinguishes Twitter from blogs and Facebook is its real-time speed, allowing users to "share and discover what is happening right now," says Twitter.com.





both sent through the regular mail system and offered online, the pair asked Illinois and Wisconsin soybean growers about the number of acres they farmed and their use of modern communication technologies, including computers, high-speed internet, cell and smart phones, and social media.

Conducting the survey solely online clearly would have been easiest, Davis says. "But if you're trying to ask questions about computer and online use, and you're only targeting people who are already on the computer and using the internet, that doesn't work really well," he adds with a laugh. Besides, the direct mail and online responses turned out to offer some interesting contrasts. Among the 205 people who took the online survey, for example, the adoption rate of computers, cell phones, and high-speed internet was essentially 100%, regardless of how many soybean acres the respondents farmed. But for the more than 1,500 growers who completed the direct-mail survey, adoption rates did vary significantly with soybean acreage. Computer use, for instance, ranged from 65% for those who farmed fewer than 500 acres, to 90% for those farming 2,000 acres or more. Similarly, high-speed internet use rose with soybean acreage from a low of 56% (500 acres or less) to 85% (2,000 or more).

Most growers continued to rate the value of printed materials highly; however, as farm size grew, so too, did their preference for online sources of information.

for information to find it and interact with me," she says.

More than a Fad

By all estimates, the number of people out there looking for information on the web is exploding. According to the internet monitoring service Pingdom, there were 1.97 billion internet users worldwide in June 2010, a 14% increase since 2009. In addition, some 25 billion messages were sent through Twitter last year, while Facebook reached 600 million subscribers—an astonishing

number considering the site started 2010 with roughly 350 million.

"So, can we say [social media] is a fad?" Corp asks. "Well, that's a pretty high adoption level for a fad. Maybe we really need to recognize that it's part of our future and try to figure out how to make it serve our goals in extension."

Like Corp, Conley and Davis suspected that many of their extension clients could be counted among those millions of web surfers and Facebook fans. But they weren't certain, and so last summer they decided to collect some data. In a short survey that was

© Paulburns | Dreamstime.com



Overall, Davis and Conley found that 85% of Wisconsin and Illinois soybean growers use cell phones, while 11 to 50% have adopted smart phones. Seventy to 100% also use computers, and 57 to 100% have high-speed internet.

Meanwhile, their use of sites like Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn hovers around 30%, suggesting that in some ways, the social media naysayers are still correct, Davis says. On the other hand, the popularity of internet technologies is only expected to grow. And that means extension specialists must be ready to meet the needs of a younger, more computer-savvy generation, he contends, especially since companies already make heavy use of the web to reach customers and the public. "We don't want this to be the dividing time when younger growers shift to [web-based] mechanisms of receiving information and are only finding company information available," he says.

Corp agrees, noting that even if an older farmer isn't into texting or getting market updates over a smart phone, his kids probably are. "I always think we need to be looking to the future, to the young people. And they're definitely into the use of those technologies and social media."

In the mania over social media, however, it can be easy to jump on board without knowing where you're heading, as Kaminski himself discovered when he started his blog. What he has learned since is that posting information to sites like Facebook and Twitter shouldn't be

viewed as an end in itself. If deployed well, these sites can steer people to the most critical content: the fact sheets, videos, and other educational materials into which extension specialists rightly sink most of their time. Social-networking sites, in other words, may offer new avenues for disseminating content, but content itself is still king.

"We did a pretty intensive job of incorporating all these social-networking tools, not because we want to drive traffic away from our site, but to make sure that people who might find

takes an hour or more to craft, while producing a video can take substantially longer. To remove the burden of then having to repost the information to a bunch of social-networking sites, Kaminski set up an automated distribution system using simple technologies freely available on the web. When he updates his blog or places pictures on the photo-sharing site Flickr, for example, a tool called TwitterFeed automatically creates a link to that content on his Facebook page. Facebook then sends the information to his Twitter followers (see www.facebook.com/twitter).

"I always think we need to be looking to the future, to the young people. And they're definitely into the use of those technologies and social media."

us on Twitter or wherever else would be driven back into our site," Kaminski says. "Because ultimately your main website is what you're trying to promote and where the meat of your information is."

Integration is Key

The question then arises: How does a busy extension person sweep up the broadest possible audience without going nuts managing every tool? Says Kaminski: "It's all about integration."

He explains that each update he writes for "Turf Diseases"—often accompanied by photos or graphics—

com/twitter), and Twitter streams the link into LinkedIn.

Similarly, he puts events of interest to the turfgrass community into Google Calendar, which then feeds them into Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn via the same tools. This way, he can simply update Google Calendar if the details change, and the automatic feeds take care of the rest.

A chronic insomniac, Kaminski admits he learned to do a lot of this during many sleepless nights. Still, it's not that hard, he says. Probably the most time-intensive part is deciding on a logical path of information flow (blog to Facebook to Twitter to LinkedIn),



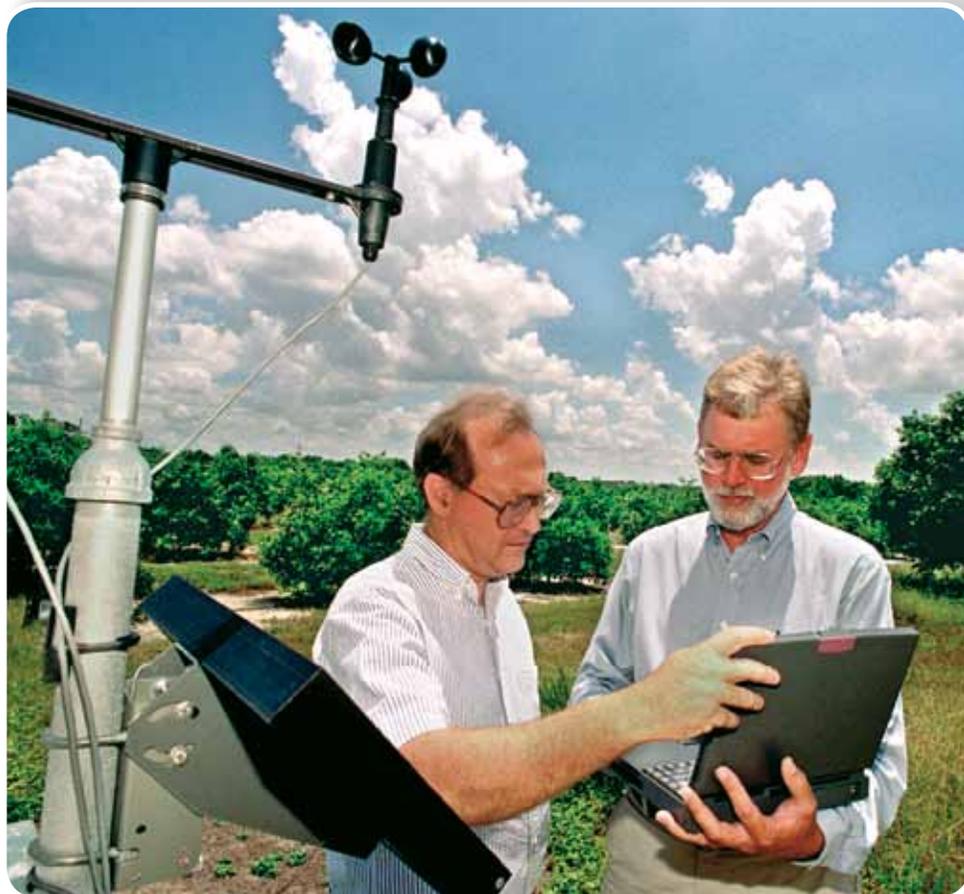


Photo by Thomas Wright (University of Florida)

so that loops aren't accidentally created: Facebook feeds into Twitter, for example, but Twitter also feeds back into Facebook. "It does take some work," he says, "but if you integrate properly from the beginning, it's going to be a lot easier to maintain, and you can focus on the content."

Learning the technical aspects of the tools and hooking them together also takes time, of course, but the investment can

be well worth it. When Kaminski embarked on his own process of integration, for instance, just over 100 people were subscribed to the Turf Diseases blog. Giving readers the option to get blog updates by email (using a tool called Feedburner) quickly netted nearly 300 more subscribers, and another 400 now follow the blog via Twitter. But the real boost came from Facebook.

"It wasn't until we integrated heavily into Facebook that our numbers skyrocketed. In a matter of a month, we had 500 followers, and now we're up to over 1,500," Kaminski says. "Numbers don't necessarily equate to impact, but at least they're an indication that people are coming and reviewing your information."

Delivering information to people is important, but in the end, perhaps the most critical element of social media is just being social. Unlike a formal departmental website, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter invite people to interact, to reveal something about their lives—to get a little personal. This can be intimidating to those who aren't used to sharing private information in the public realm of the internet. "But if you embrace it, I think people get to know you better," Kaminski says, even if you've never spoken over the phone, met in person, or live hundreds or thousands of miles apart. And then, he added, you're already on people's radar when they do want to talk in the "real world."

"The fact that it just builds presence is a really good thing," agrees Davis. "It builds that connection for the time when people want more information. They know off the top of their heads who to call."

M. Fisher, CSA News magazine contributing writer (sciencewriter@sciencesocieties.org)



Social Media Accounts for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA

Facebook

ASA | www.facebook.com/ASA.agronomy
CSSA | www.facebook.com/CSSA.crops
SSSA | www.facebook.com/SSSA.soils
SASES | www.facebook.com/SASES.students

Twitter

ASA, CSSA, and SSSA | www.twitter.com/ASA_CSSA_SSSA
SSSA | www.twitter.com/SSSA_soils
Science Policy Office | www.twitter.com/ASACSSASSSA_SPO

LinkedIn

ASA | www.linkedin.com/company/american-society-of-agronomy
CSSA | www.linkedin.com/company/crop-science-society-of-america
SSSA | www.linkedin.com/company/soil-science-society-of-america

Blogs

Wired for Soils | <http://wiredsoils.blogspot.com>
RSS Feed from Blog: <http://wiredsoils.blogspot.com/feeds/posts/default?alt=rss>
Science Policy Blog | <http://science-policy.blogspot.com>
RSS Feed from Blog: <http://science-policy.blogspot.com/feeds/posts/default?alt=rss>
SSSA President's Blog | <http://sssa-president.blogspot.com>

YouTube

ASA Channel | www.youtube.com/user/ASA001
SSSA Channel | www.youtube.com/user/SSSA02

RSS Feeds

ASA News Releases | www.agronomy.org/news-media/rss
CSSA News Releases | www.crops.org/news-media/rss
SSSA News Releases | www.soils.org/news-media/rss
ASA News & Features (homepage) | www.agronomy.org/rss
CSSA News & Features (homepage) | www.crops.org/rss
SSSA News & Features (homepage) | www.soils.org/rss
ASA Science Policy News | www.agronomy.org/science-policy/sspr/rss
CSSA Science Policy News | www.crops.org/science-policy/sspr/rss
SSSA Science Policy News | www.soils.org/science-policy/sspr/rss

