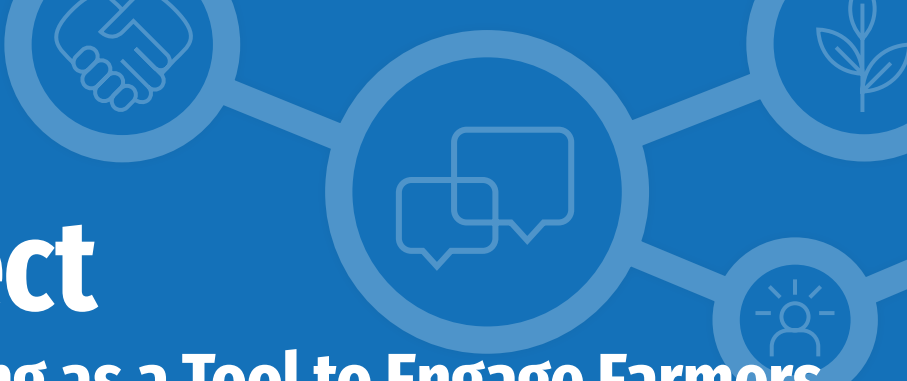




What to Expect from Digital Advertising as a Tool to Engage Farmers with Conservation Agriculture Programming

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Traditionally, extension educators and conservation professionals rely on direct relationship building to develop a network of farmers dedicated to implementing conservation agriculture practices. While relationship building is essential, it is often limiting as it takes time, and a conservation professional's reach may be limited, leaving many farmers left out of the conversation.

To reach new farmers, many conservation professionals are considering digital advertising tactics to reach beyond the choir and engage farmers who may be interested in conservation but are harder to reach through traditional relationship building.

What is digital advertising?

Digital advertising can take many forms — from search engine optimization and social media to paid promotion on third-party websites and apps.

For conservation professionals, this can include paid advertising on social media platforms farmers use, such as Facebook, or search engine advertisements on platforms such as Google. It can also include broad-scale advertising, such as ads integrated into farmer-facing content on agricultural news or commodity market forecasts, or programmatic ads which use algorithms that place ads on digital media platforms based on a farmer's personal preferences, search history, and demographics.

These digital advertising tactics have the potential to increase reach and online engagement, which may result in additional traffic to conservation-focused websites or events.

Evidence for the effectiveness of digital advertising is lacking

Research demonstrates that many farmers are involved in conservation because a conservation professional asked them to participate — no doubt due to their personal relationship (Pape & Prokopy, 2017). Conservation technicians, extension educators, and other conservation professionals develop personal relationships with farmers through in-person events, on-farm visits, phone calls, and other face-to-face methods.

These personal relationships are often built over time through ongoing in-person events such as field days, winter meetings, conferences, and one-on-one farm visits and lead to farmers coming to conservation professionals for technical expertise, funding opportunities, or farm management planning. These relationships can also help farmers connect with their peers. This multiplier effect of relationship building matters because research shows that farmers' social networks — whether formal or informal — have a positive impact on conservation practice adoption (Baumgart-Getz et al., 2012; Pape & Prokopy, 2017; Prokopy et al., 2008; Prokopy et al., 2019; Ranjan et al., 2019).

Interestingly, this same research shows that farmer networks are not reaching farmers who most need to change their practices to be more conservation oriented (Pape & Prokopy, 2017). It is this need to reach farmers who are outside the normal reach of conservation professional outreach that has led many conservation professionals to consider nontraditional, digital advertising tactics.

However, the effectiveness of digital advertising is understudied (Witzling, Wald, & Williams, 2020). There is research examining the messages that are most effective in digital advertising — such as Facebook ads — and which messages resonate with certain demographic groups (Witzling et al., 2023).

While this is key information for informing digital advertising campaigns, it tells us little about whether digital advertising engages farmers not traditionally reached by relationship-driven outreach. Nor does it illuminate the degree to which combining these outreach strategies can translate into real world conservation practice adoption.

Case example: Augmenting relationship-driven outreach with digital advertising

A research-based effort led by extension specialists at University of Wisconsin–Madison Division of Extension, Purdue Extension, and Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service explored whether digital advertising could augment relationship-driven outreach in promoting conservation-focused educational programs to farmers not traditionally reached by relationship-driven outreach alone. Additional partners included county extension educators and Soil and Water Conservation District staff in three sites within the Mississippi River Basin — watersheds in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Arkansas — and Trust In Food, an initiative of Farm Journal.

The team used both digital advertising and relationship building to recruit farmer participants for a conservation-focused leadership training and a conservation field day in each location. The goal of the project was to determine if the use of digital advertising would boost participation in both programs.

The team worked with Trust In Food to use myriad targeted digital advertising tactics to reach farmers in promoting both the conservation leadership training and the field day. Tactics included:

- Website display ads (Advertisements on the banner of a Farm Journal website such as AgWeb, etc. These were targeted so they were only displayed to farmers if they are in the geographic area of interest.)
- Social media ads
- Mobile parallax and outstream video ads integrated into Farm Journal online content (Mobile parallax advertisements are displayed on mobile devices that unfold as the user scrolls.)
- Text blasts
- Email blasts
- eNewsletter modules in existing Farm Journal newsletters
- Off-site programmatic ads (Advertisements displayed on third-party websites and apps based on farmers' personal preferences, search history, and demographics.)

Right: Example digital advertisement promoting the conservation leadership training in Arkansas. Photo courtesy University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture, Research & Extension.



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Results of recruiting farmers for a conservation-focused leadership training

The first campaign targeted farmers in each geographic location who are more conservation-minded, encouraging them to sign up for a conservation-focused leadership training. The purpose of the training was to improve farmers’ confidence and capacities to support their peers in adopting conservation practices.

Previous to the campaign, the team used Trust In Food / Farm Journal to do a comprehensive data analysis of the eligible farmers in the project region to bring forward audience insights into a complete communications toolkit. These findings were used by the team to identify and design messaging and visuals that were most likely to resonate with conservation-minded farmers and, therefore, inform campaign messaging. Messaging insights included the importance of meeting local, like-minded farmers and a focus on conservation, innovative technology, and trends. Using these insights, advertisement messaging was framed around joining a network of like-minded farmers and sharing their personal conservation story. All advertisement mediums channeled audiences to an interest form to sign up for the training.

In total, 46 farmers from across all watersheds signed up using the interest form. This interest form was also promoted by local extension educators, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, and conservation partners in the area. Of those 46 individuals, 67 percent noted they heard about the training through digital advertising, while 28 percent heard about the training from their local conservation technician or extension educator (Figure 1).

While there was broad interest in the conservation leadership training, only 12 farmers participated in the training across all three geographics. Of those 12 farmers who participated in the training, 9 responded to our survey and only 2 reported that they heard about the program through digital advertising.



Figure 1: How individuals stated that they heard about the training.

- Overall, the highest digital engagement was via targeted display ads, video, eNewsletter, text, and email blasts.
- There were key differences based on geography. For example, in Indiana and Wisconsin farmers were most likely to engage with targeted display ads and eNewsletter content, whereas in Arkansas farmers engaged more with social media, text, or parallax and programmatic ads.

This suggests that digital advertising was effective for getting the word out more widely than relationship-driven outreach alone, but for farmers to make the decision to participate in the program, the in-person relationship was a crucial and necessary component to the decision to participate.

The second digital advertising campaign targeted farmers who likely don't already use conservation practices but could be open to them, encouraging them to attend a local conservation-focused field day. Such farmers may be referred to as "middle adopters," which corresponds with the early majority category in Rogers's Diffusion of Innovation theory (2003). These individuals are open to conservation, but their decision to adopt a practice hinges on them seeing evidence of its impact and/or feeling confident that adoption poses a limited risk. Conservation professionals often struggle to reach these farmers through traditional outreach (Prokopy et al., 2019; Ranjan et al., 2019).

Audience insights from Trust In Food / Farm Journal prior to the campaign recommended reaching middle adopter farmers through many channels and touchpoints. These farmers are thought to prefer language focused on preserving farm legacy, protecting soil health resources, and learning new farming techniques. Advertisements focused on networking opportunities, learning about soil health, and protecting farm legacy.

- Overall, the highest digital engagement was via social media, customized text, and email blasts.
- There were key differences based on geography. For example, in Arkansas farmers were most likely to engage with text-delivered advertisements, whereas in Wisconsin the engagement was highest across platforms early in the growing season (i.e., June as compared to July and August).
- AgWeb website ads and Facebook ads for the field days had the highest impact.

Unlike the conservation-focused leadership training, there was no interest form for the field day, but instead a link to register. We tracked how farmers heard about the field day through a post-event survey, which asked how they heard about it.

In total, 81 farmers attended the field days across all three geographies, with 70 farmers taking the post-event survey. Of the survey respondents, 5 individuals noted they heard about the event through a digital advertisement, including a text, Facebook post, or web advertisement from Farm Journal outlets used by Trust In Food. All others noted they heard about the event from their Soil and Water Conservation District, extension educator, other farmer, or other.

Despite the small number of respondents who said digital advertising drew them to the event, Trust In Food data indicated that the advertisements received more digital engagement — through reach, clicks, and shares — than originally predicted.

However, we were unable to compare if more individuals expressed interest in the field day online versus those who attended in person. Our registration form did not allow us to capture this data. Given Trust In Food's engagement data, it could be that, like the conservation-focused leadership training, many people heard about the field day from the digital advertising campaign, but few attended the events in person.

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Key takeaways for conservation professionals

1. Strong digital engagement doesn't necessarily translate into in-person participation.

While the advertisements generated higher than predicted digital engagement, this did not translate into noticeably higher than expected in-person attendance at the farmer leadership training or field day events. There was substantial interest in both programs through clicks and online generation forms but converting that interest into in-person attendance on the day proved difficult. It may be that a middle step of engaging those who express interest through one-on-one communication is needed to help translate digital engagement into in-person participation.

2. Farmers, like the rest of us, require multiple touchpoints, both digital and relationship-based, to engage in a meaningful way.

Digital engagement alone can still be impactful, but it may take more consistent digital engagement over time to see more robust in-person impact. When the goal of digital engagement is participation in Extension or related organizations' training or events, relationship building is still important for getting people to show up.

3. There are differences in goals and procedures between digital marketing firms and conservation professionals.

Digital marketing firms can use terms and metrics that are unfamiliar to those working in conservation and agriculture, which can lead to confusion or miscommunication. Outlining roles, methods, and expectations in plain language is critical to understanding what advertising tactics will be used, who they will target, and how this digital engagement can feed into relationship-driven outreach.

Key Takeaways for Watershed Projects

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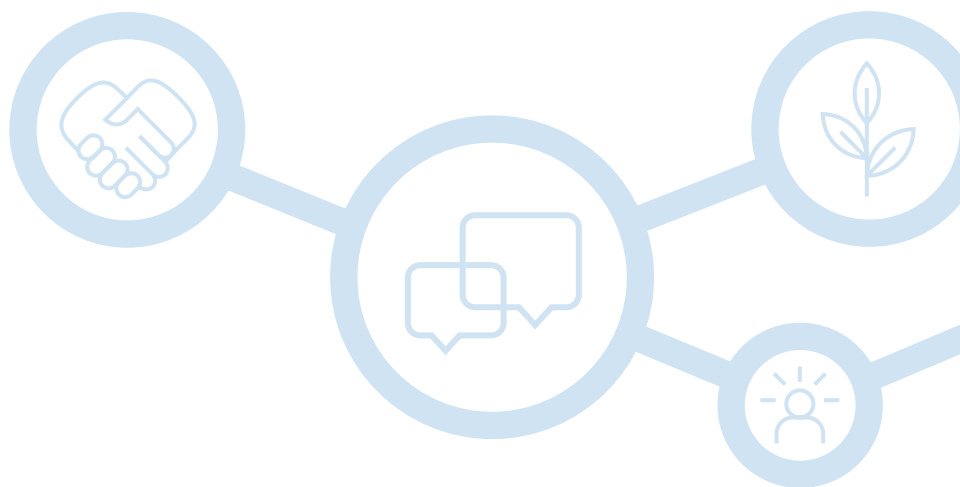
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