

Utilization of Social Media as a Marketing Tool for Equine Businesses: An Exploratory Study



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Abstract

Many people utilize social media for keeping up with personal relationships, but it is also an effective form of advertising. Our objective was to assess the utilization of social media by equine professionals in marketing their business. Surveys were disseminated to horse professionals to gather data on the use and preference of social media within the equine industry. Most participants surveyed utilized social media in promoting their equine businesses (84.4%) and agree that social media has a positive influence on their business (93.1%). Facebook was the primary type of social media utilized by professionals surveyed. Breed show professionals were most likely to use more obscure types of social media to market their business and were more likely to use print media as compared to website marketing. Professionals who have been in the horse industry 19 or more years utilize social media the same as their newer to the industry competition. Results suggest equine professionals perceive that social media benefits their business, including those with traditional barriers to social media usage. Results clarify types of social media preferred by specific horse industry professionals (84.4% use Facebook) and give some insight to perception of type of social media use.

Keywords: Business, Equine, Marketing, Social media

Introduction

The 21st century is undergoing an explosion of Internet driven messages transmitted via social media. These messages have become a major factor influencing consumer behavior, such as purchasing and

post purchase communication and evaluation (Mangold and Faulds, 2009). Yet, social media usage was still relatively new among business practitioners across a variety of industries a very short time ago (Kaplan et al., 2010). Social media refers to web-based platforms that stimulate communication and sharing of information and content between individuals within virtual communities (Ahlqvist et al., 2008). Facebook is currently the largest online social media network with more than 500 million users (Settle et al., 2011). Explosive growth of social media has provided millions of people and countless businesses the opportunity to share and access content on a massive scale (Romero et al., 2011).

Across industries, companies have adopted the use of social media into their communication plans to expand their network (Rhoades et al., 2009), which is advantageous as social media outlets are usually easily accessible and free of charge (Cornelisse et al., 2011). Individuals operating equine businesses can implement and incorporate social media as part of their marketing scheme to communicate with existing and prospective customers, promote services, sales and purchases, and endorse breeding animals, among other uses. Moreover, social media allows for clientele interactions and relationships beyond the traditional face-to-face approach, ultimately saving time and money while reaching a broader base of potential clients (Cornelisse et al., 2011). Social media could potentially benefit the equine industry, but as entry into agriculture business is increasing across all age groups, many barriers to utilizing electronics still exist, including connectivity, equipment, and training (Morrison and Teixeira, 2004; Hanna et al., 2011).

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As social media continues to grow and gain popularity, knowledgeable equine professionals may benefit from its use, yet it is unclear how horse professionals feel about harnessing the power of social media. According to the American Horse Council (2005) equine ownership, recreational use, and competitive showing is a large industry contributing approximately \$39 billion in direct economic impact to the U.S. economy each year. Marketing schemes to promote this multi-billion-dollar industry need to be better understood. Therefore, the objective of the current study was to provide insight into the use of social media and other marketing strategies of equine businesses in the horse show industry. With this knowledge, equine business professionals, extension agents, instructors and teachers, and horse owners may better understand current practices for promoting equine related businesses through social media.

Methods

All procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at Texas A&M University. Professionals in the equine industry were the target population for this study. Three groups of horse professionals involved in training and showing horses were targeted to provide information from 3 diverse groups of horse industry professionals: hunters (HUNT; n=22), reiners (REIN; n=20), and breed show professionals (BREED; n=27). These individuals were approached for potential inclusion in this study by attendance at an event held by each group.

Data were collected using a 31-question researcher designed survey, which sought to qualify each business' demographic profile and quantify use and preference for social media regarding equine business marketing. Survey content accuracy was established by faculty members in Animal Science and Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communication at Texas A&M University. Each panel member (n=3) reviewed the survey for correct and relevant content. The survey consisted of open and closed ended, partial open ended, and Likert-scale questions (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = agree, 4 = strongly agree). Demographic questions focused on the professional's equine business: size, discipline, winnings, and clientele. Questions were asked regarding the business' method of advertising and use of social media. Reliability was established using a posthoc Cronbach's alpha using the PROC CORR model of SAS® 2015 (Version 9.4; SAS Inst, Inc. Cary, NC). Descriptive statistics were utilized to analyze demographic data gathered from the survey. To develop numeric scores for the closed and partial open-ended questions, answers were grouped by like-type and given a corresponding number. Finally, social media use was assessed by pre-planned comparisons of the 3 groups of horse professionals and maturity of business using the PROC GLM model of SAS® 2015 (Version 9.4; SAS Inst, Inc. Cary, NC). Model included media and professional or maturity (media). Significance was considered at $P \leq 0.05$.

Results and Discussion

Cronbach's alpha established a reliability of 0.86 for the survey instrument. Individuals typically operated equine businesses containing between 11 and 20 horses (34.8%), had been in business over 19 years (56.5%), had a clientele base of Amateur/Non Pro riders (65.2%), advertise (91.3%), and marketed their business primarily with social media (78.3%). HUNT and BREED professionals had an average of 15.4 World Championship titles and 26.4 World Finalists in their respective associations and REIN averaged 11.5 Futurity Championships and 20.3 Futurity Finalists. A demographic examination of the equine professionals surveyed is presented in Table 1.

Most businesses surveyed advertise through social media (78.3%), followed by websites (71%), books/magazines (58%), and other forms of advertising (13%). Data suggest that social media and websites have become a large part of marketing an equine business. Whereas, the use of print media including books and magazines to advertise appear to be used on a lesser scale with some groups, which agrees with previous small business research (Wymer and Regan, 2013). BREED utilized books and magazines more often than websites (64% vs. 60%, respectively); thus, demonstrating that hard copy advertising still has a niche in the equine industry.

Table 1. Demographic information of equine professionals (n=69)¹.

Variable of Interest	f (%)
1. Size of operation (number of horses)	
a. 1-10	15 (21.7)
b. 11-20	24 (34.8)
c. 21-30	18 (26.1)
d. 31-50	7 (10.1)
e. >50	5 (7.2)
2. Years in operation	
a. 0-3	3 (4.3)
b. 4-7	5 (7.2)
c. 8-11	8 (11.6)
d. 12-15	7 (10.1)
e. 16-18	8 (11.6)
f. 19 +	39 (56.5)
3. Clientele	
a. Youth	30 (43.5)
b. Amateur/Non-Pro	45 (65.2)
c. Non-showing	29 (42)
d. Owners	3 (4.3)
4. Advertise	
a. Yes, with at least a website	49 (71)
b. Yes, with at least social media	54 (78.3)
c. Yes, with at least books or magazines	40 (58)
d. Yes, with other methods than those listed	9 (13)
e. No	6 (8.7)
5. Social Media Use	
a. Updated daily	11 (15.9)
b. Updated by primary equine professional	31 (44.9)
c. Updated by staff	14 (20.2)
d. Updated by client	4 (5.8)
e. Updated by spouse	13 (18.8)
f. Updated by other	3 (4.3)
g. Use Facebook	54 (78.3)
h. Use Instagram	9 (13)
i. Use Twitter	4 (5.8)
j. Use LinkedIn	5 (7.2)

¹All equine professionals are grouped together for this demographic profile.

Facebook was the most utilized (>75%) social media type for marketing purposes which agrees with previous findings for small businesses (Boling et al., 2014). Instagram was utilized less by professionals at a rate of 13% which was lower than expected based on previous analysis of the platform (Huey and Yazdanifard, 2014). Twitter and LinkedIn use was reported at 5.8% and 7.2%, respectively. Professionals primarily updated social media for their business themselves (44.9%) with staff or spouse the next primary updater of social media (20.2 and 18.8%, respectively). Social media for business use was updated daily by 15.9% of those surveyed (Table 1). Similar numbers of horse professionals utilized social media for personal use (n=53; 76.8%) and business use (n=56; 81.2%). Overall, only 17.1% of professionals surveyed did not use any form of social media.

Equine professionals were grouped based on the discipline they perform (thus the event participated in) as primarily stock-type breed show (BREED; n=27), reiners (REIN; n=20), or hunter (HUNT; n=22) horse professionals. All categories were more likely (P≤0.05) to have Facebook pages than any other type of social media. BREED and HUNT were more likely (P=0.004) to have Instagram business accounts than REIN (11.1% and 13.6% compared to 0%, respectively). BREED was more likely (P≤0.005) to have Twitter and LinkedIn accounts compared to HUNT and REIN (14.8% and 11.1% compared to 0% and 4.5%, and 5% and 0%, respectively). REIN utilized non-Facebook forms of social media the least. All results are presented in Table 2. Different sectors of the horse industry behave differently when adopting social media use for advertising their businesses. To our knowledge, data elucidating the sectors of the equine industry heavily using different types of social media has not been published and

warrants attention from those professionals involved in that area of the equine industry. To stay current and attract new clientele, businesses need to compete equally or better than their competition with regard to marketing their product or service including social media marketing (Dragon, 2012).

Participants (n=38) who had been involved in equine business for over 19 years were examined further to assess the use of social media among more established businesses (55.1% of total participants; Table 3). Traditionally, this group of professionals have the greatest barriers with electronic utilization, most notably, lack of skills necessary to efficiently utilize electronics and applications (Hamdan and Yahaya, 2016). Of these individuals, 79.5% advertised with various types of social media, which was not different (P≥0.46) from equine businesses with less than 19 years of experience (80.6% use social media). Facebook remained the most popular (81.6%; P≤0.0001) as Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn use was not different (P≥0.46) and on a much smaller scale (7.9%, 5.3%, 5.3%, respectively). All results are presented in Table 3.

Equine professionals reported that social media positively affects their business on a local level, increases sales, is a benefit to networking, is easy to use, is an immediate form of advertising, is a good alternative to a costly website, and overall has contributed to growth, promotion and exposure for their business. Some professionals cautioned that social media can be misleading and draw negative attention to an equine business and overall be detrimental to the business. Likert-type question responses to perception of social media use in the equine industry was assessed and are reported in Table 4. The majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed to each statement (3.24 on a 4-point

Table 2. Social media usage for equine business of equine professionals (n=69) surveyed and grouped by type of business BREED (n=27), HUNT (n=22), REIN (n=20).

	Horse Professional Type			P value
	BREED	HUNT	REIN	
	f (%)	f (%)	f (%)	
Facebook	21 (77.8) ^{a,1}	19 (86.4) ^{a,1}	17 (85) ^{a,1}	≥ 0.36
Instagram	3 (11.1) ^{a,2}	3 (13.6) ^{a,2}	0 (0) ^{b,2}	≤ 0.023
Twitter	4 (14.8) ^{a,2}	0 (0) ^{b,3}	1 (5) ^{b,2}	0.025
LinkedIn	3 (11.1) ^{a,2}	1 (4.5) ^{b,3}	0 (0) ^{b,2}	0.033
P value	≤ 0.0001	≤ 0.0139	≤ 0.0001	

^{a,b} Means with different superscripts differ significantly within row.
^{1,2,3} Means with different superscripts differ significantly within column.
 Means with common superscripts do not differ (P > 0.05)

Table 3. Social media usage among professionals with an established business of less than (n=31) and greater than 19 years (n=38).

	Maturity of Horse Business		P value
	Under 19 years	19+ years	
	f (%)	f (%)	
Facebook	25 (80.6) ^{a,1}	31 (81.6) ^{a,1}	0.74
Instagram	3 (9.7) ^{a,2}	3 (7.9) ^{a,2}	0.46
Twitter	3 (9.7) ^{a,2}	2 (5.3) ^{a,2}	0.53
LinkedIn	2 (6.5) ^{a,2}	2 (5.3) ^{a,2}	0.49
P value	≤ 0.0001	≤ 0.0001	

^a Means without different superscripts do not differ within row (P ≥ 0.46).
^{1,2} Means with different superscripts differ significantly within column (P ≤ 0.0001).

Table 4. Summary of Likert-type scale questions regarding equine business professionals' perception of social media use in their business (n = 69).

Questions:	Strongly disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Agree (%)	Strongly agree (%)	Mean response (1-4)
Has social media... helped me receive more business?	10.2	11.9	50.8	27.1	2.9
had a positive influence on my business?	3.4	3.4	41.4	51.7	3.4
caused my clients to follow my social media activity?	5.2	3.4	25.9	65.5	3.5
made me update my social media with show results?	10.3	5.2	46.6	37.9	3.1
caused me to upload videos of my client's horses?	10.3	29.3	36.2	24.1	2.7
caused me to upload photos of the horses and facility?	6.9	3.4	46.6	43.1	3.3
better allowed me to market horses?	5.2	3.4	39.7	51.7	3.4
better allowed me to market sale horses?	10.4	6.25	33.3	50	3.2
been a benefit to the equine industry?	1.4	1.4	25.7	71.4	3.7

(1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Agree 4=Strongly Agree)

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scale). Some responders chose to not upload client horse videos (39.6%; 2.7 out of 4.0). This was the least active usage of social media marketing among professionals surveyed. When asked if clients often followed the professional's social media activity, 91.4% agreed (3.5 out of 4.0). Some equine business owners choose to advertise individual horses. Of the 70 participants, 47.1% had created a social media page dedicated to a specific horse in their program. Stallions were most likely to have a social media page (61.1%), followed by geldings (30.6%), and mares (8.3%).

Summary

Data presented in this study suggest that social media is used by industry professionals as a form of promoting, advertising, and marketing equine. Although traditional methods still exist, social media is undoubtedly popular. Social media may positively influence business or be helpful in developing a brand that distinguishes one equine business from another.

The majority of established equine businesses are employing social media to advertise (77.78%), demonstrating that social media has grown in popularity among many generations. Nearly half of the professionals surveyed have implemented social media to promote equine athletes; most prominently stallions. Many employ several forms of social media for their business endeavors; however, using too many may be counter-productive to time management.

The current study focused on a broad overview of the frequency of social media use by certain equine professionals. This ever-evolving facet of agriculture is much like any other business, as the times change, so must the way in which businesses operate, advertise, promote, and market their product or service. It is imperative that professionals remain up to date on the most lucrative and efficient methods of promotion. Without this knowledge, business owners could bypass a large sector of potential clientele, while at the same time their competition may be taking advantage of the opportunity to interact with potential clients on social media. Social media can be a beneficial outlet for professionals in any business, including equine, to market and promote their product or service thus maximizing their marketing, visibility, and overall profit. The data suggests some areas of the industry utilize marketing practices differently, and can be used as a baseline for how equine professionals are using social media, specifically in the breed show, reining, and hunter horse industries. Further research should investigate potential barriers to social media use as a marketing tool for different sectors of the horse industry and clientele thoughts and perceptions of social media use for business marketing.

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