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Effectiveness of Paperless Communication from the USDA Farm Service Agency

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Abstract

The USDA Farm Service Agency replaced paper mailings with GovDelivery electronic communication in order to increase efficiency and reduce costs. This case study presents evidence from one state indicating a perception among local FSA officials that GovDelivery does not allow them to effectively serve their constituents. A gap in reliable rural Internet service and low usage of smartphones in place of rural broadband may contribute to the extremely low open rates for GovDelivery email notifications. Findings suggest that electronic-only communication does not allow the agency to effectively engage with farm owners, operators, and managers.

INTRODUCTION

In its May 2012 state newsletter, the Illinois Farm Service Agency announced that with the development of the GovDelivery email system, all USDA Farm Service Agency offices were "moving toward a paperless operation" by replacing printed and mailed information (such as county newsletters) with "notices, newsletters, and electronic reminders" distributed through GovDelivery (IL FSA, 2012, p. 1). This move was presented as a way for the agency "to work smarter and be more efficient," and farmers were instructed to provide an email address to their local FSA office if they wanted to receive the electronic county newsletter that took the place of the previous paper newsletters they were accustomed to receiving (IL FSA, 2012, p. 1). This transition came in response to a congressional mandate that the agency cut its operating costs; according to Kent Politsch, USDA Farm Service Agency Chief of Public Affairs, GovDelivery would allow the FSA to "reach … farmers better" (O'Phelan, 2014). GovDelivery notifications are now sent to each farm's owner and operator, as identified in USDA FSA records. Additional relevant parties, such as an individual with power of attorney, or a professional farm manager whose services are engaged by the farm owner, may also request to receive GovDelivery notifications (B. Powelson, email message to author, December 21, 2018).

Unrelated to issues of farmer communication, in the summer of 2016, I began working with the Illinois Farm Service Agency to identify the needs and challenges of the state's "underserved farmer" population. The USDA definition of underserved farmers includes beginning farmers and ranchers (those who are new to farming or who have operated a farm/ranch for fewer than 10 consecutive years), limited resource farmers (whose farm revenue and household income fall below a certain level), and socially disadvantaged

farmers (members of certain racial or ethnic groups such as American Indians, African-Americans, and Hispanics) (USDA NRCS, 2014). While the Census of Agriculture (USDA NASS, 2014) provides statistical information about various demographic groups within the farming population, the county-level Farm Service Agency offices are closely tied to their local farming communities and therefore may be able to provide the "story behind the numbers" that mere census tables and reports do not. Illinois is divided into seven FSA districts, each administered by a district director and comprised of 13 to 20 counties. In more rural areas, one local FSA office may serve more than one county; each office is served by a county executive director and a farm loan manager, with many of these individuals responsible for more than one local office. The district directors organize regular district-wide meetings periodically with staff from the local county offices within their district, and with the endorsement of the state agency office, I was invited to one of these routine district-wide meetings within each of the seven IL FSA districts. Between September 2016 and March 2017, I traveled to seven Illinois locations for these meetings (Greenville, Tuscola, Fairfield, Mt. Carroll, Pekin, Morris, and Coatsburg) in order to hold focus groups with the district director, county executive directors, farm loan managers, and other key personnel from the county offices within each district. I arrived at these meetings prepared to learn about the underserved farming population as it is typically defined. However, an unexpected theme emerged from these open-ended discussions, centered on the ways in which county-level FSA offices are now allowed to communicate with their constituents since the full implementation of GovDelivery. Many focus group participants believed that in the past, printed newsletters and postcards mailed directly from their local offices were a very effective way for them to communicate with their constituent farmers about FSA programs and services. They also shared that since GovDelivery replaced paper mailings, the local offices have little to no autonomy in what they can send. Prohibited from utilizing directly mailed printed materials, some county FSA personnel reported that their offices place three or four phone calls per year to each farmer they serve, which is a labor- and time-intensive way for these offices to communicate and contradictory to the goal of increased efficiency with the adoption of GovDelivery. Several participants suggested that "underserved" farmers may be those who either lack reliable Internet service, or who are simply not willing or able to fully utilize email as a primary means of receiving information, with one individual stating that elderly landowners who do not use the Internet are

"disenfranchised" by the replacement of paper mailings with the GovDelivery system. Other comments from focus group participants included:

> *"Farmers need more than 'here is a link to a resource' when they are learning about FSA programs."*

> *"Our hands are tied on what type of communication can go out from our [local] office."*

> *"We like how it used to be ... when we could send something [farmers] could put on their refrigerator."*

> *"Farmers give more credence [to information] if it comes from the county office."*

> *"What about those [farmers] without Internet?"*

SURVEYING ILLINOIS FARM SERVICE AGENCY COUNTY-LEVEL PERSONNEL

At the outset of this project, I planned to write a survey directed to FSA staff specifically addressing their perception of the needs and challenges of traditionally underserved farmers, based on what I learned about those farmers from the focus groups I was conducting with FSA personnel. However, given the communication concerns that emerged from the focus groups, I instead designed a 15-item survey following the "Tailored Design Method" (Dillman, Smyth, and Christian, 2014), targeted to FSA staff, that included several questions specifically addressing the ways in which local FSA offices communicate with and serve the farmers in their counties.

The survey was mailed to 104 FSA county office staffers throughout the state (including each of the District Directors, County Executive Directors, and Farm Loan Managers) using a mailing list compiled from public directory information available from the IL FSA website (IL FSA, 2017). The initial survey mailing was sent in July 2017, generating 59 responses; those who did not complete the first survey received a follow-up mailing approximately one month later, and the second survey generated 17 additional responses for a total of 76 participants (a 73 percent response rate).

CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY RESPONDENTS

The majority (75 percent) of survey respondents serve as County Executive Directors; 11 percent are Farm Loan Managers, 8 percent are District Directors, and 8 percent indicated other titles including Senior Farm Loan Officer and Key Program Technician (because some participants serve in multiple roles, these percentages add up to over 100 percent). Slightly under half of respondents have been employed by the FSA for 30 years or more, and half of respondents are responsible for two or more county offices in their roles with the FSA.

PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF FSA COMMUNICATION WITH FARMERS

Of the 75 respondents who indicated an opinion about the ways they are allowed to contact their constituents, 52 percent believe that the current communication methods they use do not enable them to effectively serve farmers' needs by providing important and timely information in a manner that is consistent with how they believe their constituents prefer to access that information. While respondents' age was not measured in the survey, years of service to the Farm Service Agency was used as a proxy for age in order to examine the potential relationship between respondents' age and their perception of GovDelivery's effectiveness as the agency's primary communication tool. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the perceived effectiveness of current communication methods based on years of service to the agency. There was no significant relationship ($\chi^2(5)$=6.572, $p>0.05$), suggesting that perception of GovDelivery's effectiveness is independent of the respondent's age.

Survey participants were asked to rank five communication methods (discussed by focus group participants) in order from what they perceive as the most effective to what they perceive as the least effective in reaching the farmers served by their offices (1=most effective; 5=least effective). Table 1 shows the percent of respondents identifying each method as the most effective, along with the average ranking for each of the five methods. Mailing printed materials was identified as the most effective method for communicating with local farmers (average ranking of 1.58/5 and selected as the most effective method by two-thirds of respondents). This was consistent with the opinion that "postcards are very effective," expressed by multiple focus groups. Just 1 percent of respondents selected email as the

most effective way to communicate with local farmers, with an average ranking of 3.37/5. Seventy-three respondents provided insight on the local availability of Internet access, with 40 percent indicating that reliable Internet service is not widely available in the rural areas of the counties they serve. Seventy respondents answered a question about the "open rate" for FSA emails. Incredibly, 74 percent indicated that the farmers in their counties open 25 percent or fewer of the FSA email messages they receive. As shown in Table 2, a chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the open rate for FSA emails based on the reliability of Internet access in rural areas. No significant relationship was found ($\chi^2(3)$=1.379, $p>0.05$), suggesting that the rate at which farmers open FSA emails is independent from their access to reliable Internet service. However, current communication methods used by the FSA were more likely to be perceived as effective in counties with reliable rural Internet access (73.5 percent) than in counties without reliable rural Internet access (47.4 percent) ($\chi^2(1)$=5.105*, $p<0.05$) (Table 2), suggesting that local FSA personnel believe there is a relationship between Internet reliability and the effectiveness of email communication with the farmers they serve.

PUTTING THESE RESULTS INTO CONTEXT: FARMERS' USE OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

Results from the biennial *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership* report presented in Table 3 show that in 2017, 79 percent of Illinois farms and 73 percent of U.S. farms reported they had access to computers (USDA NASS, 2017). This is fairly consistent with the 77.4 percent of households in the general population that reported having a laptop or desktop computer in the *2016 American Community Survey* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership* report (USDA NASS, 2017) also reveals that 78 percent of Illinois farms and 71 percent of U.S. farms had Internet access in 2017 (compared to 81.9 percent of general population households according to the *2016 American Community Survey*) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Within this context, on the surface, it appears that online communication with farmers, such as the GovDelivery email system adopted by the USDA FSA, may be an effective tool for the agency to stay connected with its constituents. However, Table 3 also tells another side of this story, revealing farmers' relatively low use of online communication technology such as computers, smartphones, or tablets, to conduct farm business. In 2017, 59 percent of Illinois farms and 47 percent of U.S. farms reported they had used a computer to conduct farm business, with 53 percent of

Illinois farms and 39 percent of U.S. farms conducting farm business via smartphone or tablet (a question addressing the use of smartphones and tablets was added to the biennial *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership* report in 2017, and therefore data on those technologies are not available from previous years) (USDA NASS, 2017). Table 4 presents results from the *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership* report relating to farms' use of the Internet to access USDA reports or connect with USDA services. Adoption of online technology is even lower in this context, with 24 percent of Illinois farms and 18 percent of U.S. farms accessing USDA reports or services over the Internet (USDA NASS, 2017).

According to the Federal Communications Commission's *2018 Broadband Progress Report*, 69.3 percent of the rural population nationwide had access to high-speed broadband in 2016 (defined as download speeds of 25 mbps or higher), compared to 92.3 percent of the total U.S. population (FCC, 2018). This "rural/urban digital divide" (CoBank, 2015) is well known, and the FCC is taking steps to address it. In August 2018, $100 million in FCC funding was announced for the purpose of expanding high-speed broadband to rural Illinois over a 10-year period (Illinois Public Media, 2018). Table 5 presents the accessibility of high-speed broadband access across the seven FSA districts in Illinois, showing that while the distribution of farms across the districts is fairly even, the availability of high-speed Internet among the districts is not. As of December 21, 2018, Broadband Now's website shows that 56 Illinois counties (54.9 percent of all counties in the state) have high-speed broadband coverage for at least 69.3 percent of their populations (which is the national coverage rate for the rural population); just 16 counties (15.7 percent of the state's counties) have high-speed coverage for 92.3 percent or more of their populations (the national coverage rate for total population). These Illinois figures are reported for entire counties, not just rural areas, implying a lower coverage level for the rural farming population. While rural areas wait for high-speed Internet service, smartphones are another potential tool that farmers may use to access the Internet and their email accounts, thereby circumventing unreliable Internet service. However, just 16 percent of Illinois farms utilize mobile technology as their primary method of Internet access (USDA NASS, 2017), suggesting that smartphones may not be used as a substitute for reliable high-speed Internet. When viewed within this context, the perspectives expressed by the Illinois Farm Service Agency personnel are perhaps not too surprising.

IMPLICATIONS

The USDA Farm Service Agency replaced paper communication with GovDelivery in order to save both time and money. While the readership rate for printed FSA mail prior to the adoption of GovDelivery is not currently known, the extremely low open rates for agency emails suggests that timely deployment of information to FSA constituents such as farm owners, farm operators, and their representatives may not be efficiently accomplished by relying solely on electronic means. With nearly 31 percent of rural America lacking broadband capability (FCC, 2018), and 29 percent of farms nationwide without Internet service (USDA NASS, 2017), concerns about Internet access are not unique to one state. In the immediate short run, effective outreach will be crucial as the USDA educates its constituents about changes contained in the 2018 Farm Bill. Beyond that, in light of what the USDA itself has measured with its *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership* report (USDA NASS, 2017) and the perspectives of front-line FSA personnel, relying on GovDelivery may not be the most effective method for keeping farmers informed about FSA programs and services, eligibility requirements, sign-up or filing deadlines, and countless other details. While the findings from this case study suggest that it may be worth reconsidering the FSA's policies on farmer communication, a future expansion of this research will address the readership rate for the printed mail that the FSA sent to its constituents prior to the adoption of GovDelivery communication, and explore how farm owners, operators, and managers prefer to receive USDA FSA notifications. In the meantime, it appears that farm owners, operators, and managers should be encouraged to engage more readily with electronic communication from the agency.

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Table 1. Perceived effectiveness of communication methods as reported by county FSA officials

Communication Method (n=73)	% of respondents selecting as most effective method	Average Ranking
Printed mailing (newsletter or postcard)	66%	1.58
Phone call	29%	2.63
Notice on local radio station	3%	3.94
Email	1%	3.37
Notice in local newspaper	1%	3.41

Note: Rankings were on a scale of 1=most effective to 5=least effective.

Table 2. Relationship between rural Internet access, email open rates, and communication effectiveness

	Reliable Internet available in rural areas	
	Yes	No
	%	
Open rate for FSA emails†		
25% or less	60.80%	39.20%
26–50%	50.00%	50.00%
51–75%	77.80%	22.20%
More than 75%	66.70%	33.30%
Current communication methods perceived as effective††		
Yes	73.50%	26.50%
No	47.40%	52.60%

†$\chi^2(3)$=1.379 (NS)
†† $\chi^2(1)$=5.105* (p<0.05)

Table 3. Farm access to and use of communication technology[a]

	Illinois			United States[b]		
	2017	2015	2013	2017	2015	2013
Farms with access to a computer	79%	79%	71%	73%	73%	70%
Farms with Internet access	78%	72%	70%	71%	70%	67%
Farms conducting farm business via computer	59%	55%	53%	47%	43%	40%
Farms conducting farm business via smartphone or tablet	53%	NA	NA	39%	NA	NA

a. Data from USDA NASS *Farm Computer Usage and Ownership*, August 2017.
b. Does not include Alaska and Hawaii.

Table 4. Farm use of Internet to connect with USDA resources[a]

	Illinois			United States[b]		
	2017	2015	2013	2017	2015	2013
Farms using Internet to retrieve USDA NASS reports	15%	14%	13%	11%	10%	8%
Farms using Internet to access USDA services or non-NASS reports	24%	22%	21%	18%	17%	14%
Farms using Internet to "conduct business with any USDA website"	14%	14%	8%	10%	9%	6%

a. Data from USDA NASS Farm Computer Usage and Ownership, August 2017.
b. Does not include Alaska and Hawaii.

Table 5. Broadband access across the seven Farm Service Agency districts in Illinois

FSA District	% of total Illinois farms within district	Average % of district counties' population covered by high-speed broadband
1	13.45%	55.96%
2	15.68%	68.24%
3	14.47%	65.03%
4	14.47%	81.70%
5	12.37%	56.05%
6	14.45%	86.85%
7	15.11%	75.44%

a. Data from USDA NASS 2012 Census of Agriculture.
b. Data from Broadband Now.