

Communicating With Landowners

The 2017 U.S. Census of Agriculture indicated that 40 percent of all U.S. agricultural land is rented. Farm tenants increasingly compete for farmland as they seek to grow their operations and capture economies of scale. At the same time, a growing share of absentee landowners do not understand production agriculture, and often, tenants may have little contact with landowners other than when they sign the initial agreement and periodically settle rent or rental payments. As a result, successful leasing arrangements can be difficult to develop and maintain.

For farm tenants, communicating clearly and consistently with farm landowners is a key to beginning and sustaining a good relationship. A tenant who initiates communicating with landowners shows that he or she is transparent and values the landowner as a farm stakeholder.

Communication between a tenant and a landowner can be shared through various channels, including social media, email messages or a farm newsletter, and it can address a variety of topics. To choose the appropriate communication channel and informational content to share, tenants should first get to know their audience.

Begin by knowing your audience

How a tenant chooses to communicate with a landowner and the information that a tenant chooses to share may vary by the type of rental arrangement and the landowner's background, interests and goals. A landowner in a cash rental agreement may not be interested in technical information. However, a landowner in a crop-share arrangement is more likely to understand production agriculture and might like more information because the tenant's management decisions affect landowner profit.

If a landowner inherits a family farm and has a personal attachment to it, then that person may want to know how a tenant is stewarding the farm's legacy or making changes to the farm. Also, as more people

without agricultural backgrounds become landowners, tenants may need to educate landowners about the basics of production agriculture. If a tenant rents from multiple landowners with different interests and backgrounds, then communicating general summary information is a safe approach.

To plan your communication efforts, gauge how frequently landowners would like to receive updates. You may consider distributing information on a quarterly or semiannual basis. As another option, you can time updates to coincide with significant on-farm activities or seasons. For example, you might share information at a few notable points during the year: pre-planting, post-planting, midseason, post-harvest and winter. The important takeaway is to create a schedule, and follow it. With a schedule, you can strategically plan your messages, and following the schedule shows landowners that they can depend on you to reliably share information.

Additionally, assess how landowners prefer to receive messages from you. You'll want to align your approach with how landowners would like to access information. Some may want a paper copy, but others may prefer electronic communication, such as an e-newsletter, email, text, blog or social media updates. Note that landowners may or may not use social media. If they do, then learn what platforms — for example, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or LinkedIn — that they use most consistently and would want to use to collect farm-related information from you.

Choose your communication channel

Communication channels have strengths and weaknesses and unique characteristics (Table 1). For example, email is often free, and it's an accepted form of business communication. However, email offers little opportunity to create an appealing design. Also, depending on how you structure your message, an email could feel impersonal, and emails could carry viruses or create other security issues.

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Newsletters or e-newsletters often include multiple sections and feature content about several topics, so they're good for comprehensively communicating the state of the farm. However, preparing and organizing all of the content involves time and planning. Also, creating a newsletter using a word processor or e-newsletter service such as Mailchimp can make the content visually appealing and look professional, but it requires design skills and time.

To communicate with landowners, tenants may start and maintain a blog. A blog can be used to keep landowners informed on seasonal updates as well as educate them about farming practices. Easy-to-use blog platforms often have free plans and settings for private posts. Regular updates are needed to keep the blog current, and this time commitment may become an unwelcome chore.

Social media allows users to create and share photos, audio, video and written messages. However, with social media, recognize that followers — including landowners — may not see all of your posts in their feeds as a

platform's algorithm picks and chooses the content that's displayed. As a result, you may need to point landowners to your social media pages — either your farm's business page or your personal page — in order for them to see an archive of your posts. Also, note that connecting with a landowner via social media may enable him or her to see all of your posts — those that are farm-related and personal. Your social media activity communicates who you are, so avoid posting, liking or sharing content that could be perceived as inappropriate or insensitive.

Each social media platform also has unique advantages and disadvantages. For example, Facebook favors posts that people, rather than businesses, share. That's an important point because posts with strong engagement are more likely to appear in other users' feeds. Instagram works well for sharing photos, but users may be less likely to read photo captions to gather information. Twitter is an option for sharing short updates and photos. However, because Twitter limits posts to 280 characters, posts must be brief. With a LinkedIn profile, you as a tenant can introduce

Table 1. Communication channel characteristics.

Channel characteristics	Communication channels			
	Email	E-newsletter or newsletter	Blog	Social media
Price	Free	Free with paid options	Free with paid options	Free with paid options
Accepted as business communication	Yes	Yes	Depends on audience	Depends on audience
Suited for technical information	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Tips for best reaching audience	Recommend recipients whitelist your email address to avoid messages going to junk	Give newsletter a recognizable brand, and be consistent with scheduling	Enable readers to subscribe and receive new post notifications	Identify platforms used by the audience, and encourage the audience to follow and interact with content
Control over message recipients	Yes	Yes	Depends on platform	Depends on platform
Recommended content	Summarize happenings in letter-like format	Highlight multiple topics	Record activities in journal-like format	Create short updates featuring one topic per post
Visual components supported	Text, photos, graphics	Text, photos, graphics	Text, photos, graphics, video	Text, photos, graphics, video
Recommended messaging frequency	Medium frequency	Low frequency	Medium frequency	High frequency
Design skills required	Low	High	Medium	Low
Writing required	High	High	High	Medium
Technology skill required	Low	High	Medium	Medium

landowners to your experiences and skills and showcase others' endorsements and recommendations of you. For many LinkedIn users, the platform's greatest strength is its use as a networking tool to connect with other professionals — for producers, that may include prospective landowners.

Given your comfort level with communicating via various channels — posting on social media, writing email or blog updates, designing a newsletter or photographing happenings on the farm — and landowners' preferences, you can select a communication channel that will work well for your operation and your audience.

Compile the content

Communication with landowners can address a variety of topics shared through writing, photos, audio or video. As mentioned earlier, your audience's preferences should drive decisions about the informational content you create and distribute.

All forms of communication, however, benefit when they have a strong title and share the content creator's contact information. In an email, consider the title to be your subject line. For a newsletter or blog, it would be the newsletter's name or the blog's name, and for a social media platform, the title would be the account name. A title should catch the audience's attention. It should also be consistent, so the reader can easily recognize messages from you. Including contact information, such as a contact person's name, phone number and email address, indicates that a tenant is willing to visit, share further details and answer landowners' questions.

Tenants may consider communicating about the following topics when preparing content to provide to landowners.

Status update

In a status update, summarize accomplishments and other news items that occurred since previous tenant-landowner communication was distributed. Landowners may be interested in updates about planting and harvest status, land or facility improvements, fence repairs and so forth. To keep the updates brief, use general statements. For example, "We wrapped up harvest during the second week of November."

Crop progress, pasture condition, livestock development

If the rental arrangement is a commodity-share (or flexible cash) agreement, then the landowner will have particular interest in learning about in-season crop progress or livestock development. Landowners who have a cash rental arrangement may appreciate receiving

this information as it makes them feel like they're part of the farming operation. Plus, landowners often like to discuss, or even brag about, the land they own. Knowing how a crop is progressing or livestock are growing gives landowners the information to do that.

Management practices

To complement crop progress and livestock development summaries, tenants can share management information, such as yield maps; yield histories; fertilizer application, pesticide application or animal vaccination records; and crop or livestock rotation schedules. Sharing such information may reflect positively on you as a tenant and influence a landowner in future lease negotiations. In some cases, who owns field maps may be unclear, so determine a landowner's willingness to provide this information on a case-by-case basis.

Weather update

Regardless of whether they have on-farm backgrounds, most landowners are familiar with how weather, such as too much or too little rainfall or irregular temperatures, can affect crops and livestock. If a farm experiences severe weather, such as high winds and hail, then a landowner should know how those weather conditions affected the farm operation and property. Depending on the weather event, a photo or video may better communicate the situation than a written description.

Landowners who have lived on the farm may have personal interest in weather information because they remember events of the past — the big flood that broke the levee, the record snowstorm or the drought. Landowners who live in another part of the country may not follow local weather or may not have experienced the local climate. In these cases, a weather update can provide valuable context about local conditions.

Commodity prices

Briefly, summarize relevant commodity prices and price trends, and discuss what futures markets suggest for prices. To provide context, particularly for landowners who lack land ownership experience or farm backgrounds, compare current prices to historical prices, and remind the landowner of the historical price variability.

Technology

Here, you as a tenant have a chance to educate a landowner about technological changes in farming. Be honest, and provide your opinion when necessary. Discuss why you have (or have not) adopted Bt corn, intensive grazing, no-till planting, cover crops or precision agriculture. For given technologies, point out

their advantages and disadvantages, their expected costs and returns and their benefits to the environment or farm sustainability. Mutually understanding the costs and benefits of a new technology can be helpful when discussing changes in the farming operation or leasing arrangement.

Upcoming events

Share what you have planned for the coming months, particularly happenings that will occur before your next scheduled communication. For instance, in a winter update, a tenant may discuss intentions for spring planting. Landowners may be interested in upcoming sales or auctions, fairs, community events, road improvements or business changes at the elevator or sale barn. Offer to find a time for you and the landowner to visit and tour the operation. A personal visit provides an opportunity to show farm accomplishments, discuss plans and goals and develop a cordial relationship.

Note, a farm newsletter, blog or email update can include each of these topics in a single issue or email. If a tenant chooses to use social media, then a periodic post that addresses these topics one at a time is another option. Overall, create content that enables you to familiarize the landowner with the farm operation, its recent struggles and successes and its outlook for the future.

Present information to appeal to readers

Regardless of the communication channel you select, how you present your message may affect whether you keep the audience interested. Ensure that text is easy to read by selecting a simple font. Arial, Calibri, Cambria, Helvetica, Times New Roman and Verdana are examples. Also, choose at least a 12-point font size.

When writing, use words that are easy to understand, and make your content concise. Brevity is important to keep the audience focused on your message and avoid the audience becoming distracted, and it helps to deliver a clear message. The tone you choose can also say a lot. A friendly, conversational yet professional tone can effectively engage the reader and show your authenticity.

Smartphones make it convenient for producers to take photos or capture a short video while they're working on the farm. Incorporating photos and videos into your regular communication helps landowners to visualize the messages you're sharing. Plus, both photos and videos can make a landowner, particularly one who doesn't live near the farm, feel connected to the operation.

If you choose to create a blog, newsletter or e-newsletter, then develop a simple, flexible design, or use a template. The design itself contributes to a message's credibility and clarity. After you select a design, stick with it. Maintaining a stable design will reflect positively on you.

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