

Forages on the World Wide Web

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This presentation would better be titled “World Wide Web: A personal journey by a computer illiterate redneck”. I have been intimidated by, and somewhat slow to adopt, all the “electronic technology”, however, I can safely say that the World Wide Web and other new technology (e-mail, PowerPoint’s, etc.) has had a greater impact on my forage extension program than anything in my thirty-three year career.

My first experience with “Forages and the Web” came in 1997 while serving as Chairman of the Technology Transfer Session of the International Grassland Congress. I invited Dr. David Hannaway from Oregon State University to make a presentation at the Congress on “Forage Information Systems on the World Wide Web.” I was very impressed with Dave’s presentation, but never dreamed just what an impact this technology would have on forages. It is truly amazing just how much has changed in only ten years. As an example, I simply used the Google search engine to check for a few forage-related terms (Table 1). Results of this very small search revealed a range in results from 441,000 for bermudagrass to 269 million for hay.

Topic	Number of Results
Forages	2,080,000
Southern Forages	1,190,000
Pasture	13,800,000
Southern Pasture	1,210,000
Bermudagrass	441,000
Alfalfa	6,870,000
Grazing	15,200,000
Forage Seeding Rates	408,000
Pasture Fertilization	491,000
Hay	269,000,000

SOURCE: www.google.com

In 1998, Dr. Don Ball (Auburn University) and I were invited to speak on “Technology Transfer from an Extension Agronomist Perspective” at the Australian Society of Agronomy Meetings. In preparation for that meeting, Don and I collected as much information and statistics pertaining to electronic technology as we could find. In 1998, only eleven percent of farmers in the USA had computers. Less than half used the computer for day-to-day forage-

livestock purposes. Uses cited were weather, markets, and record keeping. During this past winter meeting season, I surveyed all who attended our Master Cattleman and Master Grazer programs. Approximately ninety-one percent of farmers surveyed indicated they have access to a computer, and forty-five percent had used the Kentucky Forage Website at least once in the last six weeks. In addition, twenty years ago, approximately sixty percent of forage inquiries that I received were via letters, thirty-five percent via phone, and five percent by personal contacts. Today, less than five percent are via letter, over sixty percent by e-mail, and approximately thirty plus percent by phone (incoming percentage via cell phone) and the remainder personal contacts.

Easy Access

The technology allows tremendous freedom. No longer do we have to have traditional office hours. I communicate via cell phone from remote pasture locations. Most all hotels I stay in have wireless internet. You can get international phone cards for most cell phones and use them literally around the world. I traveled to four different countries during this past year and had wireless internet in all hotel rooms in each country.

At present, most states in the Southeast have Forage or Forage-Livestock websites. In Kentucky, we dragged our feet in getting one developed, primarily because I didn't have a clue on how to do it. Eventually, I sought help and brought the Kentucky Forage Homepage on line in 2004. At present, we have had over 25,000 visitors. In terms of number of people reached, it is the single most important forage education activity we have done in our Kentucky Forage Program. On our site (which I heavily borrowed ideas from colleagues throughout the USA) we have our monthly newsletter, publications, events, contact information, and links.

Concerns

The WWW and all its ramifications have brought about tremendous change in how we go about our day-to-day activities. Information from around the world is just a mouse click away. With all the positive aspects of this technology many concerns have also surfaced.

- 1) **Credibility:** "If it is on the web, it must be true." We deal with issues every week where a testimonial from one observation in one location can carry as much credibility as a three year replicated, multi-state, peer reviewed scientific study. (Especially if it is hidden so deep in a scientific journal that has only been read by fifty people and requires converting back to English and someone to explain the complex statistics, while the testimonial is in well written multi-color with interactive graphics).
- 2) **Time Management:** Most Forage Extension Specialists are overwhelmed every morning when they open their e-mail and find sometimes a hundred plus messages. Our e-mail address can be obtained by a quick Google search. It's so easy for anyone to ask questions on any forage-related subject. We experience frustration getting e-mails with simple questions like: "Dr. Lacefield, I'm

preparing to develop an intensive grazing system and would like your ideas on how many paddocks, how big, what species, seeding rate and date. Should I apply fertilizer? Do I aerate all of the pasture every year or just some? I plan on harvesting hay on some of the paddocks and would like to know what type equipment is best. I am confused as to what species of animals I can make the most money with, my neighbor says goats are best. The e-mail was signed, Barry.”

In this day of world wide access I couldn't assume Barry was from Kentucky or actually even living in the USA. There was nothing else in the e-mail – no phone number, no address. In the old days I could at least look at the envelope and see where it was mailed from. The above is an actual e-mail received in January, 2005.

Another concern is by-passing the County Agents. It is so easy for farmers, industry personnel, commodity groups and others to go directly to specialists or researchers. By-passing the County Agents and all the resources at the local level can weaken the overall system while creating more work for specialists.

Resources

Staying up-to-date on computer hardware and software at a time when that information is doubling every eighteen months is near impossible and very expensive. To offset some of my expenses, I will be having a yard sale soon selling 35mm cameras, overhead projectors and slide projectors. Many of us have also found challenges in getting adequate training for ourselves and our staff as well.

Summary

Many changes have occurred during my extension career, but none has impacted my extension forage program as much as the worldwide web and all its ramifications. Digital cameras, PowerPoint, home pages, Google, Yahoo (and the list goes on) has changed the way we do forage extension educational work. Keeping up on the latest hardware, software, money and time, and getting adequate training are frustrating and challenging. Other issues concerning information credibility, having time to respond adequately to large numbers of e-mails and cell phone messages continues to present challenges. These continue to be exciting times with many opportunities, challenges and opportunities. Having had the fortunate experience of working in the Southeast for thirty-three years, I don't know what the future holds, but I have confidence that the Forage Specialists who participate in SPFCIC will respond enthusiastically, efficiently and effectively.

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