



The role of social media platforms for diversified farm businesses in Scotland

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Summary

Diversified farm businesses can use social media platforms to reach new markets, sell more products and services and build their professional networks. At present, many diversified farm businesses (as with other types of rural business) are not engaging with social media or struggling to engage in an effective way.

Many diversified farm businesses are **successfully embracing social media platforms** for a range of beneficial purposes. Various approaches can be found including sharing visual (both photo- and video-based) and text-based content illustrating the products and services offered. The most successful farm diversification accounts (in terms of numbers of followers) are taking various steps to increase their visibility. Smaller and newer accounts have had less time to develop a strategy, typically posting less frequently and using less platform functions. **Effective use of social media for diversified farm businesses** includes:

1. **Posting regularly** (often daily).
2. Using a **range of content** types.
3. Using multiple **popular hashtags**.
4. **Telling an engaging story** about the diversified farm business including life on the farm.
5. Posting **attractive visual content**.
6. **Engaging actively** with other relevant (including local) businesses and promoting them on the platform.

Farmers face several **barriers to engagement**:

1. **Digital connectivity issues** are prevalent in many rural areas.
2. **Low levels of digital skills** are found particularly

amongst older farmers, as well as a lack of confidence or awareness of the different tools available.

3. **Farmers are busy**, especially those diversifying into multiple revenue streams. This leaves little time for the development of the skills necessary for effective social media use.
4. There is an **overwhelming choice** of social media (and other digital) platforms, which are perceived to change too frequently in terms of rules and functionality.

We recommend the following policy and research pathways to supporting better uptake of social media platforms amongst these groups:

1. Digitalisation policy and strategies which reflect the need for more **“low tech” digital transitions**, including towards more effective digital platform usage.
2. The **development of digital skills support, which is targeted towards digital platform use**, with a key focus on social media platforms.
3. **Development of a multimedia toolkit of resources**, informed by further research on the topic, to support farmers and other rural business owners to effectively engage with social media.
4. **Identification of/engagement with digital champions** who are using social media effectively, to provide peer support to those business who are newly embracing (or struggling to effectively use) social media platforms.



Introduction

Many farms diversify their businesses in response to financial-, land- and policy-based challenges and opportunities (Morris et al. 2017). Diversifying takes several forms, including agritourism, food production (including value added production and direct sales) and renewable energy production. Farm diversified businesses often (though not always) capitalise on land-based assets in the new business venture. Farm diversification has been regarded as a panacea for supporting wider rural economic development, including within the previous Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the current transition by the Scottish Government (Yoshida et al. 2019). **Diversified farm businesses face numerous barriers, not least in relation to reaching markets and attracting new customers.** Given the importance of knowledge sharing and communication networks for these businesses, diversified farm businesses must consider a range of approaches and tools for building these pathways. **Digital platforms have been promoted as a powerful means of connecting with customers and other relevant businesses,** with social media gaining particular attention as a tool for building and supporting small businesses (Daigle and Heiss 2021).

Many diversified farm businesses already embrace social media platforms, in particular Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Yet there are others who are yet to embrace these tools. These businesses either lack awareness of the potential of these platforms or lack confidence, time and/or skills to get started and use the various functions of each one.

This policy brief reflects on findings from research carried out by the James Hutton Institute as part of the Scottish Government's Rural and Environmental Science and Analytical Services Division (RESAS) under Topic B3: Improving

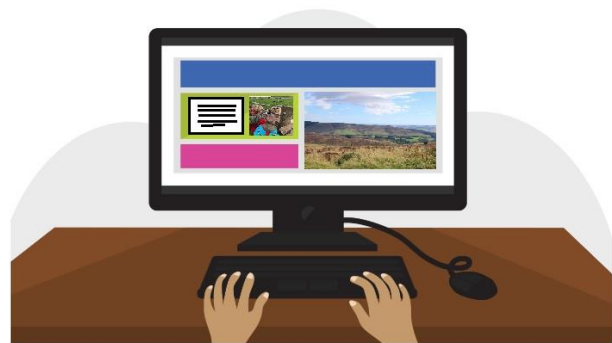


Figure 1: Digital platforms are becoming increasingly useful for farms and other rural businesses (image Credit: James Hutton Institute)

Agricultural Practice (2022-2027). The brief presents information gathered through three sources: a literature review, an online stakeholder meeting (with stakeholders supporting diversified farm businesses) and an online ethnography (netnography). The brief aims to set out the main barriers, roles and good practice of social media platforms for diversified farm businesses. The brief reflects on how farm diversification businesses are already using these platforms in multiple ways and for multiple purposes, as well as considering the barriers faced by those not already engaging (or struggling to engage effectively). The brief summarises with recommendations for supporting farm diversification businesses (as well as other small-scale rural businesses) in engaging with social media platforms in a beneficial way.

Digital platforms and diversified farm businesses

The adoption and use of digital technologies on farms has received increasing academic attention in recent years (e.g. Reinhardt 2022; Donaldson 2022; Rijswijk et al. 2021; Rotz et al 2019; Caffaro et al. 2020; Townsend and Noble 2022), as well as becoming a prominent focus within broader agricultural strategies such as The Digitisation of



the European Agricultural Sector (2022)¹, and Scottish Government policy such as the Updated Digital Strategy for Scotland (2021)² which promote **technology use for more efficient, sustainable, and competitive agricultural and wider rural practices**. Much of this work focuses on the digitisation of agricultural practices, for example the adoption of robotics, precision farming technologies or Internet of Things (IoT) technologies such as electronic identification tags for livestock. Other work focuses on “low tech” digital tools (i.e. everyday digital tools such as digital platforms which can be transformational for rural businesses, but which some still lack the awareness of, or skills and confidence to use). This focus has been addressed in the context of the wider rural economy, with less attention being given to these digital tools in relation to farms and diversified farm businesses. Where research *has* focused on the role of digital platforms including social media on farms, it argues that such **tools can support consumer reach, knowledge sharing and network building between farmers** (Daigle and Heiss 2021; Morris et al. 2017) as well as promoting **positive representations of farming, farm diversification and rural life more broadly** (Riley and Robertson 2022). There is **little literature on the role of social media and other digital platforms specifically for diversified farm businesses**. This research fills that gap and provides concrete recommendations for how policy and future research can support farm diversification businesses in engaging with social media platforms.

How are these platforms already being used? Lessons from netnographic research

Despite these barriers and challenges there are many farms and farm diversified businesses represented on social media channels. As part of this research, *netnography* was carried out to explore the use of social media channels by

diversified farm businesses. Netnography is an adaptation of ethnography (an immersive research practice which explores cultural and social phenomena) for the online world, pioneered by Robert Kozinets in 1995. It is a method for qualitatively analysing data emerging from online cultures and communities (Kozinets 2019). In this research, netnography was used as a method for exploring how diversified farm businesses are using social media platforms for a number of purposes. The analysis focused on three mainstream social media platforms: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. As part of the research process, *immersion journals* were recorded by the researchers engaged in the netnographic research. The insights presented here are based on findings recorded in these immersion journals.



Figure 2: Farm shops are a popular form of farm diversification. Image credit: Creative Commons attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)

The three social media channels all provide several different functions. For example, in the case of Instagram, a range of functions are offered. Regular posts appear on a user’s feed as well as the account holder’s “grid” and are organised in a user’s feed according to the algorithm. These feed posts can take several different formats – static photograph posts, “carousels” (multiple photos in one post) and videos (in the form of “Reels” which might feature a voiceover or be accompanied by music which is added to the video when the user is creating the

¹<https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/digitisation-agriculture>

²<https://www.gov.scot/publications/a-changing-nation-how-scotland-will-thrive-in-a-digital-world/pages/summary/>



reel in the app). Content can also be shared with users via the Stories function. Stories can be added in various formats – photo, video, photo or video with voiceover (or with music added from Instagram’s extensive library), resharing of one’s own and other peoples’ posts, linking to websites and other online content external to the Instagram app, and so on. There is also a function by which users can share live video – either on their own or in collaboration with other accounts, which is used to engage followers who are able to ask questions in the chat function during these live events. In addition to these different forms of content there are **multiple ways of engaging with followers and other users of the app**. For example, when creating a reel or photo post, a common practice is to use hashtags which make the content visible to a wider audience based on shared interests. Another practice is to tag other accounts in one’s (place-based or online) community in order to support their work, ask their advice, credit their ideas and so on. These actions help an Instagram account holder to build their online community, share their content and connect with a wider audience. Some of these functionalities, such as hashtags and stories, are common across multiple platforms.

The analysis found a range of diversified farm businesses across the three platforms. The majority of these represent diversifications relevant to agritourism as well as food-related businesses such as farm shops, cafes and businesses selling value-added food products such as preserves, cheeses and alcoholic beverages. Some notable services offered by the diversified farm businesses include accommodation (cottages, hot tubs, hideaways, lodges), film locations, workshops (e.g. breadmaking, vegetable growing, foraging), farm tours, foodstuffs (baked goods, chef-made meals) and activities such as horse riding and other outdoor pursuits. Interestingly, where farms have more than one diversification, some have a separate social media account for each diversification whereas others group them all under the same account.

Various forms of content are shared including posts

about business services and products, traditional media articles that feature the businesses, links to and information about events and workshops on their premises, personal family photos, photos of and information about the team behind the diversified farm business, the rural landscape within which the business is situated, interiors and exteriors of agritourism accommodation, resharing photos and reviews by guests or customers, and so on. Recurring themes include beautiful outdoor rural settings and seasonal aspects (e.g. Autumn leaves) which are employed to attract engagement with the posts.

Instagram and Facebook are more visual in terms of the content typically shared, though increasingly Twitter posts (or Tweets) also contain a photograph (unless the Tweets are sharing an article or website, which is also common on this platform).

Photos and videos serve a number of functions. They **tell a story about the business including the services or products on offer and help to create a brand identity** that seeks to attract potential new customers and retain existing ones. Some have a key focus on diversified products or services whereas others focus more on imagery of the working farm itself, which might function as a more indirect form of marketing through storytelling. Clearly, some diversified farm businesses lean more heavily upon the farm identity than others in promoting their products and services. The accompanying text on social media posts often goes further in alerting followers to services or products on offer. Various strategies are employed by diversified farm businesses to draw customers in. For example, we found some businesses had created “farm characters” which featured regularly in their feeds. Often this was a farm animal serving as a kind of mascot for the farm with an ongoing story, in order to encourage followers to look at the account on repeated occasions. Other strategies include running giveaways (often in collaboration with other relevant businesses) to draw in new followers and engagement as well as posting questions to encourage followers to engage



directly with feed posts and stories.

The three platforms are used in slightly different ways by diversified farm businesses. Instagram and Facebook tend to be used largely for reaching out to new potential customers, whereas Twitter is used more as a platform for connecting with other relevant businesses and organisations and for forming collaborations. However, all three platforms can be used for both purposes. For example, diversified farm businesses (as with other business types) often support each other on the three platforms by highlighting the value of peer businesses, and collaborative posts and events are often in evidence.

Good practice on social media platforms

Success on social media is somewhat subjective and there are different ways in which an account can be considered successful. One of these might be the size of an account's following. For diversified farm businesses, a larger following means a larger potential market as well as being more visible to potential collaborators and organisations who might provide support and exposure. Therefore, it is good practice to actively strive to increase the number of followers on social media platforms.

The most easily found (or visible) diversified farm businesses on social media platforms tend to be the ones which are using the platforms most frequently and diversely. Social media content is generally organised by algorithms which favour more popular content, and which drive content to users based on perceived preferences and existing connections. This means that there is a somewhat unfortunate "Catch 22" in that the larger accounts tend to be given more exposure by the algorithm within each of the platforms. However, there are a number of steps that successful accounts are taking to increase their visibility. These accounts are **typically posting most frequently, on more platforms, and using the full range of functions that the platforms offer**, quickly embracing new functions introduced by the platforms. These are

also typically the accounts with much larger numbers of followers (although clearly, the size of following is also to some extent a function of how long a business has been using a platform for – this might also be true for levels of confidence and skill with using the platforms). In Instagram for example, **diversified farm businesses with the largest number of followers** are doing the following: **posting regularly (often daily); using a range of content types in posts including photos and reels; using multiple hashtags including the most popular hashtags relevant to their product or service; telling an engaging story about the diversified farm business including life on the farm; posting regularly to stories; posting attractive visual content representing the location and products.** Smaller and newer accounts have had less time to understand each platform's functionality and have had less time to develop a strategy, often tending to post less frequently and use less platform functions.



Figure 3: There is a multitude of social media platforms available. Image credit: Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-SA 4.0)

Successful accounts also share content related to other businesses in the area. This can increase the attractiveness of the wider rural area as well as **servicing to build strong peer support networks in local business communities**, which can lead to collaborations between businesses in the future.

It is worth noting that, although posting regularly across multiple platforms seems to be an effective way to reach more followers and engage more potential customers on social media, this might not



be a sensible strategy for all businesses, especially given that we know that businesses are time poor. There is a risk of having less time for important farm or diversified business functions if too much time is spent maintaining social media presence. **There is no clear strategy that is right for all businesses; instead, each business must find the right balance that suits them.** Certain strategies might be useful to those with less time, such as using functions which allow social media users to post the same content across multiple platforms (available within the apps themselves as well as via third party apps which are aimed at organising social media content over multiple platforms, such as Hootsuite).

Barriers to the use of digital platforms

To understand how to better support farm diversification businesses to engage with social media it is first necessary to understand barriers to engagement. **There is a multitude of digital platforms** available for businesses to use for a variety of purposes. As well as social media platforms (which include Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn and YouTube, amongst others) there are also selling platforms (e.g. Ebay, Etsy, booking.com, AirBnB), knowledge sharing platforms (such as Reddit and Quora), and blogging and website building platforms (such as Wix and WordPress). **The choice of platforms to engage with is often overwhelming for small businesses.** What's more, **rural populations are often characterised by low levels of digital skills**, especially in ageing rural communities given that **older people often (but not always) have poor digital skills and confidence** (Cowie et al. 2020; Townsend et al. 2013) as well as a lack of awareness of digital tools and their potential. A further issue is **digital infrastructure, which has historically been and remains lacking in rural- compared with urban areas** (Tiwasing et al. 2022; Bowen and Morris 2019; Townsend et al. 2015). These rural-specific barriers to digital engagement are characteristics of the **urban-rural digital divide**.

As part of this research an *online stakeholder*

workshop was conducted (in 2022) with stakeholders representing agritourism and wider rural business support in Scotland. The discussion explored how diversified farm businesses can be supported to embrace social media (and other digital platforms). The discussion revealed several barriers to engagement. **Farmers are busy**, especially those diversifying into multiple revenue streams. Marketing is often the last thing on the priority list, because essential tasks such as feeding animals and welcoming guests or dealing with customers can take priority. This can mean there is **little time to develop the digital skills and knowledge necessary for using social media and other digital platforms**. As with rural residents more broadly, **many farmers lack basic digital skills**, with the age of the farmer playing a role - **younger farmers are more likely to have strong digital skills** and to use social media as well as other digital platforms.



Figure 4: Farmer using spraying equipment on the farm (image credit: James Hutton Institute)

What's more, the stakeholder discussion revealed that **funding schemes for digital skills support are often pitched too high**, targeting the improvement of coding or other complex digital skills rather than more basic or "low tech" skills, and are therefore felt to be irrelevant by many farmers. Despite efforts over many years, **digital connectivity is still inadequate in many rural areas**. Finally, **farmers are overwhelmed** by the multitude of digital tools available to them, including digital platforms. These platforms change very quickly in terms of their functionality, and farmers (as well as other rural



business owners) feel unable to keep up to date with these platform changes. Findings from the stakeholder workshop support scientific findings on barriers to engagement with digital platforms including social media.

The stakeholder workshop highlighted the need for better, more relevant digital support for farms and other rural businesses, including digital skills support which is better targeted to improving the effectiveness of social media use by this group.

Conclusions: How to support diversified farm businesses in benefiting from social media use?

Through this briefing, we have illustrated how diversified farm businesses are utilising social media platforms to engage with wide audiences and encourage new customers to buy into their diversified products and services. We have also shown several barriers that exist for those diversified farm businesses not yet engaging effectively with social media platforms. This research highlights a need for digital support that is not currently being met – namely digital support for farms, diversified farm businesses and other small rural businesses which focuses on how they can use social media platforms to their benefit, and for a range of purposes.



Figure 5: farm produce at a farm shop (image credit: CCO Public Domain)

The lessons in this brief point to some straightforward ways that diversified farm businesses (and other rural businesses) can build more effective strategies for their social media usage. We recommend the following policy and research pathways to supporting better uptake of social media platforms amongst these groups:

1. **Digitalisation policy and strategies which reflect the need for more “low tech” digital transitions**, including towards more effective digital platform usage.
2. The development of **digital skills support, which is targeted towards digital platform use**, with a key focus on social media platforms.
3. **Development of a multimedia toolkit of resources**, informed by further research on the topic, to support farmers and other rural business owners to effectively engage with social media.
4. **Identification of and engagement with digital champions** (who also own diversified farm businesses) who are using social media effectively to promote their business products and services as well as to connect with their wider business community, to provide peer support to those business who are newly embracing (or struggling to effectively use) social media platforms.

To achieve this will necessitate further conversations with a broader range of relevant stakeholders, to greater understand the actors involved, range of needs and skills development required. This research will continue to engage with stakeholders through workshops, meetings and in-depth interviews to gain further insight into the role of social media for diversified farm businesses and how these can be supported in effective social media usage. In collaboration with key stakeholders, the findings of this research will be used in the development of resources to support effective social media use in this group.



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