

## **Communications Audit on Urban Sprawl**

**Issue topic:** Urban sprawl is conquering rural land and effecting agriculture and the environment.

**Brief issue summary:** Today, with the population increasing, more people are migrating from populated towns to develop a low-density population over rural farmland. The old and important farmland is now turning into concrete taking away animal habitats, farmland and trees.

**Client represented:** Sangamon County Farm Bureau

### **Situation Overview and Description of Client**

Today, with the population increasing, more people are migrating from populated towns to develop a low-density population over rural farmland effecting agriculture and the environment. This is decreasing the amount of rural land to farm on effecting the profit for farmers and potential food supply for humans. Urban sprawl has been around for quite some time, one cause of urban sprawl is lack of urban planning. Because of our history, we know that people love to explore new land and use it for their own benefits. Today that is still occurring and people are finding new areas outside of their home that are calmer which leads them to sprawl out. As the population increases, urban communities continue to spread further form the city and take over the rural areas.

The client represented is the Sangamon County Farm Bureau. The Sangamon County Farm Bureau is a charitable organization recognized by the IRS as a public charity that focuses on service to members, government and politics, education and information. It wants to advance opportunities for understanding the agriculture industry by supporting research opportunities. One of its key goals is to fund awards and scholarships to benefit agricultural education programs.

### **Stakeholder and Audience Analysis**

#### **Stakeholders:**

#### **Who are the key stakeholders contributing to a dialogue on this issue?**

The primary key stakeholders contributing to the issue include farmers and the people of the growing population. The people are impacted because they get more space to grow their population with large urban houses and new buildings. The farmers are impacted because they are losing their land to the growing population. The secondary stakeholders include the local government and local businesses. Specifically, the secondary businesses that lose are farm insurance companies, seed sales, etc. Other companies who benefit from the issue include real estate agencies, local developers and builders, design firms, etc. Other voices that are contributing to the dialogue are local schools/education systems, ministries, healthcare systems and transportation systems.

### **How engaged are the stakeholders in the discussion on the issue?**

I believe all the stakeholders have been actively contributing to the conversation. It is a very important issue that has the potential to change the future of all people. Everyone wants to have a say in the problem. The primary stakeholders such as the farmers have been saying how it is important to preserve the rural land for agricultural purposes rather than human wants. They have worked with different businesses and news articles to help communicate their opinions on the issue. The farmers are working with business such as the Illinois Farm Bureau while the people who are pro-urban sprawl are working with real estate agents.

After doing research I see the most effective way these stakeholders have been communicating this issue is through news articles and websites. There are however other channels that are being used such as social media. On Instagram if you type in urban sprawl over 16 thousand posts come up. This has resulted positively because it is bringing awareness to the issue through all ages. Overall, I notice more articles and posts that are from agricultural prospective. People who are pro-urban sprawl are speaking up through the same channels. There is a nice balance between the two participating in the dialogue.

### **How much harmony/disharmony exists on this issue between stakeholders?**

There are two opposing sides when it comes to the stakeholders. Some of the stakeholders agree with the key elements issue while others are not. For example, farmers and agricultural business are going to have a different view on the issue than urban developers and the people who are wanting larger houses and backyards. Farmers want to keep their rural land for many different reasons whether it is for business or even just family history. Urban developers want to use the rural land to grow and extend our cities to provide more for our economy.

However, there is a little harmony between the groups. It is illegal to grow on some land that is better for farming. This helps set a boundary between each other's messages. This is publicly controversial because the different stakeholders have opposite interests, morals and political viewpoints. One common public disagreement includes having the affected policies alternative to voting. It is possible just to take a vote on what should happen to the rural land but would this potentially will not be a positive alternative.

### **How informed do the stakeholder groups appear to be?**

Between the two stakeholder groups there is extreme bias. Both believe that they are helping improve our future and are also wanting to do what is best for their company. Farmers want to preserve rural land to grow more crops to create a larger profit. They also could be trying to preserve family history. A lot of rural land is passed down generation from generation and is very significant to the family. It is also a farmer's goal to educate people about agriculture and keep it alive. Real estate agencies and urban developers have the opposite idea from farmers. They want to grow the cities to benefit their profit and the needs of the growing population.

Overall, the goal of both stakeholder groups is to pursue what they are interested in based on their political, religious and social beliefs.

Another element of bias is creating a purposeful incomplete message to emphasize the points they are supporting. The purpose of leaving out information is so the people reading the messages can't claim that there was false information. Therefore, the key stakeholder groups avoid being blamed for having false information and avoid being considered not reliable. Only certain types of stakeholders share accurate information because different types of stakeholders have different intentions and morals. Based on an article about stakeholder perceptions, stakeholders find importance in certain things more than others: accuracy, relevancy, popularity, modernity, etc. Also, a lack of communication between stakeholders and clients creates room for less accurate information, thus the information shared by stakeholders is not very accurate.

The stakeholders can get their information from any source. They most likely will end up leveraging in the middle to get different perspective. Once they get all their internal information that have to also get external information to add variety to their data. They can use mostly first party data because they are trained and educated on what they are doing, but it is also important to have third party data to eliminate bias. When looking at original content vs repurposed content, adding repurposed contents allow you to create a stronger content audience.

### **Audiences**

#### **Who are the primary audiences impacted by this issue?**

Primary audiences that are impacted by this issue include those similar to the stakeholders. For example, farmers and their families, urban businesses and the growing population. The farmers are losing their rural land and family traditions while the population of the city is expanding. The secondary audiences include city council members and government agencies. Other groups that are impacted by the dialogue include local schools, education systems, ministries, healthcare systems and transportation systems.

#### **How informed do the audience segments appear to be?**

It depends on how connected the audience is to the issue to determine how informed they are. For example, a manager at the Illinois Farm Bureau will be far more educated and informed on the issue than an average citizen who knows nothing about the damage or background of the issue. This is a topic that requires knowledge to be able to understand. It would be beneficial to do research on how our environment, economy, and agriculture is being affected before having an opinion on the subject. The target audiences should be able to gather their own information on the issue, but it is also always beneficial to talk with someone who has experience and history with the topic as well. I would recommend doing both.

I overall believe that the historical pattern of information flow on this topic is more negative than positive. There have been a lot of studies shown that with the growing population and new structures also means an increase in pollution and harm on the environment. However, there are a few articles supporting urban sprawl and saying it is beneficial for transportation systems, healthcare systems, educational systems and the economy as a whole.

## **Goal Analysis**

### **What is your client's goal in participating in the dialogue on this issue?**

The goal of my client in participating in the dialogue on this issue is to support preserving rural land and minimize the number of new houses and buildings built outside of cities. They want to make sure that the ground where the new houses are being built do not have any other purposes (IFB). If a large piece of land is being built on, it is important to check the richness of the land to see if it should be used for farming or other resources. As a company who strongly plays a role in the agriculture business, they have a strong desire to stop urban sprawl on useful farmland. Overall, the desired outcome is to preserve the rich soil for farmland and the other land for urban sprawl.

In alignment to other stakeholder's goals, it is either the same or different. It varies depending on what group your audience belongs in. For example, the Illinois Farm Bureau is going to have the same goal and opinion on urban sprawl as Bayer/Monsanto. They both want to minimize the amount of housing and buildings being built on farmland because it will not only help the future of agriculture, it is also important to their business from working with farmers. On the other hand, a client who may be in real estate will have an opposite opinion. Their goal will be to build houses on the open land. The more houses they build and sell, the more money they will make to support their families.

### **How tightly connected is this issue to your client's primary business purpose?**

The issue is tightly connected to my client's business purpose. After 100 years the Illinois Farm Bureau remains to carry out their mission of improving the economic well-being of agriculture and enhance the value of farm life. This mission statement really supports the communication goal related to the issue because it is fighting for farmers and the rural land. The business has created different scholarship opportunities and volunteer groups that help promote agriculture and its importance. The Illinois Farm Bureau wants to preserve rural land, help farmers, and promote the importance of agriculture.

On the other hand, there are other competing goals from other companies such as urban developers and real estate agents. Just like the Illinois Farm Bureau, this rural land is also going to benefit their profit. They can use the land to build new subdivisions, business, and new transportation systems. Most people today want large houses and large backyards for a cheaper cost in urban areas. The urban developers are determined to fulfill the population's needs. This creates a conflict of interest because both clients are fighting for the same thing, but for different issues.

### **Is there misinformation currently being circulated as part of this dialogue?**

Misinformation on the issue is that urban sprawl and the growth of the cities is sustainable and "green". Some also say the it is beneficial because it brings higher productivity,

is great for energy use, and increases infrastructure. Even in 2014, the United Nations launched a “World Cities Day” on October 31<sup>st</sup> as a day to promote awareness to global urbanization and promote the importance the cooperation to meet the challenges of growth (Newstrust). All of this information is very significant because it shows that some people are not fully informed on the negative impacts it has on the environment. The misinformation seems more innocent in nature and encourages people to support urban sprawl and my client refutes this dissemination of misinformation.

### **Are there artificial obstructions impacting message positioning?**

Artificial obstructions impacting message positionings on the issue include the federal and state government. The federal government influences urban sprawl because it affects tax treatment of housing and transportation costs. The tax treatment of housing affects urban sprawl because it lowers the cost of housing and encourages house consumption. This leads to the population moving to large houses in suburban locations rather than smaller urban lots. Transportation policies also as an influence on urban sprawl because the federal government has a large say in the construction of interstates and highways. The highways increase accessibility to the new suburban locations (researchgate).

The local government also is an artificial obstruction impacting urban sprawl. It is constantly making decisions that affect land use. For example, through transportation, infrastructure finance and local government finance. States will invest and encourage urban sprawl through motor use and parking requirements. They will also offer grants and loans for new development because it will be more attractive and appealing than the existing infrastructure. When the property taxation, sales taxation and user fees increase, this influences the government to look for new land for urban development (researchgate). There are also special interest groups that are lobbying and disseminating information about this issue such as the Spokane Homebuilders Association.

### **Methods Analysis**

#### **What information dissemination methods are currently being used by your client to communicate about this issue?**

At the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, I interviewed the manager, Jim Birge. One thing I learned about was the different communication channels him and his company use pertaining to this topic. This organization does not specifically say that everyone needs to stop urban sprawl, instead they just advertise and promote the significance of agriculture through different channels such as newsletters, the radio, social media, websites, magazines, emails, word of mouth and more. The most primary channel that the Sangamon Country Farm Bureau uses are news pamphlet that are released monthly. Other primary channels they use are daily emails, radio advertisements and weekly Facebook posts. Depending on the channel, they publicize monthly, weekly or daily.

#### **Are appropriate channels being used to support an ongoing dialogue on the issue?**

Each channel reaches a different audience. The monthly news pamphlet only reaches members of the Sangamon County Farm Bureau. It is very effective to those who receive it. It uses different photographs and stories that engage the audience. This method is overall very impactful, but only to those who receive it. The other channels, such as radio advertisements and Facebook posts reach a wider audience. It reaches anyone who has a radio or who has a Facebook page. This is a very effective method to get the topic out to millions of people.

One of the purposes of the news pamphlet is to have committee reports. Different people write a few paragraphs from the governmental affairs, marketing, women, policy development and more. It is a very active communication method as well as the Facebook. On Facebook many people can actively interact by liking the page and make different posts or comments for the Farm Bureau. The channels such as radio advertisements and commercials are more passive. It is just a one-way communication method.

The target audiences that are receiving the most timely and relevant information from the client are those who are members of the Sangamon County Farm Bureau. To become a member, you just sign up on their website. The target audiences who are not receiving the most timely and relevant information are those who do not members, do not have any social media, and only listen to the radio or watch tv commercials. However, much effort the audience will put in will determine how much information they gain from the source.

### **What gaps exist in the current channel methodology?**

Most audiences that are currently targeted are adults with experience or background in agriculture. To reach other target audiences such as those who live in the city or young adults, my client needs to publish more on social media. Social media today is a very popular way to advertise. According to Statista, 79% of the US population is on social media. The social media of the Sangamon County Farm Bureau needs attention and more content. Social media is also a great technique to inform the nation about urban sprawl and what we can do to help preserve rural land. If this occurs, it will be a great communication method to actively reach a wider audience.

Overall, I believe the Sangamon County Farm Bureau is doing a great job with their communication channels. They have different websites, articles, pamphlets, reminders and call to action calls that are effectively reaching their target audience. They have also created foundations and political committees. There is also a local representative that is always available to contact if one has questions. All these strategies are working well, and nothing should be eliminated.

### **Recommendations**

#### **Recommendation #1**

In popular issues such as this, it is important to brainstorm and think of recommendations or ideas to help provide suggestions to the client on how they can improve the quality and/or quantity of dialogue on the issue with their target audience. I am currently 18 years old studying Agricultural Communications. When I talk about my issue with my friends here on campus I have realized a lot of them are not educated on this topic or not even educated on agriculture. I think it is very important that everyone should be educated on agriculture especially us college students. Right now, we hold the possible changes for the future and so it is important that everyone knows these issues and topic, so we can help prevent it.

According to a Modo Labs Team, “Young adults have consistently been the heaviest users of social media by a substantial margin, and today that’s even more true: a staggering 90% of them use social media, according to a 2015 Pew Research Center study” (Modo). This study was only in 2015 and the numbers were expected to annually increase. This study proves that a great way to reach college students and other young adults is through social media. The Sangamon County Farm Bureau primarily targets parents and grandparents because they are more educated and may also donate more. However, they do have a few things with young adults like giving out scholarships and awards.

To increase their involvement with the young adults I think the best recommendation is to become more active on social media. I did my own research on what social media the Sangamon County Farm Bureau has, and I found that they have an Instagram and a Facebook, but no twitter. They are very invested with their Facebook page that has over 1,000 likes but are not very invested on their Instagram page with only 93 followers over 3 years. I recommend that the Sangamon County Farm Bureau become more involved in their social media. They need to create inviting and cool graphics to catch the attention of young adults.

They also need to expand their social media by creating a twitter. According to Omnicore, there are over 69 million Twitter users in the US with ages ranging from 18-29 and 30-49 years old (Omnicore). This is the perfect source to use to reach young adults. It is very simple to set up twitter and is free. It would be best to have different content for each social media. Facebook targets more adults and donators and should use more posts that are for the educated and more professional. The Twitter and Instagram posts can be more fun and informative for those young adults who are uneducated about agriculture and the issue.

After all the social media accounts are running it would be a great idea to create a hashtag to bring awareness to the issue. Hashtags are something simple that everyone uses. It is a quick and easy way to start a thread and create a movement. I recommend using the hashtag “#UrbanSprawl2019” to target young adults to start a movement in 2019 to bring attention to how agriculture is being affected by urban sprawl.

## **Recommendation #2**

Whenever I was interviewing Jim Birge from the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, he informed me a little bit about the “LESA score.” After learning more about it I highly recommend that the Sangamon County Farm Bureau should inform the public about what it means and what it does. If the Sangamon County Farm Bureau uses the previous recommendation above, they can consolidate and use social media and hashtags to bring awareness to what a LESA score is. For example, on twitter they can post #LESA.

A LESA score stands for “Land Evaluation Sight Assessment Score.” This score is a base for combining multiple factors into the assessment of the significance of the land for agricultural usage. It looks at factors such as the soil quality, agricultural productivity, development pressure and balances other public values (SWCS). All of these key factors tie into the score to identify what should be done with the land. It is important that the Sangamon County Farm Bureau educates the public on the LESA score because it is a very important and valuable tool to use when there are issues dealing with urban sprawl and agriculture.

According to Jim Birge from the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, the LESA score can differentiate from each government to affect the outcome that they may be looking for. The piece of land has to have a LESA score before it is considered in zoning and used for other development outside of agriculture. The LESA score could range from 0-100. The higher the LESA score, the more value the land has for agricultural purposes and meaning. The close the LESA score is to 0 means that there may be other options that are more beneficial from that land such as building a new subdivision or other buildings (SWCW). The framework of the LESA score is very flexible because different factors can affect the rating and weightings of the location.

As a consumer, I believe it is important to know what the LESA score is of the area surrounding you. According to Jim Birge, the LESA score for land around Sangamon County is closer to 100. However, this may not be the same for others. It is important to know what the LESA score of your land is because it might alter your opinion on what should be done with that land. If the land has a LESA score close to 100, the population may not want to waste that rich soil and look for something else. It overall could influence the way the public may view urban sprawl and what should be done with the land.

Overall, the LESA score is an important analytical tool that is designed to rate, and rank sites based on their importance to agriculture. I recommend that the Sangamon County Farm Bureau educates their members, donators, and young adults on what the LESA score is and how it can affect what happens to the land. They can do this by using their social media sites, writing about it in their annual pamphlet, and send out an informational email.

### **Recommendation #3**

Another recommendation that I have for my client, the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, is to get two members to travel to different high schools throughout Sangamon County to have an assembly and present information regarding the issue. When I was in high school, every once in a while, we would have different guest speakers come to talk to us about important issues. It

was very beneficial as a student to listen to someone passionately talk about the issue and inform us about what some current issues are.

At the assembly they could start off by asking how many people know what “Urban Sprawl” means. After they can continue to explain that with the population increasing, more people are migrating from populated towns to develop a low-density population over rural farmland. The old and important farmland is now turning into concrete taking away animal habitats, farmland and trees creating a large effect on agriculture. It is important that students learn this information to help educate them more about agriculture and urban sprawl, so they can use this knowledge in the future and help create awareness against urban sprawl.

From experience, I know my best way to learn something and remember it is through some type of visual. To most, it is easier to watch something and remember it than to have someone tell you or read it. In class we do a lot of projects that require personal involvement to help stimulate our brains and to help us create a full understanding of what is going on. According to Zane Education, “Visual learning engages the use of visual aids like video to deliver educational content even more effectively. It greatly benefits and enhances the learning process as interactive effects are used to reinforce the material being studied. Visual learning is a great way of learning as it aids to increase a learner’s interest in a certain subject, makes the learning process more enjoyable, and retains the student’s interest for longer periods.”

I recommend that the two members from the Sangamon County Farm Bureau create a short video to present the information. In this video it would include the basic facts about urban sprawl such as what it is, why it is happening, and how it is affecting agriculture. I believe using graphics and a video would really grab the attention of the students and be a great way to inform them about the issue. If they did not want to make one, there are great options on YouTube all about urban sprawl. Another great way to make sure the students remember the information is to include audience interaction. I recommend that the two members involve the audience by answering questions

I believe this is a great recommendation for the Sangamon County Farm Bureau. It is an effective way to inform not only students, but also adults and teachers about urban sprawl and the effects of agriculture. I hope to see these recommendations take action by the Sangamon County Farm Bureau, so we can educate the public on the issue and make a change.

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