

Facilitating real-time engagement: #AskAg Twitter chats

Maciej Chmielewski, United States Agency for International Development (USAID) LEARN Contract, mchmie@dexisonline.com

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to illustrate a case study of one U.S. Government agency's experience using Twitter as a platform for knowledge generation and exchange. It is intended as a precursor to a more intense study. In 2012, the United States Agency for International Development's (USAID) Bureau for Food Security worked with the USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project to pilot a series of Twitter Chat activities, organized under the #AskAg hashtag. The initial objective was to give a voice to development practitioners in the field by providing a monthly platform for them to exchange knowledge on various subjects, with the understanding that the conversation would happen in a transparent and accepted environment—Twitter. Since then, the Bureau has conducted more than 20 #AskAg Twitter Chats with over 100 experts and organizations. These Twitter Chats have covered a multitude of topics that relate to the Bureau's knowledge cycle. #AskAg Twitter Chats have evolved from a simple question and answer format to a more robust, structured conversation due to the addition of a full-time facilitator and participants' greater familiarity with the Twitter platform. Maciej Chmielewski

Keywords: Social Media, Knowledge Transfer, Web 2.0, Communications, Collaboration, Adaptation, Knowledge Exchange

Introduction

In 2012, the USAID Bureau for Food Security was looking for a tool or process that would allow for real-time knowledge transfer between their Washington, DC-based staff, their staff in the field, and their implementing partners. The Bureau's main question was, "How can we facilitate a process where USAID employees and implementing partners can seek out time-sensitive knowledge from each other and have a conversation around those findings?" The Bureau worked with the USAID Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project to pilot a series of #AskAg Twitter Chats to test a possible answer to this question.

At the time, knowledge that could potentially enhance field staff's work or alert teams to change course was not flowing smoothly. Due to USAID's nature—being an organization that relies on timely data and scientific research to further its work—the act of transferring knowledge has to be quick and easy.

The Bureau piloted various activities using different platforms. One such pilot involved holding 'office hours' for USAID DC staff to communicate with field staff during a given time frame each month. This concept ultimately failed due to the time constraints and lack of technological uptake. The Bureau was in search of an easily accessible online process that would allow for a quick uptake, a low learning curve, and most importantly, accessibility for a wide audience. At the time, USAID was looking to leverage an existing tool to lower the development barrier.

Social media, and Twitter in particular, allowed the Bureau for Food Security to experiment with a popular and evolving platform. Not only did this platform allow experts and users to interact, but it also broadened the Bureau's engagement with the audiences it serves by expanding its outreach. Twitter was extremely well established among international social media platforms and offered a foundation and a set of strict guidelines (such as a 140 character limit for each message) that in turn gave users parameters for engagement.

#AskAg Twitter Chats

Over the course of the first 12 #AskAg Twitter Chats, the KMDP project continuously adapted and enhanced the structure of the chats and the event preparation and implementation processes. In addition to internal feedback loops, the KMDP project relied on feedback from participants through surveys tweeted out immediately following each chat, as well as feedback collected informally from experts following the chats.

#AskAg Twitter Chats originated as question and answer (Q&A) sessions for the Twitter audience to ask specific questions of experts on a pre-determined topic. The KMDP project encouraged users to submit questions both before and during the chat, and experts would answer as many questions as the time allowed. Although this provided a useful outlet for experts to promote a specific issue, the KMDP team realized over the course of the first several chats that, with the help of participant feedback, this format could be improved. Although providing a space for Q&A was useful, it did not maximize the potential of #AskAg chats as a platform for community engagement. By guiding the chat towards two-way conversations between the experts and individual chat participants, KMDP overlooked the opportunity for users to connect both with the experts and with each other.

Subsequent #AskAg Twitter Chats were developed with the following primary goals:

- Bring people together and engage in discussion on specific agriculture/food security topics
- Create a network of people interested in agriculture/food security on Twitter
- Lower the barrier for USAID participation

While achieving the above goals, the #AskAg chats also sought to:

- Connect Twitter users directly with experts and each other
- Tap into existing networks of agriculture/food security Twitter users
- Encourage greater collaboration between USAID offices, USAID Missions, and implementing partners
- Introduce Twitter to USAID staff and implementing partners (as experts or participants)
- Create awareness of specific resources and tools
- Increase awareness of the Bureau's knowledge platform—Agrilinks—and showcase its KM/technical expertise
- Expand the Agrilinks audience
- Generate resources to add to the Agrilinks Library

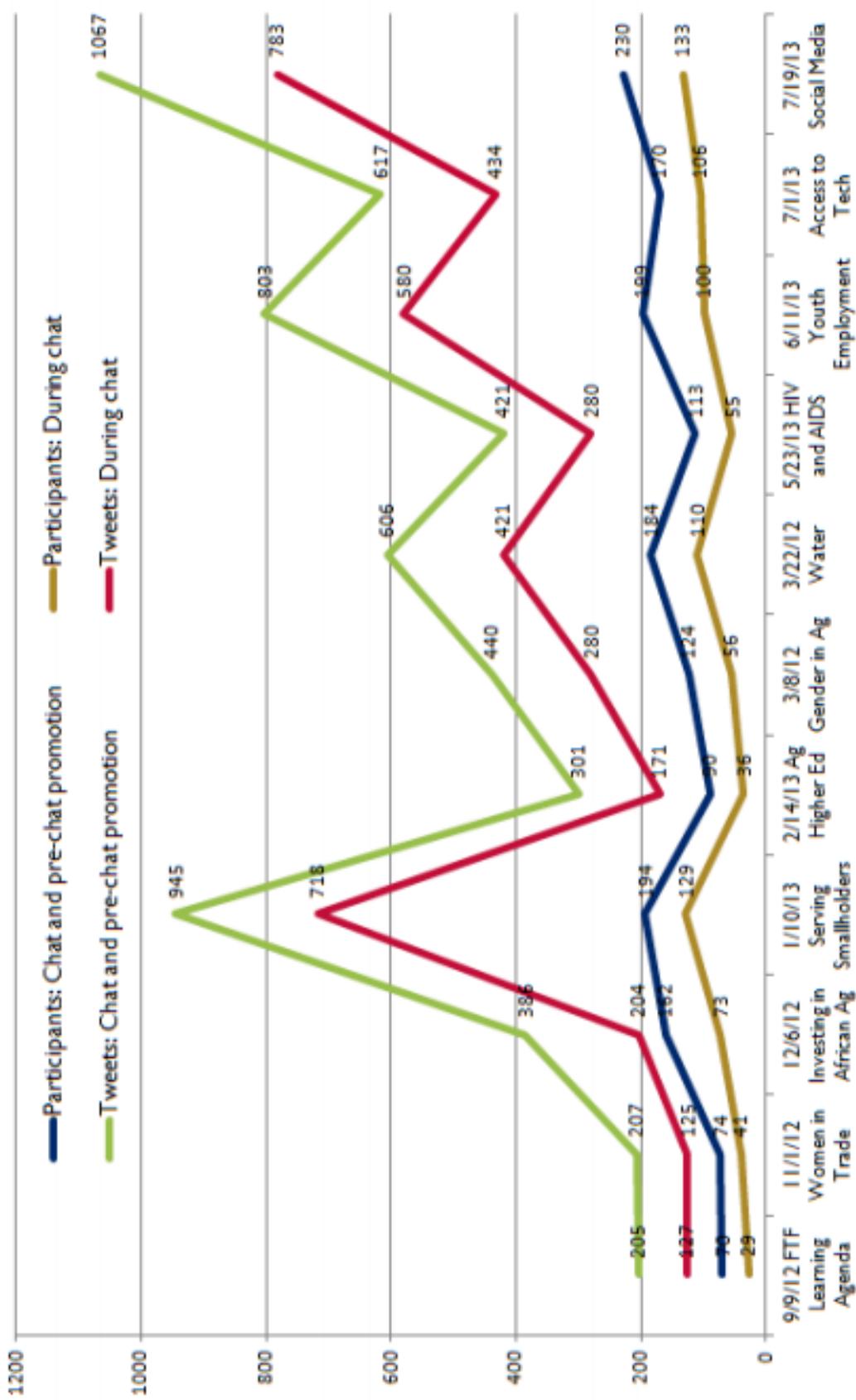
- Drive traffic back to Agrilinks

To meet these multifaceted needs, the KMDP project transitioned to a new format centered around several guiding questions to maximize discussion and dialogue among the audience as a whole. With this new approach, four to six guiding questions served to frame each conversation. The questions, posted at 15-minute intervals during the chat, generated responses from both the experts and participants. The 15-minute periods allowed for the entire user base to respond, ask follow-up questions, and engage further on a given sub-topic. Participants also still had access to ask direct questions to any of the experts. This enhanced format allowed for a robust conversation while still achieving the Q&A nature of the activity.

Evaluating Impact

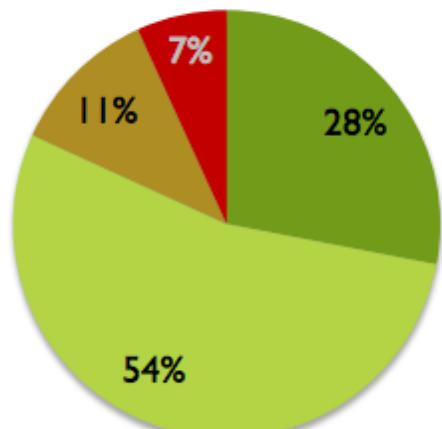
Twitter, like other social media platforms, presents certain challenges in terms of measuring “impact”. Although access to a number of quantitative indicators is available, a big part of social media’s value is its ability to generate substantive conversation and engagement. This latter component, however, is not as easy to measure. To gauge the impact of #AskAg Twitter Chats, the KMDP project collected both quantitative and qualitative data to reflect both sides of the story. Below are a few statistics from the first 12 #AskAg Twitter Chats undertaken by the KMDP project.

#AskAg Twitter Chats: Tweets and Participants



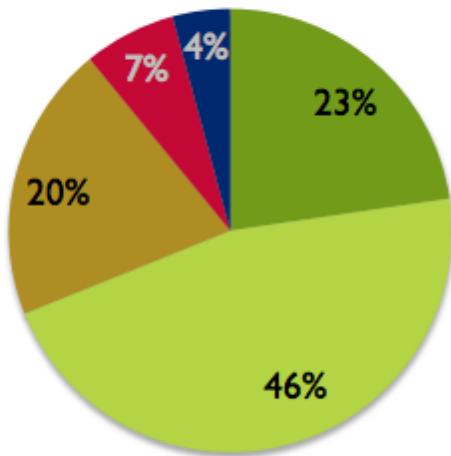
Chat	Participants: Chat and pre-chat promotion	Participants: During chat	Tweets: Chat and pre-chat promotion	Tweets: During chat
The Women's Empowerment in Agriculture Index (April 3, 2012)			Data not collected	
Feed the Future Learning Agenda (September 19, 2012)	70	29	205	127
Women in Cross-Border Agricultural Trade (November 1, 2012)	74	41	207	125
Making the Case for Investing in African Agriculture (December 6, 2012)	162	73	386	204
Serving the Poorest Smallholder Farmers (January 10, 2013)	194	129	945	718
Agricultural Higher Education (February 14, 2013)	90	36	301	171
Gender in Agriculture—Not Only About Women (March 8, 2013)	124	56	440	280
Water and Food Security Nexus (March 22, 2013)	184	110	606	421
Intersection of HIV and AIDS & Food Security (May 23, 2013)	113	55	421	280
Youth Employment in Agriculture (June 11, 2013)	199	100	803	580
Smallholder Access to Improved Technology (July 16, 2013)	170	106	617	434
Beyond promotion: Using Social Media for Development (September 19, 2013)	230	133	1067	783

Participation Assessment: I can apply what I learned to my work



■ Strongly Agree
■ Neutral
■ Strongly Disagree
■ Agree
■ Disagree

Participation Assessment: This was an effective format



■ Strongly Agree
■ Neutral
■ Strongly Disagree
■ Agree
■ Disagree

Conclusion

Overall, #AskAg Twitter Chats have succeeded in bringing people together to discuss various topics related to USAID's mission while also creating a network of like-minded development practitioners. Because they are fluid, #AskAg Chats continue to evolve to meet the needs of BFS's Twitter community, fostering increased engagement. Although it can be difficult to capture social media impact, through a combination of quantitative assessment, participant feedback, and documented interaction, the KDMD project and USAID have been able to see the powerful knowledge sharing capabilities and opportunities that Twitter Chats can offer.

The #AskAg Twitter Chats are now led by KDMD's successor, the Feed the Future Knowledge-Driven Agriculture Development (KDAD) project, and have been a driving force in setting a high standard within the development community for knowledge transfer, particularly among the online community. The chats have demonstrated tremendous value within the food security circles and have a high chance of being replicated within other sectors.

One defining lesson from this experience is that, contrary to Twitter's numerical valuations—followers, following, and tweets—both the KDMD project and the Feed the Future KDAD project have concluded that the numbers of people who join the chat are not as important as the rich conversation generated through the activity regardless of the amount of people.

Acknowledgement

The author of this paper would like to acknowledge anyone who has contributed to the #AskAg Twitter Chats in the past four years and most importantly my fellow architect Lindsay Levin, our USAID champion Zachary Baquet, the folks at the Feed the Future Knowledge-Driven Agricultural Development (KDAD) project who are still carrying on this activity, and finally the former members of the Knowledge-Driven Microenterprise Development (KDMD) project.

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Author's Biography

Maciej Chmielewski is an international development practitioner with over six years experience in communications, digital media, and knowledge management. He has worked for numerous USAID-funded knowledge management projects focusing on food security, microenterprise development, and institutional learning. Currently, he is the Online Media Strategist for the USAID/LEARN contract funded through the Learning, Evaluation, and Research Office within USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning. He received his bachelor's degree in Business Administration from Richmond, The American International University in London and a double Master's degree in European Studies from the Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland and the Palacky University in Olomouc, Czech Republic. To learn more about USAID/LEARN and the work USAID is doing with strategic learning and knowledge management, please visit www.usaidlearninglab.org/LEARN.