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Virtual Outreach: Using Social Media to Reach Spanish-speaking Agricultural Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Face-to-face outreach and in-person training have traditionally been key strategies in reaching agricultural producers, workers, and communities with safety and health information, but the COVID-19 pandemic has forced outreach educators to be creative and find alternative ways to reach, communicate, and share such information. In this commentary, we describe our use of social media to reach Latino/a cattle feedyard workers with COVID-19 related information. As a result of our effort, we reached over 54,000 people and demonstrated there is an audience for Spanish-language agricultural safety and health information. Social media can be a cost-effective method for virtual outreach in this new normal. We should look at this time as an opportunity to learn more about how our stakeholders obtain information and about how best we can connect with them. Although our outreach methods may be changing, our goal is not – we will continue to work to improve the safety and health of those who work in agriculture.

KEYWORDS

Latino/Hispanic; agricultural workers; cattle feedyard; feedlot; social media; outreach

Face-to-face outreach and in-person training conducted by the Central States Center for Agricultural Safety and Health (CS-CASH) have traditionally been key strategies in reaching agricultural producers, workers, and their communities with safety and health information. Recommendations on physical distancing and restrictions on personal contact resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic have forced outreach educators to be creative and to find alternative ways to reach, communicate, and share agricultural safety and health information with their stakeholder audiences. Disseminating research-based information, from trusted sources, is even more important for vulnerable workers who have traditionally been “hard to reach” even before COVID-19, such as Hispanic/Latino agricultural workers.¹

Supplementing face-to-face outreach, CS-CASH engages with agricultural producers, workers, and their families on social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Content on these platforms typically includes announcements for training opportunities, links to educational

materials on emerging or persistent issues, educational videos, and general agricultural safety and health information. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, English was the primary language used by CS-CASH on these platforms, even when the Center was promoting Spanish language materials; however, the inability to conduct “boots on the ground” outreach forced an evolution in thinking about how to effectively reach vulnerable worker populations, including Latino/a cattle feedyard workers, during times of physical distancing.

Social media can be an effective method for sharing occupational safety and health information.² The use of social media platforms to reach Hispanic/Latino workers with safety and health information has been discussed in other industries such as construction. A 2014 report by the Center for Construction Research and Training revealed that Facebook messages were critical sources of information for Hispanic construction workers.³

Data indicate that social media use among Hispanic/Latino adults is high. In fact, 70% of

Hispanic/Latino adults in the United States (U.S.) regularly use at least one social media site,⁴ and Facebook is the leader among social media sites with nearly 60% of Hispanic/Latino users accessing it at least daily.⁵ Although there has been much discussion on a “digital divide” among Hispanics/Latinos, nearly 90% of Hispanic/Latino adults born in the U.S. and almost 70% of foreign-born Hispanic/Latino adults own a smartphone, which they use to access the internet.⁶ As such, social media could be a promising strategy for reaching Hispanic/Latino farmworkers.

Latino/a immigrants comprise a large percentage of U.S. animal agriculture workers.⁷ A recent study highlighted that nearly 90% of Latino/a immigrant cattle feedyard workers were interested in learning more about safety and health issues related to their job.⁸ Therefore, responding to the need for reliable, trusted information on prevention of COVID-19 in the Hispanic/Latino community, the CS-CASH “Health and Safety among Immigrant Cattle Feedyard Workers” project team developed two bilingual infographics based on the most recent information from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) at the time about COVID-19 to educate Latino/a immigrant cattle feedlot workers and their families. The first infographic highlighted specific work-related practices in which one should engage to reduce their risk for contracting or transmitting COVID-19 at the feedyard. The second infographic provided ideas for workers to manage their stress and

anxiety associated with the pandemic. These infographics were created not just for social media but also to be able to be printed as a flyer to post at feedyards. These infographics provided actionable information for both workers and workplaces, and they could be easily scrolled through or zoomed in while using a mobile device. Figure 1 depicts the two infographics.

We used boosted Facebook posts (i.e., paid Facebook posts that were promoted to a specific target audience) from our CS-CASH Facebook page as the platform for our Spanish-language virtual outreach to Latino/a immigrant cattle feedyard workers. We invested a total of 454 USD in two boosted posts that ran twice between April 16, 2020 and May 31, 2020. Between the two posts, we reached 54,612 people and had nearly 3,000 post engagements during that time period (Table 1). Reach refers to the number of unique people who saw the content, and engagements refers to any actions that people may have taken such as reacting to the post, clicking a link, commenting, or sharing it with others. There were also 68 new likes to the CS-CASH Facebook page during this period, which is more than double the number of new likes on the page between January 1 to April 15, 2020. Even though the boosted posts only ran through the end of May 2020, people continue to engage with them, and we have reached almost another 10,000 people since the paid boost ended.

There are significant gaps that exist in education and outreach practices relative to language-,

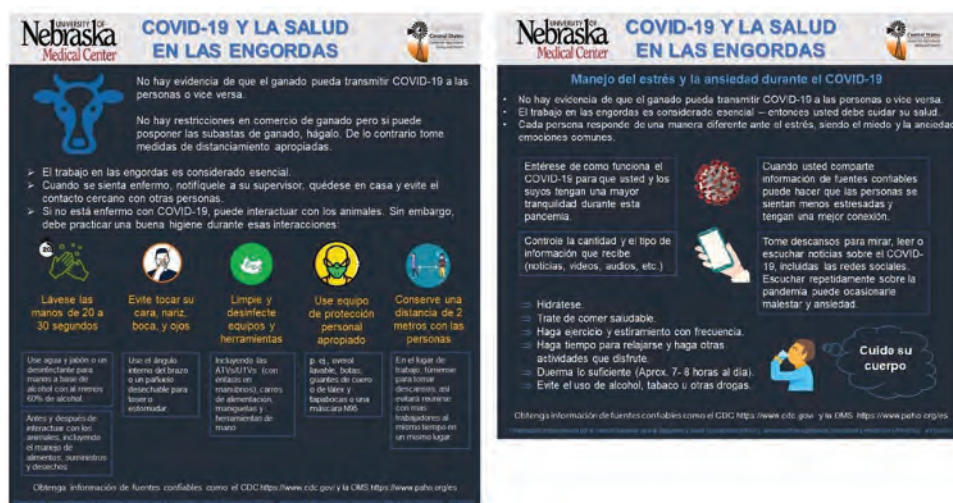


Figure 1. Spanish-language COVID-19 cattle feedyard worker infographics.

Table 1. Results of boosted Spanish-language COVID-19 Facebook posts.

Ad Set	Time 1: (April 16-May 4, 2020)			Time 2: (May 6–31, 2020)			Lifetime (through July 9, 2020)				
	Reach	Engagement	Cost per Engagement	Reach	Engagement	Cost per Engagement	Reach	Clicks	Reactions	Comments	Shares
COVID-19 prevention	21,984	1,053	\$0.14	16,844	826	\$0.18	41,660	3,186	463	18	172
Managing stress during COVID-19	8,518	563	\$0.10	7,062	497	\$0.20	22,050	2,715	236	9	91

culture-, and literacy-appropriate safety and health messaging for diverse agricultural workers.⁹ One cannot just translate materials and assume the audience will receive and understand the message. Translation is important; however, some materials and messages may need to be specifically designed for the intended worker population, considering culture, language, and literacy levels. Outreach educators also need to think about the communication channels and mediums that are going to be most effective in reaching the intended audience because there may be significant differences between groups on where they seek safety and health information. That is why it is so critical when developing messaging to understand the target audience – who are they, where are they, and what interests them – particularly when dependent upon algorithms to reach them.

Our first step in thinking about virtual outreach was to segment our audience. We were not trying to reach all Hispanics/Latinos, but instead a specific worker segment engaged in cattle production. Therefore, we targeted the posts to specific geographic areas where there were higher concentrations of cattle feedyards in Nebraska and Kansas. Then, we targeted the posts by ethnicity and acculturation status of the Facebook user (i.e., Hispanic – Spanish dominant) and by interests such as agriculture, cattle, Angus, immigration, and La Liga (referring to the professional Mexican soccer league, which was used because of the popularity of soccer within the culture). Once the post was published, we connected with influencers who regularly engaged with these farmworkers, such as staff from the migrant education program and bilingual Extension professionals to like and share the posts.

Our infographics reached over 54,000 people during the time of the paid Facebook boost and nearly 64,000 people through July 9, 2020. As evidenced by the number of engagements with

these Spanish-language COVID-19 posts, there is an audience for Spanish-language agricultural safety and health information on social media. In comparison, an English language COVID-19 post that was boosted within the same 30-day period as the Spanish language posts had a total of 141 engagements, 8 likes, 1 share at a total cost of 0.18 USD/engagement. If we are serious about improving the health and well-being of the agricultural workforce, we must produce and disseminate multilingual materials, especially those that address the changing workforce demographics and context of the work environment, emerging pathogens, and targeted occupational hazards. Social media can be a cost-effective strategy to reach a defined audience with targeted messaging,¹⁰ whereas conducting face-to-face outreach is much more time intensive and costly. For example, to host a booth at a farm show, there would be a registration fee, staff time, travel expenses, and costs for materials to disseminate. We acknowledge that online engagement may not be the same as in-person, and online reach may not equal effective comprehension of the information or translate into behavior change among end users, but virtual outreach is a promising strategy that can continue to be refined by outreach educators.

Targeting boosted Facebook posts can not only extend the reach of safety and health messages and grow an organization's social media followers, but it can also engage those who have been traditionally left out of agricultural safety and health communications and programming. Therefore, this is also a question of social justice, fairness, and equity in ensuring that all workers have access to critical information to protect and promote their health.¹¹ As a field, we have a duty to educate all workers about safety and health concerns, particularly during this pandemic, when our understanding of the virus and preventive strategies is constantly changing.

Virtual outreach may be a “new normal” moving forward. We should look at this time as an opportunity to learn more about how our stakeholders obtain information and how we can best connect with them. Although our outreach methods may be changing, our vision and goals are not. We will continue to envision and work diligently towards a vibrant agricultural sector in the U.S. where health and safety is highly valued and work-related injuries and illnesses are rare.

Disclosure statement

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