

Working the Web:
Web Searches, RSS feeds, Navigation and More

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Introduction

The Internet is an excellent way to obtain needed information. However, rapid changes in technology, the abundant and varied information available, as well as the increased mobility and interactivity allowed by the Internet can create challenges and difficulties in efficiently accessing and using the information on the web. Though not comprehensive, this presentation notes some of the current trends in Internet usage and seeks to help users to make more effective use of the Internet. The *AgManager.info* website is introduced and used as an example of some of the issues discussed.

A Few Current Trends

Rapid information obsolescence is one of the biggest trends affecting internet users. A useful aspect of the Internet is that it allows changes to be made and posted in a short amount of time. In the past, once a paper publication was produced, it was usually not revised or changed for a year, or often longer. Now, changes may be made to content daily or even faster. This may be both a blessing and a curse, since posting of new materials as well as frequent updates or revisions require users to spend time searching and reading the newest information.

Increasing mobility is another trend. The use of laptop computers, personal digital assistants (PDA) and cell phones with Internet access has contributed to the increase in speed and the demand for up-to-date materials, since these devices allow the user greater geographical flexibility and thus increase the time available for users to view information. This remote-access technology can be used in a number of ways. One example, in what is often considered a “developing” part of the world, is the use of text messaging in China by several government and private websites to send management suggestions and marketing information to farmers via cell phones.

A greater level of interactivity, as seen by the increase in blogs, wikis, live webinars and “YouTube” style video sites, places greater demands on users in terms of time, as well as the need to have access to and understand how to use the programs or websites with these features. Blogs (from “web logs”) allow users to interact with each other and/or with a moderator concerning a topic of interest. A wiki is “a website that allows visitors to add, remove, edit and change content.” (Wikipedia). This high level of interactivity has obvious advantages in allowing users to interact with each other and with specialists, but also requires an investment of time and technology.

A further trend is the move toward visual media. The Internet is rapidly becoming more visual, as video and graphics technology and software become more available. GIS technology is now used in a variety of ways. On *AgManager.info*, a grain basis tool with basis maps was developed in 2003 for providing grain basis information to users using GIS. Utilizing such features may require downloading and installing specialized software.

Most users of the internet tend to have a limited number of sites, usually six or less, that they regularly access and a large majority of internet users (more than 90%) go on-line to view a specific destination¹. This suggests that most people find a limited number of helpful sites, then use those sites optimally, with supplemental searches for additional needed information.

¹ Reade, Q. “Web Users Only Visit Six Sites”. March 6, 2006. <http://www.webuser.co.uk/news/81267.html?aff>. Accessed March 5, 2007.

Brief History of *AgManager.info*

Web delivery of extension materials in the Department of Agricultural Economics at K-State began in the late 1990's through individual faculty websites, which were generally organized around a specific topic or interest area such as crop risk management or livestock marketing. A departmental initiative to develop a single comprehensive web site covering all aspects of agricultural economics was launched in 2001 and the new site, entitled *AgManager.info*, went online in early 2002. Initially, the site's primary offerings included crop risk management, grain marketing and livestock marketing. This was followed by farm management and agricultural policy resources. In addition, upcoming events and conferences began to be publicized through this website.

As the site developed, more tools were added, including a grain basis tool, with associated charts and maps, taking the place of the periodically issued printed version. New topics were added as well, including agribusiness, human resources and energy. News updates now include interviews with extension faculty on the "Agriculture Today" radio program, downloadable as mp3 audio files, in addition to the routine grain and livestock market updates.

The *AgManager.info* website has become one of the most visited sites in the K-State Research and Extension system, currently receiving more than 50,000 visits per month, from more than 20,000 unique visitors. The most visited directory of pages on the site is the Livestock directory, which has a strong emphasis on livestock marketing updates and information. This is followed by Crops, which has a dual emphasis on crop insurance and grain outlook, complemented by the grain basis tool and maps. Next in order of use are the Farm Management, Upcoming Events, Agribusiness and Ag Policy sections.

Working the Web

There is much that could be discussed in this section but the discussion will be limited to just a few, including searching the web; RSS feeds and readers; navigation; using tools on *AgManager.info*; and a few miscellaneous topics.

Web Searches

Using the Internet effectively requires several skills. One of the most important is the ability to search for desired information quickly and efficiently. This has been helped greatly in recent years by advanced search directories such as Google². But sometimes it can still be difficult to sift through the maze of information that Google or other search tools presents. Some search tips that may be helpful in making your searches more effective:

² Note: mention of a website or software in this paper does not imply endorsement, but rather an example of what can be used. This is true for other sites or companies throughout the paper.

- Be as specific as possible in your search terms. Use the most unique terms possible.
- Enclose phrases in parentheses (“”)
- Word order matters: policy agricultural versus agricultural policy
- Use ‘OR’ (capital letters) for to find pages that include either of two search terms
- ‘+’ search, where the ‘+’ sign includes common words usually ignored (the, I, for, etc)
- To search for your term and any synonyms, use ‘~’ sign
- To search just one site, use the word ‘site:’ then the website to search following your search term. Example: farm bill site:AgManager.info
- To search for a number range: use 2 periods (..) between the upper and lower number. Example: DVD player \$50..\$100 to search for a DVD player that costs between \$50 and \$100.
- Fill in the blank search: use an asterisk (*) to answer something you don’t know. Example: Kansas State * will return results for Kansas State University, Kansas State Wildcats, Kansas State Fair, etc.
- Highlight a word on a website, right-click, and Google-search for it.

The settings for your search directory or engine are also important. Specifying the date(s), file format, or where terms appear on a page is possible and helps narrow and speed the search. Some search programs have advanced search links or windows that you can use as well.

RSS Feeds and Readers

RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds allow users to access information and updates without actually visiting each website to find specific information each time. Users can simply browse the RSS feed on their reader and if there is a topic of interest, they can then go directly to the site for the full article. Currently on *AgManager.info*, notification of new materials or tools is accomplished using email listserv lists, but in the future, RSS feeds will be used.

Websites create RSS feeds that can be subscribed to. When the content on the website changes, the news reader will retrieve and display changes. The user can then browse through the reader and select articles to read, rather than having to go to the website and find it. There are many news readers available including Yahoo, GoogleReader, NewzCrawler, FeedDemon, or NewsGator, among others. It is also possible to subscribe using Internet Explorer or Mozilla Firefox.

Sites with RSS feeds will have buttons such as those shown below:



To subscribe to an RSS feed from a website, there are several ways. If using a reader, the general steps to follow are:

- 1) Right-click an RSS/XML button on a website, then click **Copy Link Location** (Firefox) or **Copy Shortcut** (Internet Explorer).
- 2) Go to your News reader and choose to add new feed.

3) Past the URL in the appropriate box and click **Add**.

In Internet Explorer 7.0, click the RSS button in the Internet Explorer toolbar then choose a folder or create a new folder for the feed, then click **Subscribe**. If using Mozilla Firefox 2.0, click on an RSS/XML button on a site, then click **Subscribe Now**. Choose a folder or create a new folder for the feed, then click **OK**. Most readers offer various options for organizing the RSS feeds you have signed up for. Experiment with these to organize your material in the most useful way.

Web Navigation:

Navigating the web has become easier than in the early years. Links are generally well marked by text that is usually formatted to stand out (underline, bold, color). But with the enormous number of web sites available, good navigation techniques can still save time and effort. Many more choices are available than in the past and many users already have a set pattern of use, as previously noted

One of the most important keys in navigating the web is to bookmark a page once you have found something you plan to visit again. Even if you're not sure you will return, it is often useful to mark a page. The bookmark can later be deleted if it is not used. Using Internet Explorer, this is done using the "Favorites" command in the menu, then "Add to Favorites". In Mozilla Firefox, use the "Bookmarks" command in the menu, then "Bookmark This Page". In addition, use the "Advanced" tab in the "Internet Options" window on the "Tools" menu to check several settings in the "Browser" section, including "Use In-Line Auto-Complete" which will speed the process of typing in addresses of sites you have previously visited; "Enable Personalized Favorites Menu", which allows a computer with multiple users to have a personalized favorites menu for each person; and "Underline Links (Always)" to make links appear more clearly.

Use menus available on the site to move around. These are usually found at the top or on the left side, though they may be located elsewhere. Many sites will have a section of recent updates if they are frequently change, which allow the user to browse new materials without looking through the entire site.

The right-click on the mouse is very useful. This can be used to move forward and backward, to save files or pictures, to search, to add a shortcut or to bookmark the page, or to print. When positioned over a link, the right-click gives the user several options, including opening the page in a new window, saving it, printing it, or viewing the properties of the linked page.

Finding and Using Tools on *AgManager.info*

AgManager has eight primary topic areas, shown in the upper left side menu. Each area has multiple pages and levels. When you click on a topic area, you are taken to a page with further choices in that area. Crops and Livestock topics are the most extensive and go several levels down from the front page. A “Site Map” link at the top of each page provides an overview of the structure of the site, with pages linked directly on this map.

Below this primary topic menu on the left side are five other links, for Ag Econ News, Contributors, Programs, Sponsors, and Upcoming Events. The Ag Econ News and Upcoming Events links are the most active and most frequently updated. Information about “Contributors” is found through this link or a similar link at the top. Each contributor to AgManager has a personal profile with contact information and also upcoming presentations or events they will be involved with as well as links to articles and tools on the site by that person. On the site, names of authors are linked to these contributor pages, so that if you wish to contact an author of a paper with a question or comment, click on the name to get their information.

A “Site Updates” section on the right side of the front page is available, with current updates and the dates they were posted. These generally show the latest updates for the last 2-3 months. Older material is taken down from this area, but is still available on the website. Set bookmarks for new things that you find, so you can find them later, rather than rely on the front-page link.

Finding specific papers on the site can be done through the above menus or the “Site Updates” section or by looking through a specific author’s materials if you know who produced the material you are looking for. Another way if these do not work is by using the Search tool located in the upper right corner of the site. Type in your search terms and click the button. A new page with the search results comes up. Browse through these to find what you are looking for.

In the middle of the front-page are various graphics with links to events which are coming up in the near future. Click on one of these graphics and you will be taken to the page with a fuller explanation and details of the event. The top graphic in this area, with pictures surrounding AgManager has no link.

Materials available on the site generally fall into one of four categories: updates, including the “Grain Outlook” and “In the Cattle Markets”; data and charts, updated regularly, such as the “Livestock and Hay Charts” or “Grain Supply and Demand Charts”; research and white papers (these are the most numerous); and decision tools, generally in Excel, which allow users to input their own data. At last count, there were more than 70 decision tools available on AgManager, with offerings as diverse as “Crop Profitability Comparisons”, “On-Farm Storage”,

“Costs of Haying or Grazing CRP”, “Irrigation Energy Costs”, “Insurance Simulator”, “Crop and Livestock Cost-Return Budgets”, “Feeder Cattle Risk Management”, “Land Purchase and Leasing” and various machinery cost calculators.

Downloads

As the Internet develops, so does the need for software to make use of the sites and tools available. One of the first programs that should be downloaded is the free Adobe Reader, for reading PDF files. This is available at www.Adobe.com. Many websites now have information available in PDF files, which can be read, downloaded, or printed. Some sites, particularly game sites, or those with graphics, may require Adobe Shockwave (formerly Macromedia Shockwave), a multi-media player, or Adobe Flash player, for playing animation effects on a website. These are also available at the website above.

Other multi-media players include RealPlayer (www.RealPlayer.com), QuickTime (Apple’s multi-media software at www.Apple.com/quicktime/download), and Windows Media Player (www.microsoft.com). These programs can play audio files such as MP3 files and video files such as WMV, AVI, MPG files. For Firefox users, these programs are available on “Plug-ins” menu on the “Add-ons” page.

Communication through various media is also available. Instant messaging (sending written, audio or even video messages in real time) is one easy method of communicating with others. These services require the download of the IM program. Yahoo Messenger and MSN Messenger are two of the more popular. Phone conversations are also possible via the internet. One of the more popular services for this is Skype (www.skype.com).

Miscellaneous Items:

There are a number of miscellaneous topics that may be helpful for some users. These are presented in no particular order.

- It is important to have software to deal with viruses and other unwanted or malicious programs. A good free virus program is the AVG Anti-Virus, which can be downloaded at www.grisoft.com. Programs to remove spyware (software which tracks computer use or even keystrokes) can be downloaded at www.download.com. Free and paid versions of programs are often offered. Some are only for a certain time period; others are unlimited. Read the instructions carefully. Use a firewall if your browser does not have one (Windows XP has a built-in firewall).
- Be careful of spam (unwanted email) which sometimes has malicious intent, either through an attached virus or through “phishing”. Generally, do not open an attached file from someone you do not know and even from someone you know, be cautious unless you are reasonably sure what it is. Do not open a website from a source claiming to need updated information, even if it appears to be from a trusted place such as E-Bay or your bank. This is often a case of “phishing” where unscrupulous operators will try to gain access to personal information through this website.

- To evaluate possible hoaxes and urban legends: www.snopes.com
- For finding old sites or information that has been removed or changed: www.archive.org
- Keep programs updated. If using Windows, Microsoft releases updates on the 2nd Tuesday of each month. Most updates require the computer to be restarted after the update has been installed.
- Blogs provide an opportunity to interact with others who have similar interests. You can take part in sponsored blogs, hosted on a website such as the University of Illinois (<http://www.farmgate.uiuc.edu>), or you could start your own using one of several blog sites, including Blogspot (www.blogspot.com), Blogger (www.blogger.com), or Livejournal (www.livejournal.com). There are many others.
- There are many useful and fun programs to use such as map programs Mapquest, GoogleMaps, or YahooMaps. Satellite views of many parts of the world are available from GoogleEarth and on the map programs as well. News sites abound. Video sites such as YouTube provide entertaining and sometimes useful things.
- You are not limited to using only Microsoft's Internet Explorer for browsing the web. Others available are Mozilla Firefox (now version 2.0), available at <http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/> and Netscape (www.netscape.com). For Apple, the Safari browser 3.0 is now available in a beta version (www.Apple.com/safari).

Conclusion

Much can be accomplished using the Internet, but much time can also be wasted. Wise use of this resource can help and enhance your operation. A number of on-going trends affect use of the internet, including information obsolescence, increasing mobility, interactivity, and visual media.

Finding a limited number of good sites and then using them well is a key in using the internet. In addition, developing adequate search and navigation skills, aggregating information through the use of RSS readers and having appropriate software installed and understanding how to use it all assist in making effective use of the internet.

The AgManager (www.AgManager.info) website is an important source of information for agricultural producers and agribusiness managers. Decision tools, routine grain and livestock updates, data and charts, as well as research papers are presented on this site. In addition, extension faculty are available to help with additional questions via email or phone.