Social media offer fast, far-reaching and inexpensive communications tools for your business, whether you’re reaching out to customers, receiving alerts from Extension staff or discovering what’s on consumers’ minds.

“We really miss the boat if we ignore these new forms of mass communication,” says Robin Rosetta, an Oregon State University Extension educator in nursery integrated pest management. Rosetta has a Twitter feed as well as a longer-running listserv, or electronic mailing list, that complement her Web site’s pest, disease and weather news.

Each form creates challenges and opportunities. Twitter limits each message to 140 characters, while Facebook and YouTube expand communication possibilities into visual media.

“Twitter is more poetry than prose,” Rosetta says. That opens the door to more wordplay.

But its speed and brevity also is a boon for pest or weather alerts that demand quick action.

“One or two days can make all the difference,” she says.

Conversing with your audience

Social media allow businesses of all sizes to create conversations with their customers, not only about new products and other sales-focused information, but also about broader concerns.

The Maitland-based Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association has both a Twitter feed and a Facebook fan page aimed primarily at growers, says Lisa Lochridge, public affairs director.

“Because we are a membership association, first and foremost, we want to use it to communicate with our members,” she says.

But if there is an issue, such as food safety, that touches both growers and consumers, she says they’ll use both electric and print media to address concerns.

Of the two, Lochridge says Facebook is easier to start and maintain.

“The challenge with Twitter is to tweet regularly,” she says, referring to the term used for posting on Twitter. “You don’t want to bombard people but you want to let folks know you are there.”

One way Lochridge uses Twitter is to monitor conversations to see what the general public is saying about important issues, such as immigration.
Earlier this year, Plant City-based Wishnatzki Farms unveiled its new brand, Wish Farms. The launch included a redesigned Web site, Twitter feeds, a Facebook fan page, a blog and YouTube videos.

Most of the redesign was done in house, although the company sought outside help from the Tampa-based ChappellRoberts advertising agency for the videos, says Marcus Caswell, Wishnatzki Farms’ marketing representative.

The idea for the series of videos starring Pete the Pixie, who’s infatuated with Wish Farms’ mascot Misty, came from a series of round table discussions.

“How do you get that impact out to generate that bug?” Caswell asks. “Viral videos have been all the craze, and ours has taken on a life of its own.”

Videos are dubbed viral when viewers e-mail them to friends, quickly spreading them like a disease.

Caswell and Gary Wishnatzki, the operation’s owner, regularly tweet or post information on the Facebook fan page. They also write the blog, which is a short article, musing or prose.

“Gary was really wanting to make a splash with it and take an innovative approach,” Caswell says.

"How do you get that impact out to generate that bug?" asks Marcus Caswell. "Viral videos have been all the craze, and ours has taken on a life of its own!"
approach with it,” Caswell says of the digital media.
Wish Farms’ Facebook following has grown to more than 1,300 fans from about 50 last fall. Postings have ranged from how to decorate a “tuxedo” strawberry for a party to what entertainers are playing at the Strawberry Festival.
Their goal is to provide valuable information regularly to fans without inundating them, Caswell says, adding Facebook also is a good tool to receive consumer feedback.
“If you just put some useless information up there, nobody is going to chime in. They like the interaction,” he says.
Caswell says Wish Farms has even advertised on Facebook. The site allows you to target your message to specific demographic groups, such as females 25-64 years old who live in Florida and have the word “strawberries” in their profile.
Advertisers are only charged when a viewer clicks on the ad. But many more may see it without taking any action, he says.

Sorting out media uses
Gene McAvoy, a University of Florida multi-county vegetable Extension agent based in Immokalee, uses both Twitter and Facebook.
His Twitter account, under the moniker SWFLVegMan, has about 80 followers, and McAvoy says he’s still trying to figure out the best way to use it.
“I’m still trying to get my hands around that one,” he says. “What seems to happen is you get people from all over the country. It’s hard to get some type of focus. You get someone in California talking about peaches, someone is talking about cows from Illinois, and it doesn’t seem like you get a thread going.”
McAvoy says Facebook seems to offer a better venue. He established a Facebook fan page for the Hendry/Glades Farm Bureau about a few months ago and has more than 55 fans. With the fan option, people can post pictures but you can limit the amount of feedback they can provide.
“We’re trying to see if we can use it as a tool to give updates,” says McAvoy, who sits on the Farm Bureau board of directors.
But his best digital communication tool remains his listserv, which is a list of subscribers who sign up to receive his in-season weekly pest updates and other important news items.
Recipients representing more than 120,000 acres of farmland in south Florida have signed up to receive the South Florida Vegetable Pest and Disease Hotline, and McAvoy says he receives three to four requests for people to be added to the list daily.
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For links to the social media sites mentioned in this article, visit http://www.citrusandvegetable.com.