

# **Improving Business Communication: A Crucial Factor for Success Among Agro-Entrepreneurs in Georgia During the Post-Pandemic Era (with a Focus on Gender Aspects)**

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## **Abstract**

In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, this paper delves into the vital domain of agricultural communication, with a specific focus on the challenges confronted by agro-entrepreneurs in Georgia. In a world continually shaped by globalization and digitalization, effective communication has become indispensable in the agricultural sector. This study explores the evolving landscape of agricultural communication and its significance in the post-pandemic context. By examining insights from both developed and developing nations, the research seeks to identify the essential skills required by farmers and producers to not only sustain their farms but also thrive in the global marketplace.

The agricultural sector finds itself at a crossroads where traditional practices intersect with modern demands. Amidst the global integration of economies and the accelerating pace of digitalization, communication has emerged as a linchpin for success. The Covid-19 pandemic further underscored the urgency of effective communication, compelling agro-entrepreneurs to adapt swiftly to the changing dynamics of the market. This paper aims to unravel the

intricacies of agricultural communication, shedding light on the skills imperative for agro-entrepreneurs to fortify their businesses, enhance their production methods, and successfully market their products.

Our research adopts a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing Desk Research and In-Depth Interviews to delve into the core aspects of agricultural communication and content analysis. Focusing on key agricultural sectors, namely livestock, poultry, and vegetable industries, we conducted a total of 9 in-depth interviews. These interviews encompassed representatives from small, medium, and large farms within these sectors.

In our exploration, we hypothesized that media coverage predominantly highlights medium and large-scale farmers. To address the imbalance, we purposefully sought out representatives from small farms, recognizing their lack of visibility and limited access to communication resources. Random encounters at agricultural markets facilitated interviews with small-scale breeders, poultry farmers, and plant growers, offering valuable insights into their challenges and perspectives. For medium and large-scale entrepreneurs, we employed targeted methods. By using specific keywords like "farmer," "agro agriculture," "animal husbandry," "poultry farming," and "Poultry farming" in search engines, we identified potential interviewees mentioned in publications. Additionally, collaboration with municipal authorities provided leads to large and medium entrepreneurs, enabling us to approach them for interviews via telephone calls.

To conduct content analysis, we studied the media outlets named by the entrepreneurs. Through our key search terms: farmer; agro Agriculture; animal husbandry; poultry farming; Poultry farming; farmer; Egg: Chicken; meat: milk; wine: winemaking; honey; beekeeping; tea Horticulture: Nuts; nut; blueberry laurel tractor; covid pandemic (as the last two additional words). We found articles, news, interviews, and analyzed them. We examined materials published during the last 5 years (2019-2023), as the subject of our research is the problems created in agricultural communication during the Covid pandemic and the investigation of the post-pandemic reality. As a result of observing 3 media outlets, we reviewed a total of 78 articles.

It is significant to note that almost 50% of people involved in agriculture in Georgia are women. Our interviews were conducted with both female and male participants, although a preliminary hypothesis of our study is that female participants receive little or no media coverage.

### **Researches Strategie:**

The categorization of entrepreneurs into small, medium, and large scales was guided by the prevailing Georgia's tax code, effective since January 2011. According to this code:

**Small Entrepreneurs:** Individuals with an annual income not exceeding 500 thousand GEL.

**Medium Entrepreneurs:** Those with an annual turnover ranging from 500 thousand GEL to 1.5 million GEL.

**Large Entrepreneurs:** Individuals whose annual income surpasses 1.5 million GEL.

By employing a meticulous blend of random encounters and targeted searches, our research successfully incorporated the voices of small, medium, and large-scale entrepreneurs in the agricultural domain. This nuanced approach ensured a comprehensive understanding of the communication challenges faced by diverse farm sizes, enabling us to draw meaningful conclusions and recommendations from our study.

To accomplish our research objectives, a meticulously designed questionnaire was formulated for conducting in-depth interviews (please refer to the appendix for details). The selection of interview type was crucial in eliciting comprehensive insights from the participants. In this context, we opted for the multi-structured interview format. This approach involves the researcher preparing a set of questions in advance. However, unlike unstructured interviews, where informants are left to navigate the conversation independently, in a multi-structured interview, the questionnaire's author actively assists the interviewer. This collaborative approach was adopted to ensure maximal information retrieval from the participants, aligning with the depth and scope of our research objectives.

## Research Baseline

Researchers<sup>12</sup> have emphasized that agricultural communicators require not only technical proficiency in communication but also a comprehensive understanding of the agricultural domain. They stress the significance of identifying the audience, crafting targeted messages, and delivering them effectively for successful communication. Moreover, professional skills such as building trust, assuming responsibility, and fostering critical thinking are deemed essential for agricultural communicators.

In Georgia's agribusiness sector, a notable gender imbalance persists, with a substantial presence of women in the workforce often overshadowed by their limited visibility in the media. Despite the significant number of women actively engaged in agribusiness, they remain largely absent from interviews and media coverage, frequently overshadowed by male sources. This trend raises questions about representation and inclusivity within the industry's narrative. While this phenomenon is observed in Georgia, it prompts reflection on whether similar patterns exist globally, highlighting the need for increased attention to gender equity in agribusiness media coverage worldwide.

The utilization of social media platforms in agricultural marketing has surged<sup>13</sup>, with farmers predominantly relying on mobile phones for communication. Social media has emerged as a pivotal tool in agricultural marketing, offering substantial opportunities for selling agricultural products and enhancing customer relations. In their scholarly article titled "A Study on the Role of Social Media in Agriculture Marketing and its Scope," authors Bite Bhalchandra Balkrishna and Dr. Anand A. Deshmukh explore the transformative potential of information and communication technologies, particularly mobile phones, in advancing the agricultural sector. According to the

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<sup>12</sup> Fawn Kurtzo, Maggie Jo Hansen, K.Jill Rucher, Leslie D. Edgar. 2016. "Agricultural Communication: Perspectives From the Experts". Journal of Applied Communications.

<sup>13</sup> Win Morrays, Penri James. 2017. "Social media, an entrepreneurial opportunity for agriculture-based enterprises". Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development.

authors, adapting to these new tools necessitates the acquisition of novel skills and competencies.

Scientists have identified social media as the primary channel and tool for agricultural communication. Research findings indicate that social media platforms streamline the process of acquiring new information for farmers, saving both time and money. However, enhancing two-way communication hinges on improving mobile phone network coverage in rural areas.

In a comprehensive analysis of Georgia's media system, researchers have pinpointed key challenges hindering agro-communication for the Agricultural and Rural Development Project (ALCP)<sup>14</sup>. The challenges identified in this study encompass:

- Lack of awareness regarding the benefits of one's own model
- Limited proficiency in agro-communication and agro-journalism
- Scarce communication resources and challenges related to information accessibility
- Inadequate understanding of the target audience, coupled with a lack of audience studies
- Insufficient material and technical resources and equipment.

### **Communication Skills of Small Entrepreneurs: Challenges and Adaptations**

In-depth interviews conducted with small entrepreneurs underscore the diverse avenues they explore to gather information pertinent to their fields. For instance, Marina Cheishvili (woman), a plant grower residing in Kvitiri village, Tskaltubo municipality at the age of 50+, primarily relies on television broadcasts for her agricultural insights. In contrast, Ani Khvadagian (Woman), a 20 to 35 year-old poultry farmer from Nagarevi village, Terjoli municipality, turns to social networks for information. Similarly, Jay Mamashlisi, a 43-year-old shepherd from

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<sup>14</sup> Rachel Shah, Kate Fogelberg. "Developing Media Markets to Address Agricultural Constraints A case Study from the ALCP Georgia". "Springfield Centre". 2019.January.

Gumati village, Tskaltubo municipality, accesses relevant information through social networks.

These interviews highlighted a significant age-related discrepancy not only in the utilization of traditional versus alternative information sources but also in crisis management strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic, severely impacting product sales, compelled small entrepreneurs to adapt. Marina Cheishvili found her usual avenues for herb sales blocked, leading to financial distress. In contrast, Ani Khvadagiani and Jay Mamashlisi successfully transitioned to social media platforms to sustain their livelihoods.

Small entrepreneurs voiced dissatisfaction with the media's coverage of their industry. Marina Cheishvili, for instance, suggested airing specialized programs on horticulture and agriculture during evening television slots, aligning with her viewing hours. Despite being aware of online tutorials, she lacks internet access and the requisite skills to benefit from them. The absence of media contacts made it impossible for her to address a critical issue related to a purchased fertilizer that proved harmful.

Regarding state programs, small entrepreneurs exhibited varied awareness levels. Older entrepreneurs perceived SMS notifications about bank loans as beneficial, whereas younger entrepreneurs felt inadequately informed about available programs. Moreover, they emphasized the importance of not just receiving funds but also understanding their optimal utilization for farm development, such as acquiring fertilizers, expanding land, or hiring agronomists.

Small entrepreneurs unanimously agreed on the need for accessible information to enhance their communication skills. However, their perspectives on how this should be achieved differed. Older entrepreneurs advocated for agricultural-focused TV broadcasts featuring communication skill lessons. In contrast, younger entrepreneurs proposed a dedicated television channel specifically tailored to agricultural topics, providing essential skills and knowledge for entrepreneurs.

This disparity in opinions highlights the urgency for targeted communication strategies that cater to the diverse needs and age groups within the small entrepreneur community. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensuring the holistic development of the agricultural sector in Georgia.

### **Communication Skills of Average Entrepreneurs: Perspectives and Practices**

Our exploration into the communication practices of average entrepreneurs revealed diverse approaches within this group. For instance, Zurab Janelidze (Man), a 70 + year-old average grower, and the founder of "Herbia" in Tskaltubo municipality, obtains information about his field from various communication channels, including media sources. Similarly, Valida Tsertsvadze (woman), a 40 + -year-old average poultry farmer, primarily relies on the internet, books, and interactions with colleagues for information, excluding traditional media from his sources. Emiko Koghuashvili (man), an average breeder from Ofshkvit village, Tskaltubo municipality, uses social networks and occasionally turns to traditional media sources like TV channels "Imedi" and "Agrogaremo."

Regarding media coverage, there exists a spectrum of opinions among average entrepreneurs. Zurab Janelidze feels the agricultural sector needs more media attention, whereas Emiko Koghuashvili believes the existing coverage is adequate. While Valida Tsertsvadze agrees that the media portrays the sector well, he personally does not rely on media sources for his information needs.

Zurab Janelidze, the founder of both "Herbia" farm and "Gurian Product," maintains contacts with media producers and journalists, offering him the ability to reach out when necessary. Surprisingly, he has never contacted the media for his livestock-related issues, although he acknowledges the need to do so on multiple occasions.

Valida Tsertsvadze, the poultry farmer, appreciates the media's coverage of agriculture, even though he does not personally derive information from them. Conversely, the average grower, Zurab Janelidze, advocates for a systematic approach, proposing the creation of a comprehensive problem list within the agricultural sector.

He suggests involving media, state entities, and the private sector to address these issues collaboratively. Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of entrepreneur training through specialized programs aired on television channels, particularly for the medium livestock industry.

Regarding communication skills, both the plant grower, Zurab Janelidze, and the poultry farmer, Valida Tsertsvadze, express confidence in their abilities. Notably, the "Herbia" farm employs five individuals dedicated to public relations. Emiko Koghuashvili, the average breeder, believes that learning communication skills can be engaging and valuable, underscoring the importance of continuous improvement in this domain.

These diverse perspectives among average entrepreneurs underline the need for tailored communication strategies and educational initiatives, aligning with the specific requirements and outlooks within this vital sector.

### **Communication Strategies of Large Entrepreneurs: Diverse Approaches and Challenges**

Our research delved into the communication practices of large entrepreneurs, revealing a variety of sources they tap into for information. Mamuka Tsilosani, a significant figure in the cattle industry and owner of "Doran" farm in Akhmet municipality, exclusively relies on the milking association for information. In contrast, Ani Vashakidze, the Marketing Manager of the poultry company "Chirina Biu Biu Chicken Meat Production," utilizes Saxstat and the Revenue Service, highlighting the diverse channels available for large poultry farmers. Dimitri Bankanashvili, a large plant grower engaged in entrepreneurial activities in Sirnaghi municipality, accesses information primarily through the Internet.

When it comes to media preferences, Mamuka Tsilosani does not rely on any media outlet. Dimitri Bankanashvili occasionally watches the "B-MJ" channel, while Ani Vashakidze follows "Agro-environment" on television and engages with social networks, particularly the "Imedi" website.

Large entrepreneurs had varied opinions on media coverage within the agricultural sector. While Mamuka Tsilosani believes media involvement is sporadic, Ani Vashakidze feels the sector needs more attention. Dimitri Bankanashvili, on the other hand, thinks media coverage is insufficient.

In terms of communication skills, Ani Vashakidze, equipped with social media proficiency, utilizes these platforms to sell products and foster business relationships. Mamuka Tsilosani, although lacking a social media presence, believes he possesses adequate communication skills. Both these entrepreneurs have access to state programs. During the pandemic, while Mamuka Tsilosani remained unaffected, Ani Vashakidze's company adapted to digital platforms, enhancing their teamwork and flexibility.

Large entrepreneurs faced challenges during the pandemic, particularly related to artificially created shortages. For example, "Chirina Bu Bu Chicken Meat Production" encountered production disruptions due to shortages of masks and gloves. Procurement challenges arose, requiring additional funds and causing delays in orders.

Regarding the development of communication within the sector, opinions varied. Dimitri Bankanashvili stressed the importance of education, advocating for media involvement in promoting innovative ideas. Mamuka Tsilosani emphasized the need for media coverage to address sector issues, such as misleading consumer practices. Ani Vashakidze highlighted the importance of training sessions and continuous information exchange for technological progress and agricultural development.

These diverse perspectives underscore the multifaceted nature of communication challenges faced by large entrepreneurs, highlighting the need for tailored solutions and a proactive approach to addressing these issues within Georgia's agricultural landscape.

## **Content Analysis**

As part of our research, we conducted a content analysis of materials published between 2019 and 2023 in the field of agriculture across

three selected media outlets (Imedi TV, Agrogaremo TV and BMG). Utilizing search engines and specific keywords, we identified a total of 78 materials. The content predominantly focuses on the challenges or achievements of large entrepreneurs. Notably, the coverage of medium entrepreneurs is infrequent, and small entrepreneurs are entirely absent. For instance, among the 78 materials, we found 29 featuring large entrepreneurs, 11 featuring medium entrepreneurs, and none featuring small entrepreneurs. The materials underscore that communication skills are well-developed among large entrepreneurs, enabling them to articulate their challenges or successes effectively to journalists and audiences.

Of the 78 materials, 38 were published during the pandemic period, with the remaining 40 materials originating from the post-pandemic era. Addressing our research questions, we sought to determine during which period entrepreneurs exhibit more effective communication with the media and, consequently, with society at large. Empirical examples indicate that post-pandemic agribusiness representatives demonstrate enhanced communication skills, suggesting accrued benefits gained during the pandemic.

An alarming observation emerges regarding gender representation, as only 2 out of the 78 journalistic works feature women as sources. All other human sources cited in the materials are men, highlighting a pronounced gender imbalance in media content. This reinforces the need for increased efforts to address and rectify gender disparities in the portrayal of agribusiness professionals in the media.

## **Conclusion**

Based on the in-depth interviews conducted with entrepreneurs, it was revealed that farmers predominantly rely on traditional media channels for information related to their field. While some entrepreneurs mentioned social media as an information source, they also referred to the web pages of television stations. Notably, the study highlighted the significance of niche media (such as BMG and agro-environment) over mainstream media among the interviewed entrepreneurs.

The variation in information sources was linked to the age of the respondents. For instance, individuals aged over 60 primarily obtain information from television, whereas younger and middle-aged entrepreneurs tend to rely on social networks for their information needs.

Entrepreneurs expressed dissatisfaction with the media's attention to the agricultural sector, citing the poor quality of content provided to viewers.

Interestingly, our research findings aligned with those of a survey conducted by IRI Georgia. While the IRI study focused on gauging public trust in various media outlets, it coincided with our investigation in terms of media preferences and internet usage patterns. According to the IRI survey, 38% of respondents trusted TV Imedi, and 66% reported using the internet or social media almost every day, with Facebook being the platform of choice for 95% of respondents. Similarly, our interviewed entrepreneurs identified TV Imedi as a valuable information source, often accessed through social media channels. Additionally, during the Covid pandemic, these entrepreneurs extensively utilized Facebook for product sales.

Regarding communication skills, entrepreneurs were categorized into two groups: small entrepreneurs exhibited limited communication skills, whereas medium and large entrepreneurs either possessed these skills themselves or had dedicated PR employees. Small entrepreneurs, especially the younger ones, expressed the need for improved communication skills. They advocated for agricultural-focused television programs that provide lessons on effective communication.

The study validated the hypothesis that the digitalization of agribusiness during the pandemic had a moderately positive impact on agribusinesses, notably enhancing their communication skills. Additionally, hypothesis regarding the media favoring a gender imbalance in favor of men was substantiated. The media exhibited a tendency to either entirely omit or inadequately feature female sources in their coverage.

A notable insight emerged concerning innovation adoption. Entrepreneurs perceived innovations as potentially risky and tended to avoid them. Therefore, they emphasized the importance of media involvement in disseminating information about agricultural innovations. Farmers stressed the need for collaboration between media outlets and relevant state actors to facilitate training sessions and foster continuous information exchange. This collaborative effort, they believed, was essential for technological progress and the overall development of the agricultural sector. These findings resonate with the core tenets of our research, specifically emphasizing the role of constructive, problem-solving oriented journalism in addressing industry challenges and encouraging innovation adoption within the agricultural community.

#### **In-Depth Interview Questionnaire:**

1. Full Name:
2. Where do you primarily source information related to your field?
3. Which media platforms do you rely on for information: print media, radio, television, or social networks?
4. In your opinion, how effectively do the media cover topics related to your field?
5. Have you ever engaged with any media outlets? If yes, was it through personal connections or with the assistance of others?
6. What specific aspects do you believe the media should focus on regarding your field?
7. How confident do you feel about your communication skills and their impact on your professional success?
8. How frequently do you use social networks for both personal and professional purposes?
9. To what extent have social networks aided you in product sales and establishing business connections with partners?
10. How accessible is information about various programs initiated by state authorities for entrepreneurs to you?
11. How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected you and your farming operations?

12. Have you felt the need to acquire new communication skills due to changes brought about by the pandemic, and if so, have you been successful in doing so?
13. Could you recall any instances of misinformation spread by the media that had negative repercussions on your farming activities or the sale of your products?
14. In your opinion, what steps should be taken to help entrepreneurs acquire or enhance their communication skills, especially if they currently lack proficiency?
15. Age:
16. Gender:
17. Annual Income Bracket: a) Up to 500 thousand GEL b) 500 thousand to 1.5 million GEL c) Above 1.5 million GEL
18. Date of Interview:
19. Location of Interview:

**We conducted in-depth interviews in various sectors of agriculture:**

Horticulture:

Small Entrepreneur: Marina Cheishvili (Grower)

Location: Kvitiri village, Tskaltubo municipality

Age: 63

Date of Interview: 03/04/2023

Average Entrepreneur: Zurab Janelidze

Location: Tskaltubo city

Age: 55

Date of Interview: 05/04/2023

Large Entrepreneur: Dimitri Bankanashvili (Livestock Breeder)

Location: Sirnaghi municipality

Age: 31

Interview Form: Telephone

Date of Interview: 04/07/2023

Livestock Sector:

Small Entrepreneur: Jay Mamashlisi (Breeder)

Location: Gumati village, Tskaltubo municipality  
Age: 43  
Date of Interview: 04/05/2023  
Average Entrepreneur: Emiko Koghuashvili  
Location: Village Ofshkvit, Tskaltubo municipality  
Age: 56  
Date of Interview: 03/05/2023

Large Entrepreneur: Mamuka Tsilosani ("Doran" Farm)  
Location: Akhmet municipality  
Interview Form: Telephone  
Age: 60  
Date of Interview: 10/04/2023  
Poultry Sector:

Small Entrepreneur: Ani Khvadagiani (Poultry Farmer)  
Location: Village Nagarevi, Terjoli Municipality  
Age: 29  
Date of Interview: 09/04/2023

Average Entrepreneur: Valida Tsertsvadze (Poultry Farmer)  
Location: Ozureghti municipality  
Interview Form: Telephone  
Age: 42  
Date of Interview: 12/04/2023

Large Entrepreneur: Ani Vashakidze (Marketing Manager, "Chirina  
Biu Biu Chicken Meat Production")  
Location: Interview conducted via email questionnaire  
Age: 28  
Date of Interview: 11/04/2023

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