

VIUS Reports 3.4

Agricultural Sciences Focus Group

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INTRODUCTION and PURPOSE

As part of the follow-up assessment phase of the Visual Image User Study (VIUS), the VIUS team held an Agricultural Sciences faculty focus group in April 2003 on the Penn State University Park campus. Participating in the focus group were five Penn State faculty members, along with three members of the VIUS project team. The five Ag Sciences faculty members were from ag engineering (two), ag extension (two), and poultry science (one). One of the VIUS members presented a demo of a digital image management tools (the CONTENTdm™ software package) being used in the project; that was discussed during the session. The session, like all VIUS focus groups, was audiotaped with the permission of the participants.

The VIUS project has employed a broad variety of user studies of faculty and students in nearly 70 departments in the arts, humanities, and environmental studies. One finding of these assessments has been, as might have been expected, that faculty in art, art history, architecture, and related departments use the largest numbers of *pictures*. However – more interestingly to members of the VIUS team – in terms of proportions of *individuals who use* digital images, faculty in agriculture (along with faculty in earth and mineral sciences) stand out as being more than twice as likely to be users as their colleagues in other disciplines.

Because that result was something of a surprise to the members of the project team, this focus group was conducted. The purpose was to explore reasons that agricultural sciences faculty have adopted the use of digital images to such an extent.

FINDINGS

In brief, for the most part, the findings were not startling.

The individuals participating in this discussion indicated that they use images because they are comfortable with the technology; because there is an expectation in their fields (among peers and audiences) for presentation using digital images; because of the practical advantages of digital images (for example, they can be more readily manipulated through cropping, zooming, and so on); and because appropriate images are available.

One unique and relevant twist echoes the history of funding and resource allocation in Penn State's College of Agricultural Sciences; as described below, it suggests that the commitment and availability of resources is a pertinent factor.

College of Ag Sciences – an “Early Adopter” of IT. Because of a combination of state and federal grant monies, and a strategic decision by the leadership of the college, in the mid- to late-1980s Ag Sciences faculty and staff began building a forward-looking IT infrastructure for communicating across the College and the Commonwealth. This resulted in, for example, capabilities for CD-ROM development, computer training, computer support, networking, Web services, and the like.

For about a decade, that hardware, software, and human resources investment established the College of Ag Sciences as an early IT adopter among its peers nationally and among other Penn State colleges. Also, the College built a digital image library. Therefore, even though, as one participant noted, “a lot of the good stuff is still not digital” (meaning that, for example, that slides are still a very useful and necessary technology), there was and is “a good starting resource to build on.”

Current College IT Resources and Support. While the gap between Ag Sciences and other units has probably closed in the past five to ten years, the positive effects are still being felt within that College. One of the focus group participants noted that his College was and remains “technology friendly,” and that this has probably been significant in terms of encouraging and enabling digital image use by its faculty and staff.

The respondents said that the College’s central computing and publications support unit, ICT (the Office of Information & Communication Technologies), is a positive factor but not critically important at this point for them personally. One faculty member believes every department has “at least one, good key resource person” and for this reason “ICT is ok but not really the only resource.”

Disciplinary Norms. Several participants noted that in agriculture, and especially in ag extension work, there is an emphasis on presentation to audiences of all sorts (that is, including but not limited to students). Because of this, there is heavy reliance on tools such as PowerPoint presentations. This is not seen as anything cutting-edge; it is just the way these faculty and their peers, in higher education, government, and industry operate. The ramifications of this are fairly obvious: individuals use images basically to “stay current,” and can “help each other” to step up the learning curve.

Tools. Several participants commented that they do not feel that they are particularly sophisticated in terms of the tools they use. Several talked about the power and advantages of using digital cameras. Every participant was comfortable with PowerPoint. One mentioned a software package called Portfolio which he described as a relatively simple tool that he uses for organizing (labeling and adding metadata to) his personal digital image collection. Several said that they put their most important images on CDs, in two formats (high resolution and low resolution).

Discussion of CONTENTdm™. One of the five participants had seen CONTENTdm™ previously. The reaction of all was basically positive; they were interested. Comments included points that have been made in other demos of this and similar packages:

- Any package should include an easily used tool for moving data to other packages – especially PowerPoint.
- It's important to include key data about the image as well as the image itself.
- Intellectual property/rights management issues remain; the participants do not believe these concerns have been totally resolved.
- Capability for different resolution levels is important.