

Effective Use of Facebook for Extension Professionals

Abstract

As the use of social media increases, Extension is challenged to stay relevant with clientele by using digital tools. This article illustrates how Facebook can be part of Extension's repertoire of methods for communication, program implementation, education, and marketing. This allows professionals to build social networking capacity with their clientele online and transfer that social capital to the off-line world. The capacity of Facebook users to develop Groups and Pages allows those with specific interests to connect for education, sharing, and socialization. Extension professionals should consider the opportunities provided by Facebook and how it can affect their program delivery.

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Introduction

Facebook is a social networking site that has become an increasingly used method of communication, networking, and information gathering. The notion that lower income families have limited access to Internet resources due to the "digital divide" is not as relevant as in the past (Kudryavtsev, Krasny, Ferenz, & Babcock, 2007). Many Extension professionals underestimate the technological savvy of their clients; however, Guenther and Swan (2001) found that Extension clientele are using more electronic technology than college students. A North Carolina study found that survey respondents believe digital technology should be an integrated part of Extension programming (Alston, Hilton, English, Elbert, & Wakefield, 2012).

Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe (2007) found that that connections formed through Facebook supported relationships and connectivity in the offline world. The value of these relationships is termed "social capital," which has been shown to build individual and community capacity (Coleman, 1988). Facebook has the potential to enhance Extension's ability to build relationships and establish networks with clientele.

Overview

Facebook is dynamic and has changed in look and content since its formation (Facebook, 2011). This makes learning effective methods of using Facebook to enhance delivery of Extension programming

difficult. However, with Facebook's continuing increase in users and use, Extension professionals will find it a useful tool for communication, education and marketing (Kinsey, 2010).

This widely used social media tool offers Extension professionals a cost-effective method of communication with clientele while empowering social connections and long-term engagement in Extension programs (O'Neill, Zumwalt, & Bechman, 2012). The Internet is an effective means of developing new connections between people with similar interests (Horrigan, 2002; Parks & Floyd, 1996). Facebook messages from Extension personnel offer the opportunity to update followers on available programs and provide relevant information on a daily basis. The comment, message, and "like" options built into Facebook's framework offer clientele opportunities to engage with the Extension professional. Online connections often result in offline connections. Parks and Floyd (1996) found that one-third of study participants moved from online discussion to face-to-face interactions.

Building Connections Through Facebook

Facebook emphasizes relationship building (Waters, Burnett, Lamm, & Lucas, 2009). The benefits of networks built through interaction and shared experience is termed social capital (Coleman, 1988). Extension outreach can be strengthened through development of these networks and connections. Facebook usage can be a predictor of increased social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). The informal networks that are maintained through this outlet broaden personal communication and interactions and potentially strengthen social capital. This underscores the opportunity for Extension to capitalize on Facebook and move people from online information gatherers to involved and engaged volunteers and leaders. Facebook can be a tool to inform local community residents about extension programs and volunteer opportunities.

Communities benefit from strong social connections between residents. Extension professionals who use Facebook create, develop, and sustain connections between individuals and the community. Facebook interactions can be beneficial in enlarging the network of volunteers and supporters of local program goals. Farrow and Yuan (2011) found in a survey of 3,085 university alumni that active Facebook communication was a positive predictor of greater communication and emotional connectivity. The result of these connections was to effect behavior by positively impacting levels of volunteerism and charitable giving.

Education Through Facebook

Educational efforts can be enhanced through the use of Facebook Groups and Pages. Groups can be created around specific topical areas to generate interest and allow individuals to join together to share information, opinions, and ideas (Pineda, 2010). Privacy controls allow the group's administrator to control who can join and participate. Anyone who is a member of the group may interact and share information. Pages are for organizations, public figures, and businesses and are similar in format to profiles. A Page is visible to everyone on the Internet. Anyone may join a page for information and interaction. Administrators of Pages should be official representatives of the organization.

With increasing demands on time, attending Extension programs in a traditional format may not meet clientele needs. Guenther and Swan (2001) suggest that electronic technology may offer

opportunities for educational programming. Professionals can post educational articles and links to reliable information on Groups and Pages. For example, a professional can start a Facebook Group for couponing or an online site for a committee to share their efforts. A Facebook Page can be created as the official site for the Extension professional that provides educational resources clientele. Pages allow administrators to create simple surveys that are answered and tabulated online. This is useful in gathering information from online clientele. Professionals can reach a large number of clients with relevant educational material that immediately addresses the needs of individuals and families using Facebook.

Marketing Through Facebook

The use of Facebook allows Extension professionals to expand their marketing efforts. Effective marketing can aid the Extension professional in reaching a larger and more diverse audience. A Florida survey of Extension agents (Telg, Irani, Hurst, & Kistler, 2007) found that word of mouth and online marketing were the two most commonly used forms of program promotion. Facebook allows Extension professionals to combine these two useful marketing methods. Educational and program content that is posted online can be targeted directly to clientele as well as shared between clients. This increases the number of people receiving the information as well as the "lifespan" of the information. The ease of sharing encourages users to pass along educational content or programming opportunities.

Whether posting a program or information, one important key to successful marketing is having messages and images that create memorability (Maddy & Kealy, 1998). When posting content online, be as consistent as possible in the language and graphics used. The goal is for people to quickly recognize postings by Extension and view them or share with others. Create a signature line or signature picture that brands Extension programs. Always follow the marketing and branding guidelines established by your university Extension program.

Conclusion

Extension professionals who make thoughtful use of Facebook have the ability to greatly expand the impact of their programming efforts. This impact can be multi-dimensional through the sharing of educational information, establishing and improving communication, and marketing both Extension and its programs. Online Extension education does not substitute for offline contact, but can support and enhance the connectivity between clients and the Extension service. Using Facebook may help the professional meet the needs of audiences from diverse geographic, social, and economic backgrounds. As a free social media site, Facebook offers a cost-effective way to reach out to new and traditional audiences in a manner that is relevant, easily accessible, and timely.

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