

Journal of Extension

Volume 55 | Number 4

Article 24

8-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Davis, J., & Dishon, K. (2017). Unique Approach to Creating and Implementing a Social Media Strategic Plan. *Journal of Extension*, 55(4), Article 24. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol55/iss4/24>

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Unique Approach to Creating and Implementing a Social Media Strategic Plan

Abstract

Social media is a valuable communication, outreach, and marketing tool, yet Extension educators often underutilize social media due to concerns related to lack of guidance and perceived risks. This article showcases a unique approach to creating a social media strategic plan that applies best practices from the field of marketing and addresses Extension educators' apprehensions about using social media. The development and implementation of a statewide plan provided opportunities for each Extension educator to support the plan in varying meaningful ways according to his or her time availability, interest, and comfort level.

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Introduction

There is sufficient research to support Extension educators' use of social media as a communication, outreach, and marketing tool (Cooper, Cox, & Corbin, 2012; Cornelisse et al., 2011; Kinsey, 2010). However, Extension professionals have been apprehensive about adopting social media as a professional communication tool (Hill, 2015). Newbury, Humphreys, and Fuess (2014) examined the barriers that prevent Extension educators from using social media in their work. The researchers found that Extension educators perceived many risks related to using social media without sufficient supports, such as training, guidelines, or information on best practices. In addition, research has shown that Extension educators worry about the risk of commingling their personal and professional lives by using social media (Hill, 2014; Newbury et al., 2014).

Armed with an understanding of Extension educators' apprehensiveness about using social media professionally and up-to-date market research, a team of county Extension professionals developed a social media strategic plan for the Oregon 4-H program. This article describes the unique approach the team used to encourage Extension professionals with varying levels of social media expertise to support that strategic plan.

Oregon 4-H Social Media Strategic Plan Development

In 2010, the Oregon 4-H program established a policy for using Facebook pages as communication, outreach, and marketing tools. However, in spring 2014, a pivotal market research report, *Taking Stock with Teens*, revealed that Instagram had replaced Facebook as teens' preferred social media platform (Piper Jaffray, 2014).

This shift in use generated a need to develop a cross-platform strategic marketing plan for social media. A grassroots committee of county Extension educators readdressed and built on the 2010 policy to create the Oregon 4-H Social Media Strategic Plan.

The objectives of the plan are to support the use of additional social media platforms and to provide Oregon 4-H staff and faculty with concise resources for

- promoting youth- and adult-led marketing of the Oregon 4-H program on social media platforms of their choosing to increase awareness among their peers of the Oregon 4-H program and its events;
- increasing awareness of county, regional, and state events; and
- creating consistency of social media practices and efforts within the Oregon 4-H program to best achieve the aforementioned objectives.

The strategic plan focuses on promotion of youth- and adult-led social media marketing in order to increase user-generated content. User-generated content is information shared by one's peers on social media platforms through status updates, photo posts, and tweets. A study conducted by Ipsos MediaCT (2014) found that millennials are 50% more likely to trust information shared by their peers than information on media driven by companies and organizations. In addition, content shared by peers is 35% more memorable than content shared by other means and keeps users engaged longer (Ipsos MediaCT, 2014).

The strategy for promoting youth- and adult-led social media marketing involved developing and promoting a hashtag for the Oregon 4-H program (#Oregon4h) and standardizing hashtags for county 4-H programs. According to Lee (2015), "Tweets with hashtags receive 2X more engagement than those without hashtags ("Hashtags on Twitter," para. 4)." Whereas Twitter reaches a hashtag saturation point after two hashtags, other platforms, such as Instagram, actually increase engagement with each additional hashtag, even with 11 or more hashtags on each post (Lee, 2015). By promoting the standardized hashtags through existing means of communication (e.g., newsletters, Facebook posts, emails), Extension professionals are able to support the strategy without opening a new social media account or using a personal account.

As noted, the 2010 Oregon 4-H social media policy applied solely to Facebook use. Since 2010, a number of other social media platforms have grown in popularity and are widely used by Extension clients. Therefore, the 2014 Oregon 4-H Social Media Strategic Plan supports the use of multiple social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and Pinterest) by providing guidelines for consistent account usernames and profile descriptions. This approach promotes continuity and uniformity across the state. Lastly, the Oregon 4-H Social Media Strategic Plan includes best practices for posting (related to timing, frequency, type of material, and hashtag use) and examples of posts tailored for each social media platform.

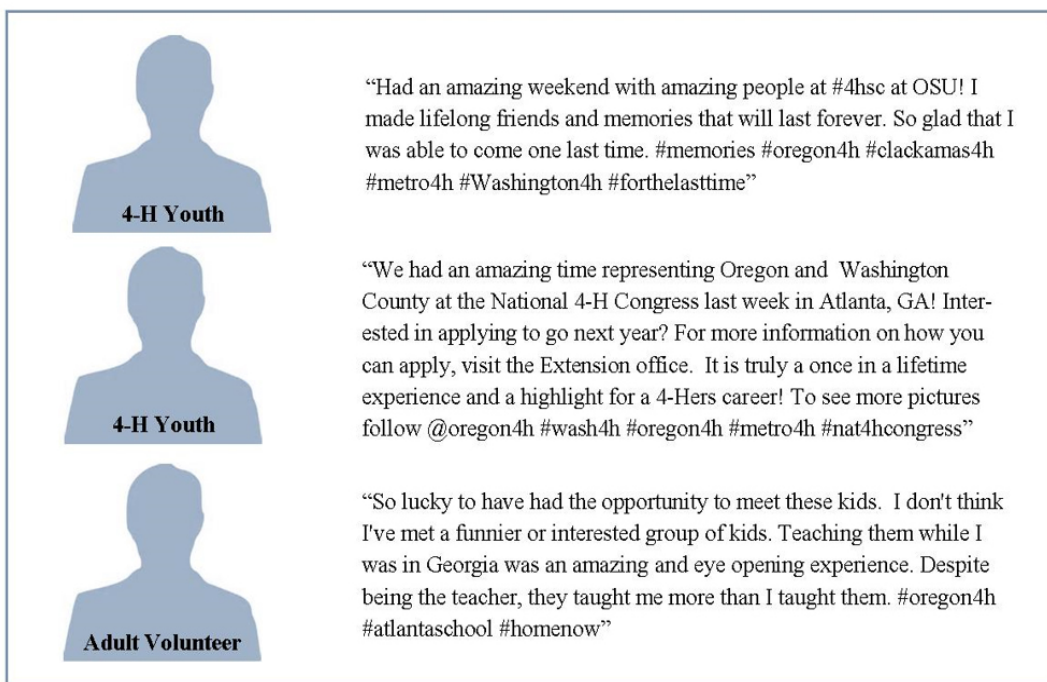
Evaluation of Objectives

Since its inception, the Oregon 4-H hashtag #Oregon4h has far exceeded 2,000 unique posts over multiple platforms; examples are provided in Figure 1. Standardizing hashtags for the county 4-H programs has resulted in widespread use of those hashtags as well. Of the 36 Oregon counties, all standardized county hashtags have been used on at least one of the social media platforms. Over two thirds of these posts and tweets were made by 4-H members and volunteers. Additionally, the Oregon 4-H Instagram page has over

1,000 engaged followers. Of the 36 counties in Oregon, 21 counties have opened and maintain a county Instagram page.

Figure 1.

Examples of Youth- and Adult-Led Social Media Marketing Using Standardized Hashtags



Recommendations for Implementation

It is important to note that hashtags are not proprietary. Using a hashtag for a purpose different from the one originally intended is referred to as "hashtag hijacking." Hashtag hijacking is not a common issue and often is done not out of ill intent but by accident. This accidental hijacking often takes place when a generic or ambiguous hashtag is created and has more than one applicable use. To decrease the risk of hashtag hijacking, make hashtags as specific, but as concise, as possible. Also, prior to promoting the use of a hashtag, check to see whether it is already being used by accessing a free online resource such as tagboard.com.

Social media is a rapidly developing field that demands attention and a strategic plan. Using market research is vital to success and worth the effort to obtain. We have found that many marketing companies allow people or entities to request copies of reports to download for free if they meet certain criteria.

Conclusion

The unique approach to creating a social media strategic plan described here has allowed Extension professionals to support the use of social media for marketing a 4-H program in a meaningful way, without requiring that any individual use a personal social media account. In addition, carrying out the objectives of the plan has not required Extension educators to learn a new social media platform, yet support has been provided to those who wish to do so.

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