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Developing a Marketing Mind-Set: Training and Mentoring for County Extension Employees

Christopher T. Sneed
University of Tennessee, csneed@utk.edu

Amy Hastings Elizer
University of Tennessee, aelizer@utk.edu

Shirley Hastings
University of Tennessee, hastings@utk.edu

Michael Barry
University of Tennessee, mbarry@utk.edu

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Developing a Marketing Mind-Set: Training and Mentoring for County Extension Employees

Abstract

Marketing the county Extension program is a critical responsibility of the entire county staff. This article describes a unique peer-to-peer training and mentoring program developed to assist county Extension staff in improving marketing skills and successfully developing and implementing a county Extension marketing plan. Data demonstrating success of this program are presented. Additionally, best practices for states wishing to create a similar peer-to-peer program conclude the article.

Christopher T. Sneed
Extension Specialist I
The University of
Tennessee Extension
Knoxville, Tennessee
csneed@utk.edu

Amy Hastings Elizer
Extension Agent III
and County Director
The University of
Tennessee Extension
Jackson, Tennessee
aelizer@utk.edu

Shirley Hastings
Director of Strategic
Planning
The University of
Tennessee Extension
Knoxville, Tennessee
hastings@utk.edu

Michael Barry
Extension Agent III
and County Director
The University of
Tennessee Extension
Nashville, Tennessee
mbarry@utk.edu

Since the seminal work of Kotler and Levy (1969), nonprofits have realized the importance of commercial marketing tactics, adapting them for their organizations (Andreasen, 2012). For Extension, marketing has been identified as a critical responsibility for the entire Extension staff (Varea-Hammond, 2004), necessary for increasing visibility and communicating the value of Extension. This responsibility, although recognized as favorable and important, can be challenging given most Extension employees lack formal marketing training (Telg, Irani, Hurst, & Kistler, 2007).

This article describes a unique peer-to-peer training developed by The University of Tennessee Extension to assist county Extension employees in developing and implementing county Extension marketing plans.

Program Background

An online survey conducted with 488 county Extension employees assessed their capacity for marketing Extension. A majority (92%) indicated having the view that marketing Extension is very important. Yet many respondents viewed marketing to be difficult (44%) and an area in which they were only somewhat effective (58%). Results pointed to a need for training on developing county Extension marketing plans as well as opportunities for skill building.

Program Implementation

A marketing program comprising face-to-face trainings and mentorship was developed. The following resources informed development of the program:

- Berger, J. (2013). *Contagious: Why things catch on*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
- Blanchard, K., Bowles, S., & Mackay, H. (1993). *Raving fans: A revolutionary approach to customer service*. New York, NY: William Morrow.
- Cockrum, J. (2011). *Free marketing: 101 low and no-cost ways to grow your business, online and off*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Fox, V. (2012). *Marketing in the age of Google*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.
- Patterson, K., Grenny, J., Maxfield, D., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2007). *Influencer: The power to change anything*. Chicago, IL: McGraw-Hill.
- Pulizzi, J. (2013). *Epic content marketing: How to tell a different story, break through the clutter, and win more customers by marketing less*. Chicago, IL: McGraw-Hill.
- Wilson, J. R. (1994). *Word-of-mouth marketing*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

The program was unique in that design and implementation were peer-driven by a statewide team of county Extension agents and regional specialists. Team members were identified by state Extension administration on the basis of their expertise in Extension marketing and their recognized marketing successes.

The project included two components: (a) 2-day marketing trainings held in each Extension region and (b) marketing mentoring with 30- and 60-day follow-ups. All members of the county offices participated in the training.

One month prior to the training, each office was assigned a marketing mentor. The mentors were members of the program implementation team and had an average of 19.5 years of Extension experience. The mentors participated in the trainings, with their county groups serving as sounding boards and resources for the county staff.

During the 2-day training, participants received instruction on topics identified through the needs assessment (Table 1).

Table 1.
Training Topics

Day 1	Day 2
Marketing 101	Improving customer service
Creating a county marketing plan	Involving volunteers in marketing
Using social media	Getting television media coverage
Writing for news media	Working with elected officials

- Writing newsletters and blogs
 - Work on county marketing plan
 - Using Extension logos appropriately
 - Creating video
 - Using photography
-

Instruction was peer-led by members of the statewide team and addressed the topics through a practical application lens. The marketing 101 session focused on the marketing cycle as it relates to Extension planning and evaluation. The session on using social media included examples of social media's impact and simple ways to implement this tool. Time was allocated for participants to develop social media plans for their offices. During the media sessions, participants learned how to spin an Extension event or success story to create media interest. Strategies for writing effective press releases and media notifications were provided. Additionally, participants refined their media skills through mock television interviews. The customer service session involved an array of topics, including dealing with disgruntled clients, phone etiquette, and professionalism. During the session involving volunteers in marketing, participants received an overview of the importance of word-of-mouth marketing. They worked within their office to develop an intentional word-of-mouth marketing plan. This plan included specific steps for using volunteers in word-of-mouth marketing. Finally, as a key component of the training, county offices were guided through the process of creating a marketing plan. This plan included a strategy for engaging elected officials, cross-marketing, use of Extension branding, and development of an elevator pitch. A majority of the second day was allotted for county staff to collaborate in finalizing their marketing plan.

Program Evaluation

Pretraining assessments were administered on days 1 and 2. Using a 5-point Likert scale, participants reported the extent to which they engaged in marketing tasks before the training. In all, 103 participants completed this assessment on the first day; 92 completed it on the second day.

A posttraining assessment was administered to participants 6 months after the training. A total of 58 participants completed the posttraining assessment.

Mean scores and standard deviations were computed. To determine whether pre- and posttraining responses were significantly different, an independent samples *t*-test with a Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = .005$) was run. Participants reported a significant increase (pretraining to posttraining) in marketing the overall Extension program (Table 2).

Table 2.
Marketing of Overall Extension Program

Action	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i> value
Market overall program (pretraining)	2.93	.836	$p < .001$

Market overall program 3.93 .961
(posttraining)

Additionally, there were significant increases in participants' use of social media and their consistent use of the Extension logo (Table 3).

Table 3.

Use of Social Media, News Columns, Press Releases,
Extension Logo, Videography, Photography

Action	M	SD	p value
Use social media (pretraining)	2.96	1.19	$p < .001$
Use social media (posttraining)	3.77	1.21	
Write news columns (pretraining)	2.08	.960	$p = .356$
Write news columns (posttraining)	2.29	1.40	
Write press releases (pretraining)	2.27	1.04	$p = .725$
Write press releases (posttraining)	2.19	1.40	
Consistently use current Extension logos (pretraining)	3.48	1.19	$p < .001$
Consistently use current Extension logos (posttraining)	4.48	.894	
Use videography (pretraining)	1.68	.789	$p = .008$
Use videography (posttraining)	1.25	.912	
Use photography (pretraining)	2.85	1.20	$p = .703$
Use photography (posttraining)	2.95	1.45	

For topics covered on the second day, participants reported significant increases in providing positive customer service experiences, creating a word-of-mouth marketing plan, using volunteers in marketing, and contacting news media outlets (Table 4).

Table 4.

Customer Service, Word-of-Mouth (WOM) Plan,
Volunteers in Marketing, News Outlets

Action	M	SD	p value
Provide positive customer service experience (pretraining)	4.10	.885	$p < .001$
Provide positive customer service experience (posttraining)	4.61	.648	
Create WOM plan (pretraining)	2.40	1.01	$p < .001$
Create WOM post (posttraining)	3.47	1.04	
Use volunteers in marketing (pretraining)	2.38	.972	$p < .001$
Use volunteers in marketing (posttraining)	3.07	1.12	
Contact news media outlet (pretraining)	3.02	1.10	$p < .001$
Contact news media outlet (posttraining)	3.88	1.24	

As part of the 6-month follow-up assessments, participants were asked about their experiences working with their marketing mentors. Using a 4-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*), participants reported satisfaction in working with their mentors, increased knowledge about Extension marketing, and improved marketing efforts (Table 5).

Table 5.

Work with Marketing Mentor

Scale item	M	SD
I was satisfied with our marketing mentor.	3.32	.508
I learned a lot about Extension marketing from our marketing mentor.	3.00	.701

The marketing mentor helped our county improve its marketing efforts.

Implications

For states wishing to conduct a similar training, the following best practices are offered:

- *Involve the entire office.* Extension marketing is not just the responsibility of the Extension office director (Varea-Hammond, 2004). Instead, it is a responsibility of every office member. Agents certainly have a vested interest in marketing Extension programming. However, administrative assistants must be included in marketing trainings as they are critical to successful marketing efforts. Administrative assistants are typically the first contact clients have with Extension. Additionally, administrative assistants are often tasked with creating marketing materials for specific Extension programs. Including administrative assistants in trainings allowed them to better understand Extension branding and effective strategies for creating marketing materials. Finally, administrative assistants can be instrumental in cross-marketing Extension programs. Through cross-marketing, Extension clientele can be introduced to other subject matter addressed by Extension as well as other Extension programs.
- *Allow time for work.* The hectic and varied schedules of Extension employees can be roadblocks to collaborative planning. Incorporating planning time is critical, especially given that marketing successes hinge on well-developed plans (Whalen & Boush, 2014).
- *Think big picture and small details.* Instructing participants on the importance of Extension marketing as well as the components of a marketing plan were important. However, time was also provided for participants to learn specific skills necessary for implementing the marketing plan.
- *Follow up.* At 30 and 60 days, marketing mentors followed up with their counties. During these follow-ups, counties reported their progress. Additionally, marketing mentors helped counties troubleshoot challenges faced in implementing the marketing plan. Such challenges included difficulty in establishing media relationships, confusion surrounding new Extension branding and proper use of the branding, identification of volunteers to use in word-of-mouth marketing, and development of county impact reports. The mentors helped with these challenges by drawing on their own marketing experiences as well as the experiences of the other mentors. In certain cases, specifically those involving media networking and branding, mentors were able to refer county staff to appropriate specialists in marketing and communications for additional help.
- *Utilize peer instruction.* For this program, the peer instructors were viewed as credible individuals who knew what it was like to navigate and balance the numerous demands faced by county Extension employees.

The future of Extension hinges on our ability to market—to effectively tell the story of Extension, our educational programs, and the impact those programs have on our communities. Unique training approaches such as the ones described in this article are essential to empowering Extension's personnel with the knowledge, tools, and skills necessary to market Extension.

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