De-Stress Your County Fair—Let Technology Do the Work!

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Abstract: 4-H agents face increasing demands to support traditional 4-H programs while adding new programming for new audiences. Without increased funding to hire additional staff, it becomes essential to streamline the facilitation of activities. To address this situation, the Union County 4-H program implemented fair management software to create efficiencies in the facilitation of the 4-H county fair and regional livestock show. The new software has reduced staff labor by over 60%, reduced pre-show preparation by 34%, and improved problem solving and increased accuracy.

Introduction

Extension offices everywhere face similar challenges in providing the same (or increased) level of services without having an increase in staff resources. Clientele typically expect traditional programming to be supported despite the increasing demands on staff time. County fair is a traditional event that has been supported by Extension since the early 1900s (Diem & Rothenburger, 2001). 4-H agents are typically still expected to manage the local 4-H county fair and livestock shows in addition to adding new program opportunities to meet new audiences.

The county fair experience is an important part of 4-H youth development. It provides a way for youth to showcase their project work, receive recognition for their efforts, and develop leadership and teamwork skills (Diem & Rothenburger, 2001). A study conducted on the positive youth development outcomes from youth participation in the county fair (Arnold, Meinhold, Skubinna, & Ashton, 2007) supports the need for 4-H agents to continue providing the 4-H fair experience as part of their programming. So how do 4-H agents meet these demands? The 4-H agent in Union County, Oregon, accepted this challenge as an opportunity to utilize technology to streamline and create efficiencies in a traditional program—the county fair.

Background

In Union County, Oregon, the 4-H agent is responsible for two livestock shows in a 6-week span. The first is the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show, a 6-day show drawing approximately 680 4-H and FFA exhibitors from throughout the state. The show includes a horse and livestock show, junior market auction, conformation judging contests and presentations. The second show is the county fair, which averages 325 exhibitors and encompasses traditional exhibits as well as a junior market auction.

The 4-H agent and program assistant plan and facilitate all 4-H activities for both shows as well as provide the clerical support for market animal weigh in and junior auction for both 4-H and FFA exhibitors. The 4-H office serves as the central point for preparing show materials, collecting entries, producing clerk sheets and exhibitor lists, entering class results, and tallying points for awards. Staff also produces the auction sale order of market animals. This consists of blending all market class placings from separate shows (4-H and FFA) into a combined auction sale order that ranks the best quality animals at the top of the sale list.

In 2002 the 4-H agent made the decision to find computer software that could help automate the paperwork required for the shows. The number of hours for paid staff time, as well as the level of stress involved, had become unmanageable. A variety of software programs were tested. The process was not always smooth, or a time saver, but perseverance paid off and today Union County has an automated system that works great.

Software Implementation

The software package selected was ShoWorks, comprehensive fair management software. It provides the level of programming needed to support livestock shows, junior auctions, special contests, and static exhibits typically entered at county fair. Today, through use of this software, facilitation of these events has become manageable and even fun. It has also allowed staff to implement new procedures that ensure more accuracy, as well as outsourcing to volunteers some of the more laborious tasks such as exhibitor registration.

With ShoWorks, 4-H leaders, FFA Advisors, and out-of-county agents can input entries through the Union County 4-H Web site. The exhibitor database transfers forward each year so names and addresses only have to be updated for changes, a task completed by those making entries. Exhibitors can receive a printout of their classes on show day, which allows for any last-minute changes. Up-to-date clerk sheets can be printed at the show, easing the anxiety of parents, exhibitors, and superintendents. Show results are now entered as classes are completed, and the auction sale order is created and printed within hours of the final market class. This allows potential buyers to have the sale list a full day prior to the auction.

Contrary to pre-automation days, 4-H staff members are now working 10-12 hour days at the show versus 16-18 hours. Additionally, the time spent pre- and post-show has been greatly reduced. Exhibitor points for selecting all-around awards can easily be tallied and printed for award programs, instead of frantically flipping through clerk sheets and adding scores by hand. The final results of the show can be emailed to media immediately following the last day of the show. Staff now have all results entered daily throughout the show, eliminating after-show entry of results.

An additional advantage is cost savings. Entry forms, premium books, and instruction letters are now posted on the county 4-H Web site, thus cutting costs in paper, printing and mailing.

ShoWorks 2006 advertises that it is the largest and most widely used fair management software for the desktop. It also supports online entries with over 10 years of proven dependability. The software is Microsoft Access based, so it allows for customization of all reports and queries, as well as building reports and forms from scratch. This feature was important for the Union County volunteers, who were accustomed to the format of traditional clerk sheets and reports. A feature called "quick entries" provides staff with the flexibility to sort class placings in a variety of ways to allow for rapid entry of results. More detailed information about the software can be found at <http://www.fairsoftware.com/>.

Conclusion

Through 7 years of testing, the Union County 4-H Extension Program has proven that using technology to

automate the livestock show and county fair works. By using ShoWorks, we have:

- Reduced staff labor by over 60%,

- Improved problem-solving abilities,

- Increased accuracy,

- Reduced pre-show preparation by 34%,

- Eliminated post-show data entry, and

- Empowered others to input entries and update databases.

Automating the county fair by using fair management software programs can make this event manageable and less stressful for all involved. These efficiencies will free up time for 4-H agents to focus their energy on developing new educational experiences for youth.

References

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