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Using Local Farmer's Markets to Promote Extension Programming

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Using Local Farmer's Markets to Promote Extension Programming

Abstract

A booth at the farmers' market was set up in Bozeman, Montana during 2007 to promote Extension activities at Montana State University. This was a highly effective, low time-input and cost-effective method of promoting Extension activities to an audience that is often not aware of the resources available from Extension programs. It is recommended that other states use this as a model for promoting Extension programming in their communities.

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Background

As Extension seeks to remain relevant in the 21st century (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004) we need to be creative in how we make the public aware of our activities and the impact they make in the community. Montana has seen a significant increase in urban population since 1990, particularly in the western mountain region (Swanson, 2005). The focus and amount of time county agents and Extension staff spend on urban issues is increasing. In addition, as resources get tighter and government demands that Extension defend its continued funding, urban populations can be an important source of support at the local, regional, state, and national level (McGrath, Conway, & Johnson, 2007). Extension specialists need new venues to promote their programming to an urban audience. One way we can reach a broad audience not generally exposed to Extension activities is through our local farmers' markets.

Methods

In 2007, the author set up a booth each Saturday morning at the farmers' market in Bozeman, Montana. The author or a representative of the Schutter Diagnostic Laboratory (the Montana State University lab for plant, disease, and weed identification) set up the booth. A "special guest" was invited whose research or Extension program was featured. A press release was sent to the local papers announcing the special topic and encouraging people to bring diseased plants, insects, or weeds they would like identified.

Guests were asked to bring publications or brochures about their program as well as hands-on or visual materials. Example topics included insect identification, soil fertility, weed identification and management, native turfgrasses for the lawn, plants for the home landscape, beekeeping, plant diseases, and a local television show supported by Extension, *Montana Ag Live*. In addition to materials provided by the guest each week, Extension publications called "MontGuides" and fact sheets covering topics of interest to the urban community were displayed and available for people to take with them. We also kept a campus telephone book on hand and referred questions we could not answer to the appropriate specialists.

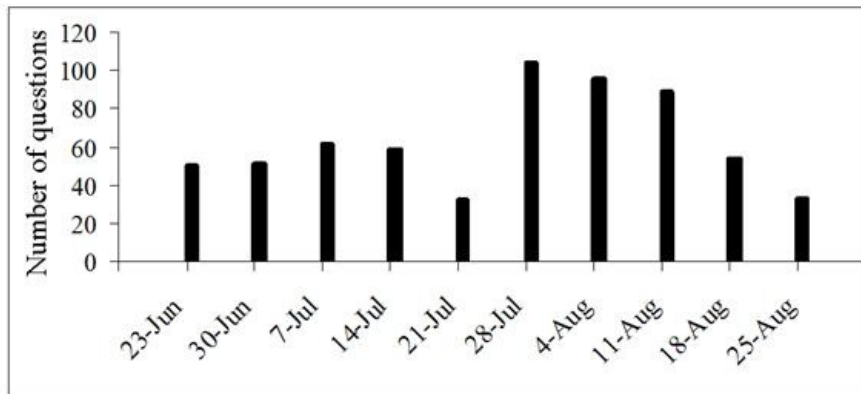
The startup costs for this activity were minimal. Booth space was donated by the farmers' market each week. Equipment purchased included a tent, a table and chairs, a box file to organize Extension publications, and several plastic holders for brochures and signs indicating the topic of the day. Extension publications (MontGuides) and some promotional items such as pens with Extension logos and banners for the booth were provided free-of-charge by the Montana State

Results

The number of questions varied throughout the summer (Figure 1). The lowest number of questions was received on July 21st, most likely due to overall low attendance at the farmers' market that day. The first press release was published in local papers prior to the July 28th farmers' market, and the number of questions greatly increased on that day and during the subsequent two weeks (Figure 1). In total, we counted 628 questions and distributed hundreds of Extension publications and fact sheets. Many people stopped to pick up publications but did not ask any questions.

Figure 1

Number of Questions Asked at the Montana State University Extension Promotional Booth During Each Week of the Farmers' Market in Bozeman, Montana During 2007



Some of the most common questions asked during 2007 were about pests of concern in the community. These were: cottony ash psyllids, how to control ants, diagnosis and control of fire blight in apples, spruce budworm control, and weed identification and control. Another frequent question was: "What is Extension?" The audience was diverse, from homeowners who wanted to control weeds on their property without using herbicides to those who wanted to know what insecticide to drench their harmless ants with. It provided an opportunity to promote integrated pest management and sustainability.

Some of the most popular Extension publications people selected were horticultural, including how to grow tomatoes, raspberries, garlic, and spruce trees in Montana. Other popular topics included Richardson ground squirrel control, spider identification, control of knapweed, and a list of soil testing agencies.

By far the most popular display was on insects. The insect display was particularly well liked among children, whose parents took the opportunity to ask questions. Other displays included plugs of native turfgrasses from lawns, bee keeping tools, a fertilizer display, trees and shrubs that do well in Montana, and samples of common plant diseases.

Positive Aspects of This Activity

- Highly visible.
- Reached an audience that might otherwise not be aware of Extension activities.
- Provided a friendly and convenient location to get the public's questions answered, especially plant disease, insect and weed identification.
- Increased public awareness of the Schutter Diagnostic Laboratory as a free service.
- A good opportunity for Extension Specialists to interact and learn more about each other's programs.
- Questions asked that helped Extension Specialists to identify and prioritize needs for publications and press releases.
- Popularity with market coordinators, who recognized that the booth drew people to the farmers' market who otherwise may not have come.
- Popularity with the special guests, who enjoyed their time and expressed a willingness to do it again next year.

Improvements of the Booth for 2008

- A greater diversity of topics covered by guests, including community development, food stamp and farmers' market program, nutrition, and food safety.
- Inclusion of graduate students as guests, giving them an Extension experience.
- More colorful, interactive displays to draw people into the booth.
- A digital microscope and laptop to look at samples.
- A "pest of the week" and "tip of the week" dry-erase board with seasonally relevant or invasive pests and landscape tips.

Conclusion

This booth was used as an example of a high-profile, low-input Extension activity in various presentations by the author, including the American Phytopathological Society meetings in San Diego, California (Burrows & Lanier, 2007). At least nine other states have Master Gardeners who set up booths to answer gardening questions at farmers' markets (Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Maryland, Missouri, New York, Tennessee, Washington, and Wisconsin) based on a survey of diagnostic clinics. However, no other state uses a farmers' market booth to promote Extension programs to the author's knowledge.

The impact of this activity is difficult to quantify, but a great number of visitors to the booth expressed their thanks for the information they received, and many people visited the booth several times. Together these indicate the community goodwill engendered by our efforts and the usefulness of the information visitors obtained.

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