Innovation Is Key for Technology-Based Outreach

James R. Jasinski
Ohio State University Extension, jasinki.4@osu.edu

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Abstract
The Ohio State University (OSU) funded an outreach and engagement grant to design the Gardeners' Toolshed, a garden center kiosk. The kiosk represented a unique opportunity for OSU to introduce itself to the citizens of Ohio in the area of gardening and pest management. The kiosk is a touch-screen-enabled computer with specific content in 14 areas ranging from plants to water gardens. This project was piloted in a garden center in southwest Ohio for just over 1 year. A user survey revealed they were quite pleased with the overall user interface, appearance, and informational content of the kiosk.

James R. Jasinski
Extension Educator Integrated Pest Management Program
Ohio State University Extension
Urbana, Ohio
Jasinski.4@osu.edu

Innovation plus Technology Equals Outreach

Technology has become a part of our everyday lives, from ATM's and online bill paying to self scan check out lanes at the grocery store. As Extension educators, being able to harness the momentum and direction of technology could lead to expansion of our educational mission into new clientele markets.

In Ohio, gardening is a very popular leisure activity, and training Master Gardeners (MG) is one of our most successful programs, with over 3,800 certified MG and approximately 600 MG being trained on an annual statewide basis (Pam Bennett, personal communication). Combining the passion that many Ohio citizens have toward gardening, a computer interface focused on gardening and landscaping, and a university goal of expanded outreach education led to the design and creation of a Garden Center Kiosk.

There were two basic goals of this project: to raise awareness in communities away from the campus in Columbus that Ohio State University (OSU) has a positive impact on their lives, while at the same time providing unbiased research based information on a variety of gardening topics, including pest management using technology.

So This Is a Kiosk

The kiosk itself is called the "Gardeners' Toolshed" and consists of an iMac computer encased in a clear acrylic cuboid, measuring 34" high x 22" deep x 20" wide (Figure 1). The inside of the enclosure is covered with four posters facing outward displaying gardening tools, flowers, fruits, vegetables, and the OSU logo. The computer has a touch-sensitive LCD screen that extends above the top of the enclosure that visually invites users (garden center patrons) to interact with it.

Figure 1.
Kiosk Placed at Meadow View Garden Center. Note the LCD Screen Above and Printer Inside the Cutout on the Front Panel.

The computer runs a series of hypertext markup language (html) pages offline using a common Web browser, so users think they are online when in fact they are not connected to the Internet at all. Future versions of the kiosk will be online capable if the garden center has a high-speed Internet connection to allow for specific information searches and a "how to garden" series of videos. A laserjet printer is housed inside the enclosure with a slot cut into the front panel to allow printed pages to be removed.

The initial screen is composed of 14 sections; Annuals, Backyard Fruit, Insects, Trees & Shrubs, Gardening Basics, Ornamental Grasses, Lawn Care, Vegetables, Bulbs, Herbs, Perennials, Water Gardens, Plant Diseases, House Plants, Roses, and Local Extension Offices. Each section has several layers of content "below" the initial screen for users to navigate through simply by tapping on the screen with their finger in the appropriate area. Each layer has educational content derived from university fact sheets that users can print off at no charge. Users can find help on many subjects from plant selection or evaluating their options, including pesticides, for their pest problem. The kiosk's content and navigation are originally from the University of Illinois but have been modified to suit Ohio conditions by several state specialists.

The garden center kiosk project was initially funded in 2002 from an OSU Outreach and Engagement grant. In the spring of 2003 the kiosk was placed in a garden center in Centerville, Ohio. The staff were trained on how to use the kiosk and given a manual on how to restart the kiosk in case of a malfunction or power outage. In addition to the on-site training, the staff was encouraged to use the kiosk for their own edification when business slowed down. A survey was attached to the kiosk inviting users to evaluate its performance and usefulness. The following are results from the 20 surveys returned.

Survey Says

The most visited categories were Insects, Herbs, and Perennials, with Annuals, Plant Diseases, and Roses all tied for fourth. When asked what attracted users to the kiosk, 45% responded its shape, 35% its affiliation with OSU, and 50% its overall "curb appeal." Responses do not add up to 100% because of multiple choices for the answer. In terms of how long users visited the kiosk, 50% responded between 2-5 minutes, 25% between 6-10 minutes, 15% over 10 minutes, and 10% under 1 minute.

All respondents thought the kiosk was user friendly and added value to the garden center. Seventy percent of surveys indicated they would visit the kiosk again if they returned to the garden center. Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated they were able to find the answer to a question they had concerning gardening. Only 10% of surveys indicated using the touch screen was difficult. Twenty-five percent of respondents indicated they were looking for information related to pesticides.

Sixty-seven percent of the respondents thought that a color display was necessary, and the print quality was rated good or excellent by 40% of users. Sixty percent of kiosk users were familiar with Ohioline, OSU's online fact sheet database, and the same percentage has used OSU Extension services before. Sixty-five percent of respondents said they would mention the kiosk to their neighbors, and only 25% categorized themselves as computer savvy. Fifty percent of respondents would like to see the addition of "how to" video clips on gardening and pest management topics. Last, some comments about the kiosk included "beautiful look," "more specific information," "it's a great learning tool, thanks!," and "good graphics added."

Wrap Up

The kiosk was removed from the garden center in the fall of 2004 after the pilot project expired.

Although the kiosk performed well in this trial, parts of the operating system and original kiosk software needed to be fine-tuned. These bugs have since been addressed by upgrades to both the operating system and kiosk software, and the unit is currently waiting placement in another garden center to continue its mission of providing research based information to garden center clientele. The next step in the outreach process involves expanding the number of kiosks to other garden centers in the state.

In summary, the garden center kiosk concept seems to have found a niche in providing gardeners access to research-based information in a very convenient, user-friendly, and non-threatening way. At the same time, the kiosk provided the staff of the garden center with an opportunity to expand their area of expertise at appropriate times. Extension educators should be encouraged to experiment with new information delivery systems in non-traditional outlets to leverage both university recognition and outreach to audiences who undoubtedly welcome Extension programming.