

8-1-2006

Evaluation of an E-Learning Online Pecan Management Course

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Recommended Citation

Stafne, E. T., McCraw, B., & Mulder, P. G. (2006). Evaluation of an E-Learning Online Pecan Management Course. *The Journal of Extension*, 44(4), Article 30. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol44/iss4/30>

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August 2006 // Volume 44 // Number 4 // Tools of the Trade // 4TOT7



PREVIOUS
ARTICLE



ISSUE
CONTENTS



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Abstract

In February 2004, an online pecan management course was launched to educate pecan growers and assist them with decision-making. The interactive course was designed for both experienced pecan producers and first-time pecan producers. Since the inception of the course, only 24 persons have paid the registration fee. Several potential problems underlie the poor registration numbers, including low level of computer literacy, limited access to the Internet, download times, previous grower experience, cost, and awareness. Low registration numbers indicate that a more active approach to improve enrollment is needed to increase awareness.

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Introduction

In February 2004, an online pecan management course was launched to educate pecan growers and assist them with decision making (OSU Online Pecan Management Course, 2004). The interactive course was designed for both experienced pecan producers and first-time pecan producers. The original concept was to complement the Pecan Short Course taught at Oklahoma State University (OSU) as a way of saving classroom instruction time. It would dramatically decrease the number of personal contact hours for instructors and also cater to those individuals who have an interest in pecan production but cannot travel to take the Pecan Short Course. Because the course is offered online, there is no restriction based on state, region, or country. Anyone is eligible to participate in the online course as long as the registration fee is paid (currently \$75).

Tabulated Usage

Since the inception of the course in February of 2004, only 24 persons have paid the registration fee. Fifteen persons registered in 2004, and only 9 in 2005. Registrants represent 11 different states. Of the 24 total registered users, 11 are from Oklahoma, 3 from Texas, 2 from Arkansas, and one each from Alabama, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, and Missouri. Participants in the 2005 Pecan Short Course were allowed free access to the course; however, only 18 of the 37 students registered. The design of the online course did not allow for feedback in the form of surveys or number of page hits.

Perceived Problems

The Oklahoma Pecan Growers' Association (OPGA) has a membership of over 400. Oklahoma is typically in the top 5 pecan producing states in the United States and is in the top 3 states for number of pecan farms. Because it is an Internet-based course, growers from any state have access to the site. Why, then, is the participation level so poor for this online course? A list of potential problem areas is given below:

1. Low computer literacy of pecan growers,
2. No or poor access to Internet,
3. Long download time of pages,
4. Experience level of grower precluding further education,
5. High perceived cost, and
6. Potential users lack of awareness that it exists

Potential Solutions

Computer literacy of pecan growers is a large obstacle because many of the pecan growers are older and have not used the technology extensively. A recent contracted mail survey done in 2003 on behalf of the OPGA and the OSU Cooperative Extension Service indicated that 41% of pecan growers in Oklahoma are over age 64 and 67% are over age 55. The survey also indicated that 43% of respondents have no Internet access and another 21% use the internet only once a week or once a month. Another 51% of survey respondents indicated that they had no interest in taking an online pecan course.

Although pecan growers are usually well educated (nearly 50% have a college degree), their age and opportunity to learn new technological advances have been limiting factors. There exists recalcitrance, especially in older individuals, to learn new technology. The online course was designed to be user-friendly, so hands-on demonstrations at venues such as Extension and commodity group conferences could boost participation.

Many pecan growers in Oklahoma and other pecan-producing states live in rural areas that may have no access to the Internet or only limited access through dial-up connections. Most of the pages within the online course have photos that inhibit fast download times. The frustration level of trying to download each page of the course could be another factor in the low registration. The solution to this problem is difficult. Conversion of the course to text-only is not a viable option to maintain the desired educational outcome. However, new technologies such as satellite-based Internet access are being developed that may allow even rural growers the opportunity to experience the course in the future.

Because many pecan growers have a farming background, it is possible that they believe further education is something they do not need. Often growers only engage Extension personnel when there is a problem to be solved, not for preparatory or preventative measures such as education. The way to combat this misconception is to present seasoned growers with brochures and hands-on demonstrations during field visits or annual conferences.

Potential participants can access a limited number of pages to familiarize themselves with the course set-up and allow them to gauge whether or not they wish to pay the registration fee. The cost for the online course is currently \$75 for one year's worth of access. Perhaps potential users believe that there is sufficient free material about pecans on the Internet so that they do not need to pay for the online course. The difference is that the online course reinforces learned material through self-assessment quizzes. It is also a "one-stop shop" for pecan educational resources that cover a wide range of topics.

The online program should be dynamically advertised so that more people know where to find the page. This could be accomplished through more far-reaching Extension publications. An article in *Pecan South* magazine introduced the course to readers and included all necessary registration information (Mulder, 2004), that likely led to the diversity observed in terms of different state participation. Follow-up articles in key producer publications are needed for reinforcement and to reach a broader audience. Brochures are available upon request; however, they are not distributed at meetings or shows and are not available online as a first introductory information source for what potential registrants can expect.

Conclusions

The online OSU Pecan Management course has not been effective as an educational tool for the pecan growers of Oklahoma and other pecan growing states for several reasons. Yet, the number of states represented by the current registrants suggests that an opportunity exists for more extensive utilization of the course. However, the online course has been in existence for two years

and the low registration numbers indicate that a more active approach is needed to improve enrollment. If the online course continues to draw insufficient interest, other options such as offering a CD version may make the course more tenable. A broader spectrum of advertising the online course through publications and word-of-mouth needs to be done to reach the intended audience.

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