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## Effective Use of Community Partnerships to Maximize Impact

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## Effective Use of Community Partnerships to Maximize Impact

### Abstract

Through collaboration with community partners, UVM Extension has been able to reach and have an impact on a large audience at Everything Equine, a statewide educational equine event and consumer tradeshow. By partnering with Champlain Valley Exposition and others, UVM Extension is a major player in an event that would be time/cost prohibitive and virtually impossible to produce alone. All partners bring different strengths and resources to the event, resulting in a well-rounded 2-day educational and shopping experience for Vermont horse industry members. This event has also brought positive attention at the state level to this growing agricultural industry.

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## Introduction

Extension, long known for providing education and services that change the lives of many, has had to contend with decreasing funding support on a nationwide basis. Also, Extension often must compete for audience attention with "for profit" organizations that provide "educational clinics and seminars" that are interesting, but may not hit the target on some of the true needs of our clientele.

This is illustrated by the multitudes of equine people who are willing to pay for an "Animal Communicator" or the "newest tricks" training technique seminar, as compared to the average of 20 to 30 industry members who participate in workshops that present information directly applicable to improving their business, pastures, safety, or facilities. How can Extension attract the maximum audience, yet keep the mission of providing necessary and pertinent information to make a positive change in the business, land, and quality of life of clientele and their animals?

## Background

In 1999, the University of Vermont (UVM) and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VT-AG) held a statewide Vermont Equine Industry Summit to identify goals and priorities of the Vermont equine industry. Several of the key priorities emerging from that meeting included the need to:

- Conduct an updated VT equine economic impact survey
- Address equine insurance and liability issues
- Increase industry marketing/promotion/tourism
- Address land use policies for equine
- Establish a communications network.

Every year since the original gathering, I have organized an annual Vermont Equine Industry Summit meeting (average attendance of 100 people) to address these statewide issues. I have also partnered with community and state entities to complete many projects, including the barn safety oriented *Self-Guided Horse Facility Analysis* booklet and the Vermont Horses Count Equine Survey (Greene & Ather, 2003).

When the Director of Special Events from the Champlain Valley Exposition (Essex Junction, VT) saw

a newspaper article about the growing equine industry (my survey results), I was contacted to discuss the possibility of collaborating on a statewide equine event and consumer tradeshow. By combining strengths and resources with community and university partners, UVM Extension is now a key player in Everything Equine, the largest 2-day equine educational event in Vermont.

## The Event

Everything Equine highlights the increasing strength of the equine industry in Vermont by combining an exciting blend of outreach and education offered by UVM Extension, with a top-notch equine trade show coordinated by the Champlain Valley Exposition. We have recruited a broad array of local expertise and national talent to make Everything Equine the centerpiece of Vermont's equine industry activities. The timing of the event (late April) is excellent as well. People are "stir crazy" after a long, Vermont winter, but the weather is not quite good enough to be out with their horses.

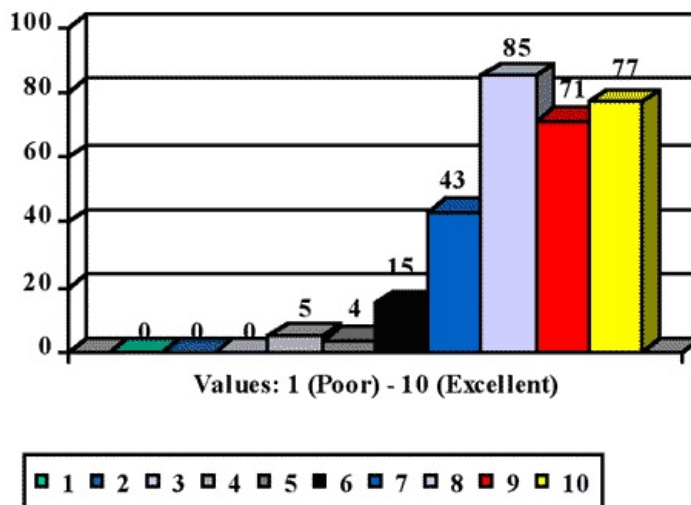
With three seminar rooms, a large demonstration arena, and a smaller demonstration pen, participants have numerous educational choices. In addition, the last two annual Summit meetings were incorporated into Everything Equine in the form of the Equine Summit room to take advantage of the exposure to a much larger audience. Summit Room speakers cover relevant topics (regardless of breed or discipline) that are important to equine industry members and their clientele. Finally, as a part of Everything Equine, UVM also hosted the university-sponsored northeast regional educational event Horses 2005 (and Horses 2004). Cornell University (2001, 2002) and Rutgers (2003) have hosted this regional event previously.

Students in my Equine Industry Issues course put classroom concepts to practice by developing a pilot computer survey to gather feedback on the event and participant demographics. We staffed a table with six computer stations (Figure 1) and offered a 45-question online survey that took approximately 8-10 minutes to complete. Of the 328 survey respondents, 95% stated that they plan on attending the event in 2006. Figure 2 shows that 78% of respondents had a good to excellent (8-10 rating) overall impression of Everything Equine/Horses 2005. Other survey data will be tabulated and used to demonstrate horse industry impact on Vermont.

**Figure 1.**  
Pilot Equine Survey Computer Station



**Figure 2.**  
Overall Impression of Everything Equine/Horses 2005



## Results

With over 6,000 attendees in 2005 (a 20% increase from the inaugural event in 2004), Everything Equine is the largest 2-day equine educational event in the state. This event provides an ideal example of how an Extension program can have direct and indirect impacts on a variety of stakeholders. Everything Equine now provides a venue for integration of educators, equine industry members, community partners, Vermonters, and state decision makers to recognize and promote a growing segment of animal agriculture in Vermont.

Each partner brings collaboration and expertise to the event, providing multiple "draws" for the audience. This environment brings industry members and "equine consumers" together to highlight the size and impact of their own industry within the state. In addition, the showcase of local talent (trainers, veterinarians, equine lawyers, extension personnel, etc.) provides opportunities to effectively disseminate information, as well as interact with stakeholders and promote Vermont equine businesses.

Participants had the opportunity to gain directly applicable knowledge and skills from over 75 seminars and demonstrations. In addition, Everything Equine provided a venue to bring UVM Extension resources to the forefront at the state level. Some indirect Extension-related impacts and outcomes that have come to fruition due in part to this event include:

- UVM Extension program topics publicized (biosecurity, barn safety, helmet poster, equine survey, etc.)
- Request for testimony on VT's equine industry to the Agriculture House Committee
- Consultation with VT legislators on equine related legislation language
- Creation of Vermont Equine Industry Committee co-facilitated by UVM and VT Farm Bureau
- Experiential learning opportunities for UVM students through class activities related to the event.

## Conclusion

As a result of this mutually beneficial partnership, UVM Extension has been able to draw on the strengths of community partners while contributing a valuable educational piece to this event. The exposure has been invaluable for the professional reputation and credibility of our statewide equine Extension program and has had long-term benefits for other equine Extension projects. This positive exposure has continued throughout the year in the form of articles and other coverage in local, state, and regional equine and agricultural publications. The excitement generated from this event has allowed several equine Extension projects (e.g., publications, posters, etc.) to gain ground at the industry, local, and legislative levels.

## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge community collaborators Champlain Valley Exposition, Guys Farm and Yard, and The Horse Works. The author is extremely grateful to Fran Kinghorn for her editing help and her extensive assistance conducting the on-line survey at Everything Equine. Photo credit: (Figure 1) Jane Kennedy O'Neil.

## References

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