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Development of Educational Programs for Retail Stores That Sell Pesticides

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Development of Educational Programs for Retail Stores That Sell Pesticides

Abstract

Although homeowners usually purchase pesticides from home and garden centers, previous surveys have shown that store employees often do not receive adequate training in pest management and pesticide safety. Educational programs were conducted for retail store employees in Illinois. Topics included pest identification, integrated pest management, pesticide safety, pesticide toxicity, and emergency spill response. Evaluations suggested a high level of satisfaction with the training. Evaluation comments also indicated concern over the high turnover of seasonal employees, the wide range of employee understanding of pest management, and time constraints that may prohibit small retail stores from participating in educational programs.

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Introduction

It is estimated that 85% of all U.S. households have at least one pesticide product in storage, while 63% of all households have between one and five pesticide products in storage (EPA, 1992).

Lajeunesse, Johnson, and Jacobsen (1997) and Sclar, Cranshaw, Jacobi, and Fleener (1997) found that the majority of homeowners purchased pesticides from home/garden centers and used these outlets as information for pest management recommendations.

A statewide survey in Illinois found that only 34% of the retail stores provided any employee training related to pesticide use (Czapar, Curry, & Lloyd, 1998). Furthermore, of those individuals who received any training, only about one-half indicated that the level of training was adequate. If any training was provided, the focus tended to be on pesticide selection and use, while the concepts of integrated pest management (IPM) were largely ignored.

Educational Program

In 2001, a program was developed to provide educational training for retail store employees who recommend and sell pesticides used in the home and garden. Funding for this program was provided through a grant from the United States Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Region 5 in cooperation with the Illinois Department of Agriculture (IDOA).

Training programs were conducted by a University of Illinois specialist and Extension Educators at eight locations throughout Illinois between 2001 and 2003. In 2002, the program was also presented in Spanish to employees of Home Nursery located in Albers, Illinois.

In order to accommodate retailers' schedules, programs were conducted during the month of February. Each program was approximately 3 hours in length. For convenience, programs were held in the morning or afternoon at local county Extension offices.

Topics addressed during each program included pest identification (insects and weeds) and integrated pest management recommendations (both chemical and non-chemical options). There were also discussions on pesticide safety, pesticide toxicity, the role of personal protective equipment, pesticide poisoning symptoms, and emergency procedures in case of spills.

We also wanted to make the audience more aware of University of Illinois Extension resources, including publications, fact sheets, Web sites, and the Master Gardener Program. For example, each session ended with a brief presentation by a local Master Gardener or Extension educator, explaining additional programs and showing the stores how they might collaborate in specific areas, such as customer referrals and pest identification.

As an incentive to participate, several University of Illinois publications were provided free of charge to each store that sent an employee. The value of the publications was approximately \$60.00.

The target audience for this program was very specific: employees of retail stores that sell general use pesticides. Because the stores had to commit their employees for a half-day, this was a significant investment for store management. In fact, some retailers from small stores expressed an interest in the program, but were unable to participate because they would have to close the store to allow their employees to attend.

Results

Approximately 100 individuals participated in the program over the 3-year period. This included employees from chain stores such as Wal-Mart, K-Mart, Ace Hardware, Big R, Lowe's, True Value, and several smaller local garden centers. Participation in most of the programs tended to be relatively small, with the average attendance from the eight locations around 13 individuals.

Following each program, participants were asked to evaluate the usefulness of each topic on a one to five scale (1=lowest, 5=highest). As shown in Table 1, evaluation results suggested a high level of satisfaction with the training received.

The most useful topics to the audience were references, pesticide safety, Extension resources, and materials provided in handouts.

Table 1.
Evaluation of Retail Store Educational Program (n=95)

Question: How useful were the following topics?	Mean	SD
References and sources of information	4.4	0.83
Pesticide safety and toxicity	4.4	0.83
Insect identification	4.3	0.87
Weed identification	4.2	0.82
Responding to pesticide spills	4.3	0.85
Local Extension resources	4.4	0.78

Handout materials	4.4	0.80
How well did topics address common customer questions	4.0	0.98

This educational program was also featured on the Healthy Homes national satellite videoconference on March 27, 2003. It was broadcast to more than 200 Extension sites nationwide and 81 department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) field offices. To see the Webcast, go to <http://www.hud.gov/webcasts/archives/training.cfm>, and follow the link for Lead Hazard/Healthy Homes - March 27, 2003. The entire broadcast is approximately 2 hours long, but the Illinois IPM segment is 8 minutes long and begins 57:25 into the program.

Summary

The audience was very receptive to the educational training programs, and individual comments suggested that most participants were willing to attend future programs. Previous surveys have shown that improved customer service is the most important training outcome identified by this audience (Czapar, Curry, & Lloyd, 1998).

The audience also faces several challenges related to maintaining store personnel able to answer pest management questions and provide recommendations. Because many stores hire seasonal employees to help with the lawn and garden departments during spring and summer, there tends to be a high turnover of employees, which indicates that regular training programs are important in educating new employees.

The wide range of backgrounds and understanding of pest management was noted in some of the evaluation comments. A few individuals suggested that the materials were too advanced and too much information was presented. In contrast, others attending the same program commented that some topics were too basic and would like to have gone into more detail.

Another concern that was identified by storeowners was the time commitment required to attend educational programs. In some cases, owners of small stores would have had to close the store in order to attend meetings.

Recommendations

Schedule training to fit the store owners'/employees' availability. Similar to the Pesticide Applicator Training program for farmers, educational programs for retail stores should be held in January or February. In addition, conducting two or more short training sessions may be more convenient than one long session.

Provide incentives for participation. This could include reference materials, educational resources, or access to Extension Web sites. After the training is completed, these resources could remain in the store and be available for other employees. For some store employees, a certificate of completion adds value to the program. Displaying the certificate increases their credibility and helps differentiate them from their competition.

Develop closer relationship between stores and Master Gardeners, and make stores aware of existing publications. This will help Extension increase visibility with a new audience and become more recognized as a local resource. The ability to refer customers for unbiased pest management advice or to reference a newsletter or fact sheet should be a preferred option.

Finally, target and customize training programs to increase participation. The largest retailers, who sell the largest volume of products, might be interested in a general program that is easily transferable. For example, training full-time employees and managers, who, in turn, train seasonal employees might be the best approach where there is a high turnover of staff.

In contrast, smaller retailers who use customer service as a tactic for capturing and retaining customers may be interested in a more in-depth program. A modular curriculum with beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels of training may be more appealing to storeowners who may be the sole providers of pest management information.

Retail stores that sell pesticides represent a large potential audience for Extension programs. There appears to be a significant demand for information on pesticide safety, pest management references, and local Extension resources. Educational programs for store employees should improve their ability to make recommendations and make them more aware of safety considerations for pesticide use.

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