

8-1-2001

Small Farm/New Farm: One Agent Meeting Other Agents' Needs for Research-Based Information Through the WWW

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Recommended Citation

Polson, J., & Gastier, T. (2001). Small Farm/New Farm: One Agent Meeting Other Agents' Needs for Research-Based Information Through the WWW. *The Journal of Extension*, 39(4), Article 21. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol39/iss4/21>

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August 2001 // Volume 39 // Number 4 // Tools of the Trade // 4TOT1



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Small Farm/New Farm: One Agent Meeting Other Agents' Needs for Research-Based Information Through the WWW

Abstract

One Ohio Extension agent created a Web site to help Extension Agents, Agriculture, quickly find research-based information to answer the questions of people with new and/or small farms. The site currently contains over 1,300 links to .edu, .gov, and .org sites. Readers with a rural clientele should find the site useful. Others may find inspiration, motivation, and instruction from reading how the site evolved from a group of agents discussing a lack of available resources to a state-of-the-art means to access up-to-date resources. *Small Farm/New Farm* <http://newfarm.osu.edu> officially debuted in December 2000 and is being well received by agents, specialists, and administrators.

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Background

Rural Northeast Ohio is experiencing a transition from a rural-farm to a rural-nonfarm population. In October 1998, agriculture and natural resource (ANR) agents and specialists in Northeast District Extension (Ohio) met to discuss "Farming on the Urban Fringe." Our meeting had no speaker and no agenda. We had agreed to meet because everyone was concerned with how best to provide ANR educational programming and resources in an area that was rapidly urbanizing.

The 15 agents and specialists in attendance began by sharing the most difficult problems they faced in meeting the educational needs of the people in their counties. Three hours into the sharing, it was clear that the most pressing problem of most of the ANR agents was a need for research-based information to answer the questions of a growing "small-farm/new-farm" audience. The majority of the questions coming into their offices weren't from full-time or even traditional part-time farmers, but were from homeowners and rural landowners who had bought a small acreage and wanted a "farm/rural experience." The agents' biggest frustration was finding research-based information to give them.

What Is "Research-Based" Information?

There are numerous magazines and newsletters aimed at the "small-farm/new-farm" audience, but they frequently include anecdotal information, "sales pitches," and stories about individuals who are advocating their way of doing things. It can be quite time-consuming to sort through the many "hits" of a World Wide Web (WWW) search engine and quickly find research-based information on small-farm/new-farm topics such as: agri-tourism; starting a greenhouse business; hydroponics; home laying flocks; llamas; earthworms, etc.

At subsequent meetings agents and specialists began discussing what kinds of information it was appropriate to give their clientele. How could one determine which information was "research-

based" and appropriate to distribute? Was it better to give someone 10-year-old research-based information or up-to-date information posted on a company's Web-site? Was it better to give clientele anecdotal or industry-based information or nothing at all? Most concluded the information had to come from a university, government, or similar institution. But then they wondered, "Was it available?"

Searching for Research-Based Links

One agent had recently taken a class on designing a Web page and could see that if useful "research based" sites existed and could be located, it would be possible to put together a Web page for Extension agents that linked directly to pre-identified, research-based information. This agent became increasingly intrigued with the challenge and started searching the Web for information to meet his colleagues' needs.

He found that with patience, resourcefulness, organization, tenacity, and a variety of search engines, it was possible to find university and other research-based information on many of the subjects of interest to agents on the Web. He began assembling a notebook of Web addresses with ".edu" suffixes that contained useful information.

In subsequent meetings, the other agents were impressed with the agent's information and number of Web sites, but they still did not have an easy way to access the information. The agent distributed hard copies of his lists of Web sites, but also started designing a Web site to organize the information for easier access by agents and others. He modeled it after sites at the University of Missouri and British Columbia, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. He applied for and received a small grant to increase the hours of a part-time assistant to help enter information, confirm links, and perform other tasks. Thus was *Small Farm/New Farm* <http://newfarm.osu.edu> born.

What Do Agents and Their Associates Need?

The constant guiding principle behind deciding what links are included on the Web site is: "What do the agents and their associates need? The agent behind the site wants to make it easier for other agents to put out their bonfires by answering their questions. The ideal is for agents and their assistants to quickly find useful information on the Web, print it out, explain it as necessary, and give it to satisfied clientele. The Web site also deals with current issues like Hoof and Mouth and, in Ohio, the West Nile Virus and Gypsy Moth.

Criteria for Including Sites

The agent uses following criteria were used to determine whether to link to a site.

1. **Edu, Gov, and Org:** Initially only sites that ended with ".edu" or ".gov" were included. Recently, Arkansas Extension publications started being listed under sites ending with ".org," so additional sites in that category are expected. No sites ending in ".com" are currently accessible through the site, and there are no plans to add them.
2. **Best Sites, Not All Sites:** No attempt is made to include all sites under a particular classification. The focus is on having the best sites in each category, with particular attention paid to information that is geographically and climatologically related to Ohio.
3. **Economics and Budgets:** Sites that include costs, budgets, and other seemingly useful economic information are preferred. Economic information is lacking in many publications.
4. **Ohio Origin:** When considering listing, Ohio sites are favored if the content is equal to or exceeds other out-of-state sites.

Site Organization

The site is continually evolving, but at this writing the "home page" of this site contained the following seven main headings and subheadings:

- **Enterprise Budgets**
- **Agri-Tourism**
- **Crops**

- Berries
- Flowers
- Forages
- Forestry
- Grains & Oil Seeds
- Grapes
- Greenhouse
- Hydroponics
- Nursery Crops
- Ornamentals Specialty Crops

Tree Fruit
Vegetables

- **Livestock**

Aquatics
Birds
Large Animals
Other Animals

- **Management**
- **Value Added**
- **Water Resources**

The site is organized for agents to quickly access information with few clicks and little download time. One click on a heading or subheading will take agents to research-based links to information about the subject. With many agents using modems, at least part of the time, pictures and graphics were kept to a minimum to help pages load more quickly. As the Web site developed, the agent got support to add a search engine to help users find some types of information more efficiently. The search engine searches only ".edu" sites.

Evaluating and adding links as well as maintenance of existing lists is ongoing. It is a continuing challenge to organize the site and know where best to list new sites. A link checker developed at Ohio State is utilized for link maintenance.

Marketing

The Northeast District Extension office prepared notebooks containing color hard copies of the Web page resources. These notebooks have been distributed to Extension offices and to district and state Extension personnel. The purpose has been to familiarize potential users with what they might find when viewing the Web site. The Extension agent has included the Web address in his e-mail signature, as well as providing links to the address on his county and the NE District Extension's Web page.

Some Unexpected Benefits for the Agent

At age 57, the Extension agent was not looking for a reward or notoriety when he began this project. He simply saw a challenge and an opportunity to provide resources for himself and some colleagues who needed it. Initially he enjoyed the challenge and reward of continually finding more useful information. As he says, "I was having too much fun and never looked back."

Now that the Web site is running and many are finding it useful, the agent is finding some additional, unexpected benefits. One, he is experiencing more collegial treatment from people at all levels in and out of the university. People at all levels in the university tend to treat him more as their equal. Two, colleagues regularly provide him with new links, tips, or additional information to improve the site. Three, his county peers are finding his Web site useful and are telling him so. Four, he has had the opportunity to share his work with colleagues at a major conference outside Ohio. Five, he has an increased knowledge of HTML programming language. Six, this project has allowed him to work closely with a water quality specialist who was looking for greater exposure of his own Web-based resources.

How Do You Measure Success?

Success will be measured by whether or not people use the site and find it useful. Or as the agent says, "When I can walk into most Extension offices in the Midwest, walk up to a computer used by an agricultural agent or assistant, and there is a little icon I can click that takes me to the *Small Farm/New Farm* Web site, I will know we have done our job. Until then we will just keep enhancing and improving the Web site." Efforts are also being made to more formally evaluate who is using the Web site, how they are using it, and whether it was useful and to gather suggestions for improvement.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the following individuals for their expertise and assistance: Steve Baertsche, Keith Smith, Nathan Watermeier, Cathy Weilnau, Helen Deeble, Tim Murawski, Charlene Margetiak, and Northeast District Agents.

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