Using Technology for Community Engagement: Four Key Web-Based Platforms for Adoption in Extension

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Abstract. Extension professionals engage with communities to present programming, find solutions, and disseminate research-based knowledge. While traditional means of communication and face-to-face meetings are still important, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted the ways these professionals connect to their communities. Web-based platforms can provide unique, alternative ways to engage communities in programs, evaluations, and information sharing. Our team of Extension professionals share platforms that create engaged communities by meeting virtual demands.

INTRODUCTION

Extension has faced challenges related to technology use and community engagement (Smith & Kotrlik, 1990). The COVID-19 pandemic increased the need for youth- and community-engaged Extension programs that could be delivered from a distance (Bates, 2020; Calvert & Fabregas Janeiro, 2020; Israel et al., 2020; Morefield & Fabregas Janeiro, 2020). Many Extension professionals adapted pre-existing programming for web-based engagement to continue to meet the needs of communities (Bamka et al., 2020; Fawcett et al., 2020; Morefield & Fabregas Janeiro, 2020; Stokes et al., 2020). In March 2020, Extension, schools, and other youth and adult services, providers, and facilities canceled in-person programming. As the shutdown continued, Extension professionals prioritized youths, adults, and families, knowing that the development programs aimed at this demographic can lead to generational success (Arnold, 2020; Arnold & Rennekamp, 2020; Morefield & Fabregas Janeiro, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic created a need for Extension professionals to receive training focused on designing materials and programs through web-based platforms for a wider audience (Israel et al., 2020). Extension professionals in Georgia relied on technology and virtual resources before the pandemic, but the increased application of web-based platforms allowed professionals to connect to their communities in new ways, create community despite social-distancing mandates, and disseminate knowledge about food, physical activity, and life skills. Different platforms provided unique services, and awareness is a major component of adoption. We used Remind, Mailchimp, Facebook Groups, and The Patch to extend and promote engagement.

REMIND

Remind (https://www.remind.com) is a safe social application used to streamline communication between educators and the community via email or text message. With each new class created, the application generates a unique code that allows users to identify and join the class. The app logs the information shared with participants and makes the information easy to access later. Safeguards protect the personal contact information of all users.

Though Remind utilizes a two-way communication system, users ages 13 and under can only receive—not send—announcements or messages, and parents receive notifications about their child's activity on the app. Extension professionals can schedule and send individualized announcements (so replies are kept separate) or permit

group messages (so that all members can view replies and respond accordingly). Technology has become a necessity, but access to technology has also become accessible and simple via mobile devices. Remind makes it easy for users to stay connected and for Extension professionals to disseminate program updates, event flyers, files, and voice memos at any time.

MAILCHIMP

Mailchimp (https://mailchimp.com) is an online marketing and commerce service that helps programs expand their outreach. Mailchimp is a great tool for Extension professionals because the platform features audience management, creative tools, marketing automation, and analytics. Users can create websites with online stores and appointment scheduling. They are also able to send messages, called campaigns, to subscribers.

With the audience management feature, individuals can subscribe and receive communication about specific programs. Mailchimp gives users the option to manually add subscribers or to place an embedded form on a website. Then, users can segment their audience based on shared traits and send specific campaigns to each specialized group.

When creating and sending a campaign, Mailchimp offers users the option to create their own template or choose from existing templates. Each account can store files and images. Users can send programs and to large audiences at once. Mailchimp also filters out any emails that are no longer in use and helps users determine who is reading and responding to specific messages.

FACEBOOK GROUPS

Facebook groups provide a place for community members from across the world to come together and explore shared interests. These groups are not meant to sell or promote products or services, but to be attentive to the needs of the group and build a bond amongst group members. Group members share pictures and videos, create polls, share research, and—depending on the kind of group—offer support or insight.

Facebook groups are an incredible tool for Extension programming. Used as a virtual program platform or as an in-person program retention tool, Facebook Groups can keep participants engaged and aware of future programming opportunities. Facebook Groups also offer free impact insights by tracking group growth and engagement.

In November 2021, working in collaboration with seven other Extension offices across the country, a Georgia Extension Family and Consumer Sciences Agent started a "30 for 30 Walk-a-Weigh" Facebook Group. Within four days of sending invites to the personal Facebook friends of the eight administrators, 1,200 members joined the group. At the conclusion of the "30 for 30 Walk-a-Weigh" on May 31, 2022, the group had 1,353 members who had submitted 3,476 posts, 3,883 comments, and 49,106 reactions.

THE PATCH

The Patch (https://patch.com) is a national online posting system available for any city or town in the United States. This website focuses on uniting and empowering communities by sharing important local news and information. The platform allows users to spread 'good news' and keep citizens informed.

The platform itself is easy to use and offers three different ways to post your information. After a quick sign-up, you have the option of contacting The Patch to become a verified community leader in the system. Extension professionals can write articles, post about events, and send direct messages to specific neighborhoods. This can be useful for timely articles about financial literacy, gardening, and 4-H activities. It is also a great opportunity to advertise the large-scale events popular in Extension.

CONCLUSION

While traditional methods of communication still work for Extension outreach and education (Sneed & Franck, 2020), Extension professionals increasingly rely on technology-based platforms to convey information and increase reach (Allen et al., 2016; Johnson et al., 2018; Parmer et al., 2017). Having a variety of web-based platforms in one's planning and programming toolbox gives Extension professionals access to a wider, more diverse audience.

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