

E-Business Applications of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Food Systems Website

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The World Wide Web (WWW) is revolutionizing access to and delivery of information, via timely and easy-to-use interactive multimedia, and multi-disciplinary methods. The extension-outreach system of land-grant universities can utilize this powerful tool to enhance educational opportunities for food system professionals and consumers. This three-year project is designed to develop extension education on the WWW around a food-systems model to allow delivery of personalized instruction while providing multi-disciplinary answers to complex questions. Issues facing the industry are complex, and an effective method of addressing them is needed. Extension education on the WWW developed around a food-systems model will allow delivery of personalized instruction while providing multi-disciplinary answers, which are not logistically feasible with traditional programming methods. The intent of this project is to transform the mode of access to university resources in order to maintain the leadership position of the land-grant system and collaborating institutions in the delivery of research-based and applied information to the citizens of the region.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the process involved in developing the regional food-systems web site as a model infrastructure for interdisciplinary educational efforts. This project is unique in that it builds on the strengths of the collaborating institutional partners within the region. The interaction of many disciplines such as agricultural production, marketing, safe handling of a regional food supply, environmental issues, and nutritional sciences illustrates the diverse educational needs of stakeholders (site users). Increasing understanding of the interrelationship of the

entire food system, including its relationship to the environment and the value of its various components, ultimately contributes to the viability of the regional agricultural industry. This in turn will assist in maintaining the quality of life for residents. This paper first describes the food-systems web site project and then highlights selected e-business applications of the Mid-Atlantic Regional Food Systems Web Site (MARFSWS).

Objectives

The overall objectives of this project are to:

1. Provide ease of public and private entrepreneurial access to a database of current and reliable information;
2. Gather research information, including case studies on farm retail direct marketing/wholesale marketing, women's health, environmental issues, and food safety, allowing regional extension/research collaborators to update the content easily and quickly;
3. Determine methodologies to enhance e-business applications of the food-systems web site such as a searchable map for product offerings, a classified-ads section for product and equipment offerings, a calendar of events, and a retail farm market directory;
4. Design and develop the Mid-Atlantic Regional Food Systems Web Site, featuring an easily accessible and searchable database of basic and advanced resources, multimedia educational presentations, searchable directories of experts, current bibliographies, calendar of related meetings, on-line journals/newsletters for publication of timely research, and discussion forums;
5. Develop evaluation mechanisms to allow continual feedback for improvement of the food-systems web site and to determine the impact of the project.

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Food-Systems Web Site Goes Online

The Mid-Atlantic Regional Food Systems Web Site is now available to provide producers and consumers with education and user-friendly information pertaining to safe and nutritious consumption of the local food supply. The term "Food System" is used frequently in discussions about nutrition, food, health, community economic development, and agriculture. Included in the initial launch of the site are five components of the food system: Agricultural Direct Marketing, Producer/Consumer Interface, Women's/Men's Health and Nutrition, Environmental Issues, and Food Safety. Agricultural producers and the public are invited to visit the site at <agri-culturehealth.com>.

E-Business Applications of the Website

This project is intended to be responsive to stakeholder/user needs, including the incorporation of several e-business applications into this web site. Farm market lists; a classified-ads section; a calendar of events and resources for farm market operators, agricultural producers, and consumers are currently being developed. These applications are described below.

Farm Market Lists Promote Local Retail Farm Markets and Product Offerings

To reach the farm market list the user first clicks on the Regional (Local) Foods icon on the home page of the web site. This will bring up the menu for the Farm Market Lists where the user can search for a specific retail farm market by market name and address. Another feature of the site allows the user to view all of the markets listed within the region. Perhaps the most important feature of this e-business application is the ease with which the user/farm-market operator can add their market to the list. This can be accomplished very easily by clicking on either the Application icon on the Regional Foods home page or the Add a New Market option found on the Farm Market Listings page. This feature of the web site is important to farm retail market operators because it allows market operators to promote their markets and product offerings on the Internet. Individual market operators may not be able to do this on their own, primarily because of

cost and time constraints. For those that already have web sites, it allows them the opportunity to have another avenue for promoting their markets and their web sites. In many cases, the use of this site by market operators will assist extension and industry market consultants in helping retail farm market operators bridge the digital divide.

Consumers using the Farm Market List are able to search for local products and farm markets by specific crop. In either case, once a market has been identified the user is given the option of obtaining a map complete with directions from point of origin to the farm market.

Farm-Market Classifieds on the Internet for Product and Equipment Offerings

Another e-business application of the Food-Systems Website is the classified ads section, which allows the farm-market operator to list items that are wanted or for sale. Users can search listings and add listings to the classifieds.

Other E-Business Applications

MARFSWS has other e-business applications that are useful for commerce, including a calendar of events where important industry and educational functions can be listed and educational information on agricultural direct marketing and health, food-safety, environmental issues. Many of the direct e-business applications cannot be fully utilized until the site is fully launched.

Summary

This paper has outlined and described the Mid-Atlantic Regional Food Systems Web Site and highlighted some of its e-business applications. The authors believe that the development and launching of this web site can begin the process of 'bridging the digital divide' in the food industry. Much has been accomplished; however, much work, cooperative effort, and additional funding is needed to bring this project into productive use. Hopefully the presentation of this paper will assist in beginning the dialogue on developing the avenue for continuing this web site, complete with its e-business applications and the vast potential for expansion.