

A Team Approach to Outreach Education: Connecting Industry and Academic Partners to Educate Generational Audiences

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

The agricultural industry plays a significant role in Montana's public and economic welfare. The economic impacts of agriculture can be seen in its services, enterprises, commodities, revenue, business taxes, and employment connected to the diverse industry sectors. According to the National Agriculture Statistics Service (2015), agriculture ranks as the number one industry in Montana with \$5.3 billion in agricultural services and products. With a growing population and smaller agricultural enterprises, interest in specialty crops has been growing. USDA (2017b, p. 1) defines a specialty crop as, "fruits, vegetables, tree nuts, dried fruits, horticulture, and nursery crops... used by people for food, medicinal purposes, or aesthetic gratification." A large selection of specialty crops are commonly sold directly at farmers' markets, local restaurants, farm stands, and grocery stores in Montana.

With this increase in local production comes an opportunity for growth and partnerships between industry and academic partners. All current and future producers must be informed of changes in agricultural technologies, production practices, alternative markets, and consumer demand. Farm Service Agency (FSA) services and programs "provide American farmers and ranchers with a financial safety net while also helping to protect natural resources and enhancing food security" (USDA, 2017a, p. 8). University agricultural educators aim to create methods, models, and programs to inform public opinions and policymakers on agricultural and natural resource issues while also preparing students to work in the global workforce (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016). Typically, these organizations provide education to similar audiences independently. The approach in this project focused on collaborative planning, development, and implementation of events utilizing representatives from each organization to educate shared audiences on agricultural issues.

How It Works

This project targeted youth, college students, agricultural educators, extension agents, consumers, and urban specialty crop growers as generational audiences for outreach education. Project leaders and FSA specialists worked together to plan a series of year-long events to promote financial safety, environmental stewardship, and best production practices for generations of agriculturalists. The events were developed with input from academic and industry partners to familiarize audiences with financial, educational, and production activities integral to enterprises. Using this team approach, academic and FSA experts co-presented at 4-H and FFA conventions, farm field days, classrooms and farm activities, extension events, farmers' markets, and commodity conferences. Additionally, project partners worked together to develop a whiteboard animated video as a unique modern communication approach to promote key messages for FSA. The specific topics for events were agricultural education opportunities, farm operating and youth loans, and noninsured crop disaster assistance programs. Topic selection was based on needs identified by the FSA office personnel, university agricultural faculty, and growth of specialty crop production within Montana.

Results to Date/Implications

Initially, FSA specialists conducted a training for all project leaders to become educated on relevant services and programs for target audiences. A yearlong work plan was then co-developed to include the following events: implementation of a realistic, sustainable crop production course, Farm Field Day activities, youth loan workshops for secondary agricultural teachers and extension agents, industry conferences, a campus farm tour, and a weekly booth at

local farmer's markets. All events were attended by an FSA specialist and an agricultural faculty member to promote both organization's goals and reach larger audiences. To date, ten events have been completed with an estimated 500 people reached.

Future Plans/Advice to others

There remains a constant need for outreach education of agricultural information and industry changes. Educational programs can address these issues and transfer relevant information to raise the agricultural awareness of audiences. Many agricultural organizations target similar audiences for outreach education and should look for potential opportunities to co-teach relevant information. In this project, different and new generations of audiences were reached using a variety of delivery methods and opportunities gained from a teaching partnership.

When pursuing partnerships, it was imperative to build relationships with team members early in the process to confirm project goals, time commitments, event attendance, and program content. Planning for the events took place early to reserve space, submit proposals, and prepare materials. Sufficient time must be integrated into the event timeline for review and approval from all levels of administration when partnering with a governmental organization.

Gaining support from all team members was a critical component to the success of this partnership. Faculty should consider these partnerships as highly desirable professional opportunities to advance scholarship, promote the academic program, connect with the industry, and stay current on agricultural issues. Larger, more diverse audiences were reached by promoting a team of experts who can speak on a variety of topics. Additional research on public knowledge of agricultural issues was also conducted in connection with events to further explore this educational approach. Ten more events will be conducted in the next year with hopes of reaching at least 500 more people.

Costs/Resources needed

This idea was funded by a USDA Farm Service Agency grant. Minimal costs for conference attendance and booth fees were incurred, while some were free for non-profits. A whiteboard and video scribing company was contracted to create a 90 second personalized, realistic animated video that is being used for promotion at events. Costs vary by video services chosen. Printing costs for promotional brochures, workshop information, FSA materials, and surveys was \$200. Finally, resources provided by FSA included farm loan booklets, pamphlets, and stand-up banners that were utilized at all events in combination with academic information on agricultural education. Graduate students were utilized at all events to host booths, administer surveys, present information, and promote the academic institution at a rate of \$15/hour.

References

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