

Framing the Future of Extension: What State Websites Reveal About Brand and Purpose

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Introduction

All state land-grant universities serve a three-pronged purpose in their respective states by providing higher education to the public, conducting research, and improving communities through cooperative extension programs (Land-Grant Impacts, n.d.). Land grant extension services seek to serve the public and provide value to them. Yet, the awareness and understanding of extension services as one of the core missions of land-grant colleges to provide for the public have, at times, failed to reach all audiences effectively. To generate awareness of these programs, universities have tried to establish an extension brand in each state. Previous research has investigated how these organizations have focused on building a master brand to better connect with stakeholders and the public (Abrams et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2011; Ray et al., 2015; Zagonel et al., 2023). The purpose of this study was to investigate how the visual or external brand of different land grant systems was communicated through their websites.

Conceptual Framework

Brands are ubiquitous and play a crucial role in the success of companies and organizations (Libai et al., 2010; Romaniuk & Gaillard, 2007). Brand equity refers to the consumer's perception of the brand's value, influenced by their attitudes, familiarity, and connection to the brand (Keller, 1993; Wood, 2000). A brand acts as an organization's link to the external audience (Kornberger, 2010). Within that brand, it is crucial to communicate the brand's purpose and mission clearly. Companies that communicate both to internal and external stakeholders enhance their reputation and improve company performance (Dermol & Sirca, 2018). This study focused on the external components of branding on extension websites, including logos, names, websites, usability, and communicating purpose and mission.

Methods

Researchers conducted a content analysis of the websites of 15 land-grant institutions. Content analysis focuses on the content of messages derived through text, symbols, or images (Krippendorff, 2004). The content analysis focused on how well these land-grant institutions communicated their brand. All 15 websites were reviewed based on the principles of brand equity. This includes analyzing their brand name, website content, and visual items. After analyzing the extension websites, we determined categories and themes through a deductive coding process of note-taking during content analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). A stratified sample approach was employed, including the top three agricultural-producing states at every fifth rank (i.e., 1-3, 10-12, 20-22), to ensure balanced representation across varying levels of agricultural output and regional diversity.

Results

Data were clustered and presented in three broad categories: Brand Design and Alignment, Communication of Mission, and Website Design and Structure.

Brand Design and Alignment - All of the 15 states analyzed utilized “extension” in their public-facing brand names. Some states had variations of this, including “Cooperative Extension” in California and Virginia, or “Extension and Outreach” in Iowa. Some states emphasize their connection to their land-grant identity, such as Colorado State University Extension. Nearly all states aligned with their land-grant university in terms of colors, logos, and other items, with the extension being co-branded with these institutions. Virginia's Cooperative Extension was the

only one with an independent color scheme because two universities share it. Some states (e.g., California, New Jersey) used institutional umbrellas (UCANR, NJAES) in their naming and branding of their extension programs.

Communication of Mission - Many websites included a clear mission statement or tagline near the top (e.g., Iowa: “Real Impact for Iowans”; Oklahoma: “Education Everywhere for Everyone”). Others embedded their mission deeper in the page (e.g., Ohio), or emphasized broad educational impact without using a formal tagline (e.g., Tennessee’s opening story instead of a slogan). Statements often centered on outreach, applied research, local impact, and lifelong learning, aligning with Extension’s national identity. Several states emphasize the impact of extension through various metrics, human-centered stories, and targeted resources.

Website Design and Structure - Most websites used a top navigation banner with clearly segmented categories (e.g., programs, publications, offices, events). States like Florida and Iowa made it easy to explore topics by audience interest (e.g., lawn and garden, youth development, economic development). Most websites emphasized accessibility through intuitive navigation, prominent search functions, and program filters by interest or location. Colorado and California were the only ones identified as having a Spanish-language option for the homepage.

Conclusions and Implications

All 15 states maintained the term “Extension” in their public-facing names but took different approaches in branding clarity, mission communication, and visual alignment. Most states integrated their identity closely with their land-grant university brand by utilizing consistent logos, colors, and naming conventions, thereby reinforcing institutional credibility. However, in cases like California (UCANR) and New Jersey (NJAES), umbrella branding sometimes diluted the visibility of Extension itself, potentially hindering public recognition.

The clarity of extension’s purpose and communication of impact were the most significant differentiators. States like Iowa and Oklahoma effectively communicated the Extension’s mission and public benefit through strategic placement and purpose-driven messaging, which has the potential to improve the Extension’s outreach and performance in these states (Dermol & Sirca, 2018). Others, such as Ohio and California, were less direct, embedding their mission statements more deeply into their sites. While multiple states included strong visuals, programmatic navigation, and links to events or publications, fewer were consistent in highlighting measurable impacts or even catering to different audiences, such as offering multilingual access.

These findings align with prior research that emphasizes the importance of communicating both mission and measurable impact to enhance stakeholder engagement and public trust (Dermol & Sirca, 2018; Ebrahim, 2003; Abrams et al., 2010). As Extension continues to serve in each state, it will need to communicate its brand and value to the public to positively influence attitudes, improve connections, and foster familiarity with its brand. Further work is needed to develop this research line on extension awareness, branding, and methods for improving awareness strategies. After all, if the work is not effectively reaching the intended audience, what is it really extending?

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