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Working Smart: Increasing the Reach of Extension Programming Through Media Advertising

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Abstract: A successful Extension program requires effective marketing strategies. Extension educators commit extensive time and resources to prepare an educational program, but who will attend the event? A well prepared program with poor attendance frustrates the presenter and wastes precious Extension resources. As county programs work within the financial constraints of lean economic times, ineffective program marketing is unaffordable. This article shares the results of a study conducted to compare the enrollment numbers for FCS education programs that were promoted using either free and then paid advertising methods. Paid advertising resulted in sizeable increases in enrollment for FCS Extension programs.

Introduction

A successful Extension program requires effective marketing. Extension educators commit extensive time and resources to prepare an educational program, but who will attend the event? A well prepared program with poor attendance frustrates the presenter and wastes precious Extension resources. As county programs work within the financial constraints of lean economic times, ineffective program marketing is unaffordable.

Effective marketing takes time, creativity, and sensitivity to the motivations of the target audience (Bairstow, Berry, & Driscoll, 2002; Chappell, 1990; King & Boehlje, 2000). Tradition and experience may lead Extension personnel to gravitate towards preferred promotional methods. A recent survey of Florida Extension agents (Telg, Irani, Hurst, & Kistler, 2007) shows word of mouth to be the most-used method of promotion, with online methods the second most frequently used strategy. Least common are paid newspaper advertisements, with 98% of respondents using this method as few as 0-5 times in a year.

Extension has many free or inexpensive ways to promote its programs, including Web sites, email, brochures, flyers, newsletters, direct mailings, community calendars, and public service announcements. In some cases, Extension gets extensive newspaper coverage of programs when they are deemed newsworthy. However, if Florida programs are representative of the nation, paying for a newspaper, radio or television ad is a rare event.

Recent experience of Idaho Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension educators suggested that paid media promotion may be a good investment. In several areas of family finance and health, Idaho educators found that paid ads (newspapers, billboards, and radio) substantially increased program enrollment. Preference for free venues of promotion may be strong in Extension, but is that wise in terms of program impact? To assess the value of paid advertising, several Idaho FCS educators decided to further investigate the question.

Method and Results

FCS county educators in Idaho offered the same programs twice within a 12-month period, once with paid advertising and once without paid advertising. In four of the comparison pairs, the program with paid advertising was offered first and then offered later in the year without paid advertising. For two program pairs, the sequence was reversed. Free advertising included word of mouth, flyers, brochures, community bulletin boards, and Extension newsletters (mailed and on-line). Paid advertising varied depending on community resources and included television, radio, and newspaper.

When the programs were promoted using free outlets alone, enrollments averaged 4.5 people. In fact, three of the six programs were cancelled due to lack of enrollment. However, when paid advertising promoted the program, enrollments averaged 31.8 people. A particularly striking contrast was a program on osteoporosis, which was cancelled for lack of enrollment without paid advertising, but drew 64 attendees when it was advertised in the newspaper.

Perhaps the toughest tests of the value of paid advertising were the two programs that were offered with paid advertising first, drawing a sizeable enrollment plus waiting list (60+ people). In these cases, the excitement from the original course could have carried over to the repeat offering to produce a crowd even when promoters only relied on newsletters or word of mouth. The waiting list alone could be a rich source of attendees. However, that was not the case. One program had to be cancelled for lack of enrollment on the repeat offering, and the second program only drew four participants, despite having a 43-person waiting list when it was offered only three months earlier!

The one exception to the pattern was a diabetes nutrition program, which drew a disappointingly small group both with and without paid advertising (four and five participants, respectively). Of all the classes offered, the diabetes program had the narrowest target audience, perhaps illustrating that it may be better to work with clinics or hospitals to reach the relevant group.

Sometimes Extension programs get extensive free coverage in the local newspaper, drawing a crowd—one Boise program had 20 enrollees and 32 on the waiting list after such an article. However, when the program was offered 3 months later without the newspaper coverage, only 14 people signed up. Working with the local media can yield outstanding results, but Extension educators can't count on extensive media attention for all of the excellent programs they offer. Repeat offerings of the same workshop are particularly unlikely to be deemed newsworthy. The same program offered in a neighboring town also had excellent enrollment (20 participants, 43 on the waiting list) as a result of a modestly priced ad in the local paper.

Discussion

With shrinking Extension budgets in the current economy, it may be tempting to forgo paid media advertising—indeed it was the least used method among recently surveyed Florida Extension educators (Telg et al., 2007). However, many state Extension programs have experienced staff reductions, and it is especially important to use educator time well. This evidence shows that paid advertising is a good value for increasing the effectiveness of Extension educators.

A 2004 survey by the University of Idaho College of Agriculture and Life Sciences showed that interest in Family and Consumer Sciences topics was strong among Idaho residents. However 70% or more of respondents had not used Extension services in the past 12 months. Many times, participants comment: "I didn't realize Extension offered this program." Paid advertising is one cost-effective way to extend program outreach to area residents.

The findings presented here show strong results for media advertising, but there may be limits to the effect. For example, a program with a known limited audience (e.g., child care providers or WIC participants) may not benefit from broad-based advertisement because it is easier to reach the target group directly. Another consideration might be whether the program is well known in the community or a newly introduced curriculum.

In sum, comparisons of enrollment in FCS programs with and without paid advertising showed that a modestly priced advertisement substantially increased program enrollment. These results suggest that paid advertising may be a key element in "work smart" strategies that increase the reach of Extension programs despite budgetary constraints.

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