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An Email Model to Answer Consumer Questions During Times of Staff Shortages

Alan Majka

Assistant Extension Professor and Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Augusta, Maine
amajka@umext.maine.edu

Beth Calder

Assistant Professor and Extension Food Science Specialist
University of Maine
Orono, Maine
bcalder@umext.maine.edu

Jane Conroy

Associate Extension Professor and Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Dover-Foxcroft, Maine
jconroy@umext.maine.edu

Louise Kirkland

Extension Professor and Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Bangor, Maine
kirkland@umext.maine.edu

Nadine Reimer

Assistant Extension Professor and Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Waldoboro, Maine
nreimer@umext.maine.edu

Kate Yerxa

Assistant Extension Professor and Educator
University of Maine Cooperative Extension
Orono, Maine
kyerxa@umext.maine.edu

Abstract: UMaine Extension has increased the capacity of county offices to respond to consumer questions about nutrition, food safety, and food preservation by using an email group. Faculty, support staff, and clients reported high levels of satisfaction. Eighty-two percent reported the information received influenced their

actions, while 50% believed the information helped reduce their risk for food borne illness. Those looking for ways to rapidly address consumer questions from counties where there is lack of expertise in specific program areas may want to consider using this model.

Introduction

In an era of shrinking budgets and evolving priorities, University of Maine Cooperative Extension (UMaine Extension) has developed an efficient system to maintain quality service for our clients. Over the past decade, UMaine Extension has experienced a 68% decrease in the number of faculty positions requiring expertise in nutrition, food safety, and food preservation. As a result, many county offices no longer have staff available to answer consumer questions related to these important topics. Moreover, statewide food safety and nutrition specialist positions have been frozen due to budget cuts.

Because Cooperative Extension has a long history of being the primary source of information in the state for these topics and many clients still lack the skills, equipment, or connectivity to find reliable information on the Web, UMaine Extension continues to receive many questions through phone calls. Often, callers expect an immediate answer because they are in the middle of canning or food preparation. Local support staff members were left with the challenging task of searching for someone available with the expertise needed to provide reliable information in a timely manner.

Several innovative approaches to answer Extension client questions have been developed. An "answer line" that used two fulltime home economists and two toll free phone lines to respond to client questions was used by Iowa State University (Williams, 1984). Later, a "telephone hotline" was described where client questions were answered by trained operators who were supported by a team of specialists (Molgaard & Phillips, 1991). Master Gardeners used a phone response manual to answer horticulture questions posed to a "Phone Response Team" (Patterson, 1995). Rather than answering client questions directly, the "Family and Consumer Sciences Rapid Response Center" used dedicated staff and specialists to provide technical support to local agents (Brannan & Gray, 1998). A team of Master Gardeners monitored and responded to horticulture questions posted by the public on an electronic "Ask a Master Gardener" Web input page (Meyer & Jarvis, 2003).

Methods

Based on an assessment of support staff and faculty, we developed a system that would meet the following criteria.

- System would require no additional funds or staff.
- Clients would receive answers from qualified faculty members.
- Instead of asking the client to make additional calls with the consequent perception of "getting the run around," qualified faculty members would contact the client directly.
- Responses would be timely, preferably immediate, with the intention to provide an answer within 24 hours.

- Staff members looking for assistance with client questions would know that the question was being answered.
- There would be no duplication with multiple faculty members responding to the same question.
- Subject matter of questions, response time, geographic region, client and support staff contact information, and other data would be collected to assist in program planning and evaluation.

A protocol was established in which staff in a county or state office who received client questions by phone or email would direct the question and client contact information to an email group consisting of several qualified Extension faculty members throughout the state. Those in the email group volunteered to serve on the "Nutrition, Food Safety and Food Preservation Call Team." Currently, the call team is composed of five educators with considerable nutrition, food safety, and food preservation experience. Two of the educators are registered dietitians, and one team member is a food science specialist.

When a call team member was available to answer the question, he or she replied to all (the staff member who sent the question, as well as the call team email group), that the question was "being answered." This let the staff members know that the question was being answered and prevented multiple team members from responding to the same question. After the call team member directly contacted the client and answered the question, another email was sent back to all again that the "question was answered." All email to the call team was automatically saved in a public folder for later retrieval to be used for evaluation and program planning.

The system was announced and described at a statewide support staff conference. Support staff from throughout the state received a laminated card with step-by-step instructions on how to use the call team. The call team was implemented in July 2005. At the time of implementation, and at the beginning of every holiday and harvest season, an email was sent to all Extension staff reminding them about the call team and how to use the email group.

Impact

From October 15, 2007 through October 14, 2008, 149 calls were forwarded to the call team (Table 1). The majority of clients were female. Almost all of the questions were asked over the phone, with very few received by email. Not surprisingly, more calls were forwarded to the call team from counties without faculty qualified to answer questions. Most calls were made during the height of harvest and holiday seasons. There was little difference in time of day.

Table 1.

Description of Calls Sent to University of Maine Cooperative Extension Nutrition, Food Safety and Food Preservation Call Team from October 15, 2007 â October 14, 2008

Subject	
Food Safety	27.5%
Food Preservation	65.1%

Nutrition	4.0%
Other	3.4%

Fifty-one callers were interviewed by phone to determine the impact of their contact, as well as the level of customer satisfaction (Table 2). Over 50% thought the call team helped them to reduce their risk for food borne illness.

Table 2.

Phone Survey Responses by Clients Who Were Contacted by the University of Maine Cooperative Extension Nutrition, Food Safety and Food Preservation Call Team from October 15, 2007 â October 14, 2008

Did the information you received:	Yes	No
Influence what you did at the time?	82%	18%
Influence what you've done since?	71%	29%
Do you think the information you received helped you to reduce your risk of a food borne illness?	58%	42%
Would you call UMaine Cooperative Extension again?	100%	0%

Twenty staff members throughout the state who referred questions to the call team responded to a questionnaire (Table 3). Almost all reported they would like to have similar call teams available to answer client questions for other program areas. All reported that they were "usually" or "always" happy with the response time.

Table 3.

Survey Responses by University of Maine Cooperative Extension Staff Members Who Sent Calls to Nutrition, Food Safety and Food Preservation Call Team from October 15, 2007 â October 14, 2008

Question	Yes	No	Don't Know
Did it save you time compared to referring the questions elsewhere?	90%	0%	10%
Was it helpful to receive an email message stating that someone was going to contact the customer?	95%	5%	0%
Was it helpful to receive an email message stating that the customer's question had been answered?	90%	5%	5%
Do you think the call team results in better customer service for people who contact your office?	100%	0%	0%
Would you like to see similar call teams developed for other program areas?	95%	0%	5%

Conclusion

The Nutrition, Food Safety and Food Preservation Call Team has benefited Maine citizens who have received reliable and timely answers to their questions, regardless of local staff expertise. Educators have the peace of mind that food safety/preservation and nutrition questions in their home counties will be answered when they are out of the office. Support staff members have an efficient way to have client questions answered. This email tool is an efficient, inexpensive model that may be used to continue to provide quality customer service in any program area despite staff shortages.

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