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A Successful Multi-Institutional Blog for Transferring Garden and Landscape Information to the Public

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Abstract: In July 2009 four faculty members from four different institutions created a blog to educate consumers and professionals about plant-related issues. Online resources were used to measure the number of times that the blog was viewed and its impacts. The blog averages about 200 views a day, and 80% of those responding to a survey could name specific impacts that the blog had on their gardening and landscape practices.

Introduction

Blogs offer an option for disseminating information that is very different from more conventional systems such as fact sheets, face-to-face seminars, and consulting because of the exceptionally small lag time between the time that information is posted and the time that it can be read worldwide. Extension personnel are just beginning to understand the diverse uses of blogs and to use them effectively. As Deborah Coates

wrote in 2004 "Weblogs in Extension offer the potential to promote trust, create new conversations, filter and disseminate knowledge, and build strong internal networks. In the process they will also change who our clients are and how we interact with them" (Coates, 2004). Private blogs are well known as resources for discovering hot trends or the newest information about what a particular band or author is working on. Within Extension circles blogs have become more commonplace, but they are often infrequently visited and are targeted towards specific groups such as participants in a 4H program (Ashton, Galloway, & Bourdeau, 2010) or Master Gardeners in a particular location.

In July, 2009, four faculty members from four different land-grant institutions began a blog initially intended to deliver information to the gardener and homeowner. This blog is called The Garden Professors, is hosted by Washington State University Extension, and is located online at <http://www.gardenprofessors.com>. The faculty members involved in this blog each post one article a week, with each participant assigned to a particular day, with the exception of one participant who posts twice a week. Posts may be on any topic, though health and care of landscapes is the predominant theme, and Friday posts generally including some sort of quiz for blog readers to take. In general posts are not made on weekends. There are no formal rules for any of the participants beyond doing their best to keep up with their posting.

Information posted on The Garden Professors includes a wide range of information on caring for and selecting plants for the landscape. Topics have included such things as how concerned to be about certain invasive plants, how appropriate balanced fertilizers are as general use fertilizers, how to plant trees, and whether peanuts will grow in Minnesota. Comments are accepted from those viewing the blog and are frequently answered by the faculty involved.

Gaining an Audience

To gain an audience, the members of The Garden Professors sought publicity by asking a popular gardening blog, GardenRant, to review the site. The review was a positive one, and on the 2 days after the review was posted, just over 900 computers visited the site. When giving talks across their states and the country participants always mention the blog site, and, because all of the information from the blog is available to search engines and the blog purposely deals with topics relevant to many people, there are a number of Web searches referred directly to the site from search engines such as Google. Our readership has expanded from the intended home gardener audience to include nursery and landscape professionals, educators, and others interested in science-based garden writing.

Assessment and Results

One of the most important, yet difficult to quantify aspects of Extension activities is measuring the impacts that these activities have. Blogs are on-line and so are usually compatible with online tools such as Google Analytics. Because of this it is possible to document the number of unique visits made to the blog per day. Additionally, the online tool SurveyMonkey allows bloggers to survey those coming to their site, asking them relevant questions about their behavior relative to what they read on the site.

According to Google Analytics, the number of visits to The Garden Professors from January 1, 2010 until December 31, 2010 was 71,126. Of these visits, 36.35% came from referring sites, such as GardenRant, 38.81% of this traffic came directly from people going directly to the site, 22.45% of the visits came from search engine referrals, and 2.4% of the visits came from unknown sources. Web traffic came from 62 countries.

On December 29, 2010 an online survey (Figure 1) was posted on the blog to assess why people read The

Garden Professors and what types of behavioral changes have occurred because of information found on this blog. One hundred twenty people filled out this survey. The results showed that 89.2% of respondents read The Garden Professors for science-based information about gardening, while 84.2%, 32.5%, 62.5% and 65% of respondents respectively read The Garden Professors because of the interesting and relevant topics, the ability to engage bloggers in questions and answers, its usefulness as a continuing education resource, and its entertaining approach to gardening science.

Eighty percent of those who filled out the online survey indicated that reading The Garden Professors had caused some kind of behavioral change. Reduced use of chemicals including fertilizers and pesticides was the most prevalent reported effect of reading The Garden Professors, with 43.3% of respondents indicating that they had reduced chemical usage. Respondents also reported reduced use of potentially invasive species and improved ability to protect soil including erosion and runoff at 33.3% and 39.2% respectively.

Figure 1.
Survey Used for Assessing The Garden Professors

1. Why do you read The Garden Professors blog? (Multiple choices are allowable.)

- Science-based information about gardening
- Interesting and relevant topics
- Ability to engage bloggers in questions and answers
- Usefulness as a continuing education resource
- Entertaining approach to gardening science

Other (please specify)

2. What types of personal behavior changes can you attribute to information you've found on this blog?

- Reduced use of chemicals, including fertilizers and pesticides
- Reduced use of potentially invasive species
- Improved ability to protect soil, including reducing erosion and runoff

Other (please specify)

3. Are there other reasons you have found this blog valuable?

4. Are there improvements you would like to see in the blog regarding CONTENT?

5. Are there improvements you would like to see in the blog in terms of STRUCTURE (e.g. usability, function, or anything else not related to content)?

Conclusion

The Garden Professors is a successful Extension-based blog that reaches a wide audience. It has provided a rapid and straightforward means for its participants to disseminate information to the gardening public and, because of easy-to-use online tools, also provides an easy way to quantify impacts. Blogs seem to be an underused method for disseminating information, and Extension professionals who seek to reach a wider audience should consider using a blog. To reach the largest audience possible, it is useful to consider seeking opportunities for publicity through already established blogs or other websites that target a similar audience.

References

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