



December 2011
Volume 49 Number 6
Article Number 6TOT3

[Return to Current Issue](#)

Using Technology 24/7 for Regional Assistance After Shutdown of Major Industries

Patricia Brinkman

Assistant Professor/Extension Educator
Family and Consumer Sciences
Fayette County
Washington C.H., Ohio
brinkman.93@osu.edu

Melanie Hart

Extension Educator
Family and Consumer Sciences
Greene County
Xenia, Ohio
hart.382@osu.edu

Christine Olinsky

Assistant Professor/Extension Educator
Family and Consumer Sciences
Montgomery County
Dayton, Ohio
Olinsky.1@osu.edu

Rose Fisher Merkowitz

Associate Professor/Extension Educator
Community Development
Miami Valley EERA
Wilmington, Ohio
Olinsky.1@osu.edu

Ohio State University Extension

Abstract: People facing unemployment or who are underemployed need access to community and financial information and resources 24/7. Collaborating with community agencies and organizations, FCS educators developed a website with comprehensive local and state resources and educational tools that the consumer might otherwise not have been aware were available. Although the website was developed for five specific counties, statistics have shown that people in other counties, states and countries have found some of the information valuable. An additional tool, a Facebook page, provides updates on current issues each week.

Situation

"I thought I'd work at DHL forever and I had no idea what to do when it closed." This was the sentiment of many employees of DHL (air freight), GM, Delphi (automotive industry), and related businesses that faced closure when these major employers left southwest Ohio in 2008. Over 15,000 jobs were lost in a five county region; in many families, both income earners lost their jobs.

DHL pulled out of Clinton County, cutting 10,000 jobs, according to a report on "60 Minutes" that aired Jan. 25, 2009. One of three households in Wilmington and the surrounding area had someone working at the airport. This captured the concerns of our nation and national media as evidenced by reports on Voice of America, NPR radio, *Farm World Magazine*, and *The New York Times*.

Extension Takes Action

Extension educators in the five counties most affected by this regional crisis realized the opportunity to use their expertise to address this situation. The use of unbiased, research-based materials in Family and Consumer Sciences could be harnessed to provide clientele with a resource providing social, emotional, and financial information as events unfolded.

The project started by reaching out to our counties with newspaper articles, radio programs, and public forums. Residents and local bankers provided feedback that we were "right on target" with our information. Incorporating the additional educational information other agencies were providing, we used technology to reach clientele 24/7. The nature of these industries called for around-the-clock accessibility as jobs ran day and night shifts, so providing information around the clock was important. Because many people are hesitant to discuss finances publicly, technology allowed us to meet needs of those most affected by the downturn. Using a website allows Extension professionals to focus educational efforts and fulfill their role of providing unbiased, research-based information (Kallioranta, Vlosky, & Leavengood, 2006).

How Technology Assisted

Confidentiality and anonymity were provided by the website as it was developed to meet the needs of the targeted demographic group (Andrews, Preece, & Turoff, 2002; Bellini & Vargas, 2003) and was established with a mission and reason for existence (Bellini & Vargas, 2003). Also supporting the use of a website was a 2008 survey of farmers that found they used more technologies than students. Gender made no difference in the use of technology (Guenthner & Swan, 2011). Therefore, 5 County Solutions <www.5countysolutions.osu.edu> was created with support from OSU Extension's Communications and Technology Department and local office support. The website includes the following resources and tools for individuals and families:

- State and National Resources: Extension, Ohio Benefits Bank, Community Development, Financial Stability Resources
- Essentials: Food, Clothing, Shelter, Stress Management, and Taxes
- County Resources: Local Resources relevant to each county

- Tools: Financial and Career links
- News: Blogs, newspapers, YouTube, television, radio
- Support: Family Fundamental Newsletters, information on COBRA Laws
- Avoiding Scams: Links
- Small Business Resources: Help for those considering starting a small business

A YouTube linkage was added to the site, and a Facebook account created at www.facebook.com/5countysolutions. Referrals have been made to the website as a one-stop for information on local services. Weekly Facebook postings focus on hot topics. These technology resources were chosen because one can track user analysis.

Since the website started on November 30, 2008, there have been 5,058 visits; 11,325 page views; 2.24 pages/visits; and 77.16% new visits. This indicated 22.84% were repeat users and were visiting more than one page per visit. The percentage of content usage was divided between Home Page only (26.33), Essentials (17.7), County Resources (16.67), Index (7.25), and Tools (6.73). Top traffic sources are Google (29%), Direct (26%), Yahoo (6%) and Myabx.com (5%), where DHL provided web access to employees.

Impact

Although our initial intent was to serve the five counties in our region, it extended to 213 cities in Ohio, 47 states, and 44 countries/territories. Table 1 has examples of the scope and reach of the website as of March 11, 2011.

Table 1.
5,058 Visits from 44 Countries/Territories

Country	Number of Visits
United States	4,940
Côte d'Ivoire	29
India	8
Nigeria	7
United Kingdom	6
Canada	5
Russia	5
Malaysia	3

Vietnam

3

A resource directory was created in collaboration with 130 agencies linked on the website. Media coverage of the website included local newspapers, *Farm World Magazine* (4/21/10), Channel 12 in Cincinnati, Voice of America on NPR radio (10/21/10), WOSU radio (4/26/10), *OSU Extension 2010 Annual Report*, *OSU Today* (the university's faculty and staff daily e-news on March 11, 2011), and Headliner for OSU Extension Website (3/12/2010).

Marketing efforts included bookmarks displaying <5countysolutions.osu.edu> distributed at DHL and ABX Transition Centers, county departments of Job and Family Services, unemployment service centers, Benefit Banks, employment agencies, and food pantries. Internally, all Extension offices in the state were notified of the resources available on the website and their common utility to any county throughout the state.

How to Replicate

First, you will need to assess the needs of an audience and what information would be important to have available to them. Authors determined that, through collaboration, they developed a more comprehensive website that was better able to address needs of the specified audience than any one could have done alone. Contacting your institution's technology department early in the planning process allows for awareness of scope and availability issues to be addressed in the initial planning stages.

Including community agencies and organizations allowed us to provide information about far-reaching resources and assistance that the consumer might otherwise not have been aware of existed

An important aspect of the site that gave it a far-reaching, universal utility was meeting specific needs while also providing beneficial information for communities across the state. The site therefore has focus but provides for a fairly common need for information and resources adaptable for the times as a whole. With more resources online, Extension educators should take advantage of using the Internet to provide data and information (Barta, Woods, Dauffenbach, & Wallace, 2004).

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