

The Minnesota Maple Series: Community-Generated Knowledge Delivered Through an Extension Website

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Abstract: *Extension continuously seeks novel and effective approaches to outreach and education. The recent retirement of a longtime content specialist catalyzed members of University of Minnesota Extension's Forestry team to reflect on our instructional capacity (internal and external) and educational design in the realm of maple syrup production. We responded by developing an educational maple blog series that incorporated faculty and community expertise through a participatory, peer-to-peer approach. The blog series expanded and strengthened the state's maple knowledge network, met contributors' and users' content needs and expectations, influenced maple practices, and retained program flexibility for adaptation.*

Our Challenge

Delivering quality content to family woodland owners to support maple syrup production has long been a priority for University of Minnesota Extension Forestry. The 2010 retirement of our longtime maple specialist challenged our team to restructure our maple-related offerings. We sought novel approaches to deal with several interrelated challenges:

- Transition content from a beloved and seasoned specialist;
- Identify and cultivate new instructional capacity inside and outside Extension;
- Offer quality education designed to foster behavior adoption and change.

With syrup season fast approaching, we sought solutions to address each of these concerns, while allowing future adaptation. We elected to develop a blog series (Kinsey, 2010; Coates, 2004) on the Extension Forestry site My Minnesota Woods <<http://www.myminnesotawoods.umn.edu/>> and used participatory techniques to enrich the overall blog experience.

Participatory Blogging

The 2011 Minnesota Maple Series (Figure 1) included nine weekly posts, running from 21 February through 21 April, plus a series index. Extension educators developed and coordinated the series; determined overarching themes and specific topics; and contributed content and technical skills. Finally, educators selected and recruited maple syrup producers from around the state as contributors.

Figure 1.

Screen Shot from the 2011 Minnesota Maple Series



The series tapped real-world expertise, making it widely available. We felt learners would relate to the experiences of local producers (their peers), chosen to represent diverse geography, production systems, and cultural traditions. This allowed us to cover a range of production considerations in a single series. Weekly posts introduced producers and shared their stories through words and images, reflecting their conditions, approaches, and objectives. This approach developed Extension's relationship with knowledgeable citizens. The technology permitted quick publication of text and images, bringing nearly real-time information to our target audience throughout the season, from both Extension educators and their local peers: active producers.

Results

Website Analytics

We analyzed pageviews, visits, and unique visitors (Figure 2) for all posts with "maple" in the title for the period 1 January - 19 September 2011. While the series ran for only 9 weeks, the expanded window provides context for maple-related site activity. Some of the content analyzed predated the series.

Figure 2.
Understanding Web Metrics Terminology

"Pageview" - A view of a page on your site. A reload counts as an additional pageview.

"Visits" - The number of individual sessions initiated by all the visitors to your site

"Unique visitor" - A visitor that can be declared with a high level of confidence as unique to the site.

- Source: Google Analytics

Table 1 presents data for the most popular maple posts during the period. There were 3,620 pageviews and 1,473 visits. The majority occurred during the series (Figure 3). Unique visitors to posts ranged from 84 to 288 (due to overlap, visitor totals are not added). The most popular was the series index, with 594 pageviews from 288 unique visitors.

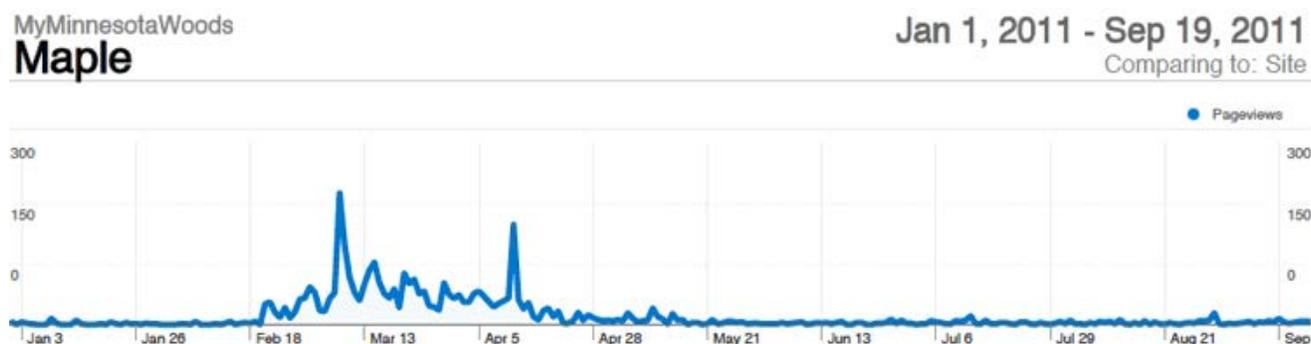
How did series traffic compare with the rest of the site? Within the series timeframe, 21 February - 21 April 2011, My Minnesota Woods' most popular post registered 910 pageviews from 434 unique visitors. In the same period, the most popular maple post had 542 pageviews from 267 unique visitors, and the series index was the sixth most viewed page overall, with seven maple posts among the website's top 20 posts.

Table 1.
Site statistics for Maple Blog Posts on My Minnesota Woods, January 1 - September 19 2011

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Post Title	Post Date	Page Views	Visits	Unique Visitors
2011mapleseries [series index]	n/a	594	247	288
Timber Sweet	3 Mar 2011	495	195	274
Announcing the 2011 Minnesota maple series	21 Feb 2011	427	195	272
Making maple syrup at the Peterson farm	25 Feb 2011	451	205	278
Drinking Maple (non-series)	9 Mar 2009	226	147	174
Poem of the Month: Maple syrup (non-series)		220	114	173
Spirit Lake Native Products	10 Mar 2011	192	80	148
Updates from week of March 14	15 Mar 2011	269	97	165
Fuel systems and updates from week of March 28	31 Mar 2011	129	26	88
Charlie Nahgahnuh and Updates	23 Mar 2011	176	45	102
Saps and Syrups in Minnesota (non-series)	20 Mar 2009	277	n/a	177
Value added products and updates	8 Apr 2011	139	34	84
Our final post	14 Apr 2011	138	33	88
Totals for all "maple" posts		3620	1473	

Figure 3.
Time Series of Total Daily Maple Pageviews for the Period



Users

While useful, traffic tells us little about content value. For this, we sought direct feedback from readers. All series posts allowed readers to add questions or comments either below the post or in a linked discussion space. Finally, we linked an evaluation form to each post to elicit directed feedback. Unfortunately, only 18 readers followed the survey link. We believe the embedded survey approach could be better crafted to encourage higher response rates.

Table 2 highlights the results of the evaluation form. Respondents supported our goals of increasing user knowledge and peer connectivity. One shared: "I am in the early years of collecting sap so I do not have anything... to share but have learned a few things." Another wrote: "I just read the blog and it is perfect! In fact, the next email ... was a DNR forester from Iowa that had a question!" Most respondents had applied or planned to apply new knowledge in their practice. One commented: "We plan on cooking some sap... and got a very good idea on how to organize the wood under the kettle" [from an embedded photo]. All respondents

found the blog appropriate and useful, and nearly all wanted to see more presented in the same format.

Table 2.
Select Results* from the Embedded Survey

Survey Question	N	Strongly Agree	Agree	Percent Strongly Agree or Agree
I have learned something about Maple Syrup Production by reading this blog series.	18	9	9	100
This blog series has helped me to connect with (directly or indirectly) or feel connected to another Maple Syrup Producer or Producer Network.	18	9	9	100
I have used or plan to use knowledge acquired through this Blog Series.	18	6	10	89
The authors have clearly presented appropriate and useful information.	18	14	4	100
I would like to see information presented in this way for other forest products or activities that occur throughout the year.	18	12	5	94
*As of 20 September 2011				

Producers

We also obtained feedback from two of our four featured producers. Both found the series and their involvement worthwhile. One shared: "It was interesting to see other producers' experiences." Producers found the series to be "an easy way for us to help people," and Extension's involvement allowed them to contribute in a time-constrained season. One commented: "The blog made us aware that there [are] other ways to reach out to people and share our love of making maple syrup." Producers would have appreciated more insight into traffic on their content, which can easily be provided. Overall, producers responded positively and showed interest in future participation in similar offerings.

Internal

Finally, participating faculty met to evaluate the experience, *ex post*. Engaging community experts in program delivery was a clear positive, as was integration of existing resources (e.g., national and regional publications, online content, etc.) with real-time local content. A noted challenge was the time investment for series development and delivery, including site visits and production of weekly posts.

Summary

Participatory blogging represents a powerful tool for content development and delivery. It strategically pairs Extension's content expertise with community expertise. Likewise, it develops and reinforces university-community partnerships. Community participation also offers a means to engineer diversity into programs. Finally, a series builds and sustains energy around an issue over a period of time. We recommend the approach where knowledge is decentralized and/or community based and when learning opportunities develop over discrete timeframes. Examples might include various garden projects, county and state fair season, or seasonal gathering (e.g., balsam bough/wreath making season). Finally, we recommend that educators budget accordingly for time commitments associated with new technologies and production.

References

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