

Successful Statewide Walking Program Websites

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Abstract: Statewide Extension walking programs are making an effort to increase physical activity levels in America. An investigation of all 20 of these programs revealed that 14 use websites as marketing and educational tools, which could prove useful as the popularity of Internet communities continues to grow. Website usability information and an analysis of all 14 sites were combined to determine characteristics that may enhance the efficacy of these sites. Application of these findings could allow Extension professionals to more efficiently communicate with the public about exercise, nutrition, and state walking programs.

Introduction

Extension professionals strive to educate community members about healthy lifestyles, including nutrition and physical activity (PA). This role is becoming increasingly important as obesity levels climb at an alarming rate and threaten everything from quality of life to the economy (United Health Foundation, 2009). The National Health Interview Survey estimated that in 2009, 27% of Americans over age 18 were obese, 35% were overweight, and 55% had never participated in any "periods of vigorous leisure-time physical activity" (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010).

Extension professionals have already begun to call attention to the importance of PA by implementing statewide walking programs. Although all programs have unique features, the majority works to encourage PA among youth and adults in the community. Thus, it is logical that recruitment, education, and communication tools found useful by one program may similarly enhance another program. For instance, some states have taken advantage of the Internet's popularity by employing walking program websites as tools for participant recruitment and education. This article identifies qualities of effective walking program websites that may promote PA and healthy lifestyle.

Methods

Walking programs were defined as any initiative by state Extension professionals to challenge community members

to increase PA, particularly through walking. In addition to being active in 2011, the programs were to occur for at least 3 weeks, once per year, and were to involve a method of tracking miles walked or minutes of PA performed. These criteria were formulated after assessing the mission statements of various Extension walking programs. Most programs work to help participants make gains in health and fitness, so some time is needed to allow participants to start and adhere to an exercise program. A method of recording PA was required so that participant improvement over the course of the program could be assessed. Extension websites for each state were searched for information on any program matching this definition. Extension offices that did not indicate any such program were contacted via email or telephone to confirm that, in fact, no yearly program had been implemented.

To objectively evaluate the site's efficacy, each website was awarded one point for the presence of each of the following items (Table 1):

- Mile tracking ability to allow for numerical recording of progress
- Program information, such as dates, fees, and mission statement
- Contact information to make it simple for participants to ask questions
- Educational resources to encourage positive lifestyle changes
- Link to Extension website to promote cooperative Extension services

Table 1.
Statewide Walking Program Websites with Usability Criteria

Program Name	URL	Miles Track	Program Info	Contact Info	Educational Resources	Link to CE	Total Points
*Drop Everything and Walk (DEW) Pennsylvania	< http://extension.psu.edu/pike/events/registration-deadline-for-d.e.w.-drop-everything-and-walk-starting-april-10 >	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
FIT Extension (Virginia)	< http://www.fitextension.ext.vt.edu/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	4
Mississippi in Motion (MM)	< http://msucares.com/health/health04/ms_in_motion/index.html >	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Walk Across Arizona (WAAZ)	< http://cals.arizona.edu/walkacrossaz/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
*Walk Across Arkansas	< http://www.arfamilies.org/health_nutrition/walkacrossar/default.htm >	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Walk Across Maryland	< http://walkmaryland.umd.edu/ >	Y	Y	Y	N	N	3
Walk Across Tennessee	< http://walkacrosstn.tennessee.edu/ >	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Walk Across Texas! (WAT!)	< http://walkacrosstexas.tamu.edu/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5

Walk Across Utah	< http://walkacrossutah.wikispaces.com/ >	N	Y	Y	Y	N	3
Walk Kansas	< http://www.walkkansas.org/ >	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	4
Walk Nebraska	< http://www.walknebraska.org/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	4
Walk New Hampshire	< http://www.walknh.org/fhc/initiatives/walknh/ >	N	Y	Y	Y	N	3
*Walk New Jersey Point-to-Point Challenge	< https://www.getmovinggethealthynj.rutgers.edu/walking_program/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	5
Walk North Dakota	< http://www.walknd.com/ >	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	4

Y=Yes, N=No to the criteria

*These programs do not have their own independent sites, but are featured on their state's Extension website

§ All websites were accessed and available online on April 4, 2011.

Results

We found that 20 states offer a statewide walking program to encourage PA among community members (Figure 1). Of these, 14 programs offer walking program websites (Figure 2).

Figure 1.
States with Extension Walking Programs

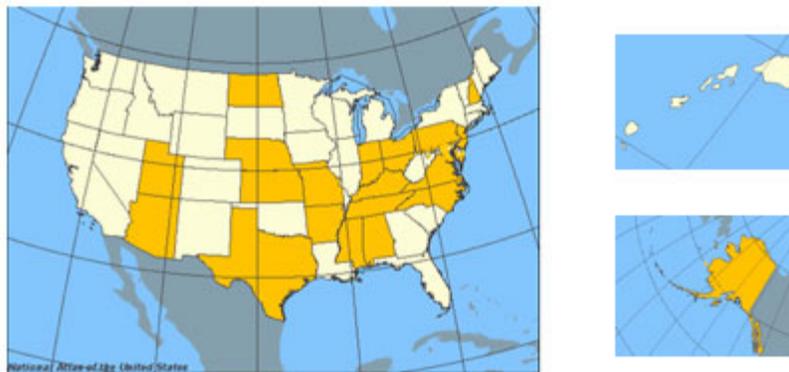


Figure 2.
States with Extension Walking Program Websites





Table 1 shows the names of the statewide walking programs and objective evaluation items we defined (see Method) and the total points earned by each website. All websites displayed contact information on the homepage, and 93% also included educational resources related to either walking or healthy lifestyle patterns in general. Only 57% had a link to the Cooperative Extension website, and 57% offered a PA recording system.

Discussion

Value of Walking Program Websites

A report on the "MAP-IT" program—a program similar to many of the statewide walking programs—revealed that a method of exercise logging was needed to improve the efficacy of the program (Morgan, 2006). Websites have the potential to solve this problem by providing an efficient method of exercise tracking.

Furthermore, websites may help increase participation in the program. The Kentucky walking program (which does not use a website) has had approximately 390 participants in the past 6 years, whereas the Walk Across Texas! (WAT!) site claims "thousands of Texans" have participated since 1996. From 2001 to 2010, the Walk Across Arizona (WAAZ) program included 10,426 participants from all age groups (Hongu, Block, Sanchez, Hoelscher Day, & Harris, 2010). It is possible that the WAT! and WAAZ program websites provided increased marketing for the program due to the escalating popularity of Web-based communities (Kallioranta, Vlosky, & Leavengood, 2006).

Qualities of an Effective Website

The following characteristics may further enhance the marketing and educational capabilities of walking program websites:

Audience Appeal

Audience appeal may be created through a mission statement and appropriate background information (Bellini & Vargas, 2003). For example, both the WAT! and WAAZ homepages display brief yet concise mission statements, in addition to inviting photographs to attract viewers who may be interested in starting an exercise program. Website aesthetics also either attract or deter viewers by helping to shape a first impression of both the website and walking program (Kuan, Bock, & Vathanophas, 2008).

Navigability

Ease of navigability is particularly important to a user-friendly website (Zhang, von Dran, Blake, & Pipithsuksunt, 2001). The Walk Across Nebraska website uses a clearly placed navigation bar to outline the site and has convenient login and "Get Started" buttons from the homepage.

Content

Website content is considered by some to be one of the most important aspects of an educational website (Zhang, et al., 2001). Walking program websites should provide ample health references through the utilization of a variety of information-sharing tools, including discussions, articles, and quick facts to appeal to many audience members (Kallioranta, et al., 2006). For instance, the WAAZ website provides health-related newsletters and quick "Did you know?" facts throughout the site.

Conclusions

Statewide walking programs have the potential to encourage healthy lifestyle changes for communities throughout the nation. When paired with a dynamic website, these programs may become even more effective in providing educational resources for community members, increasing awareness about Extension offices, and encouraging participation through marketing techniques.

Analysis of participation and success rates would allow for a more precise evaluation of the efficacy of websites in the promotion of these walking programs and, ultimately, the promotion of PA and healthy lifestyle changes. However, basic Web design principles may be an important step forward to making these websites user-friendly marketing and educational tools for walking programs.

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