Targeted Food Marketing to Youth: Engaging Professionals in an Online Environment

Abstract

The use of technology provides unique ways to create an engaged online community of learning for professionals that can be integrated into existing and future Extension programming. The Targeted Food Marketing to Youth online professional development course uses strategies and tools to create and support an engaged online community.

Mary Jo Katras
Extension Educator &
Extension Associate
Professor
Andover, Minnesota
mkatras@umn.edu

Kelly Kunkel
Extension Educator &
Extension Associate
Professor
Mankato, Minnesota
kunke003@umn.edu

Sara R. Croymans
Extension Educator
and Extension
Professor
Morris, Minnesota
croym001@umn.edu

Brianna Routh
Extension Educator &
Assistant Extension
Professor
Worthington,
Minnesota
brouth@umn.edu

Mary Schroeder
Extension Educator &
Extension Associate
Professor
Marshall, Minnesota
hedin007@umn.edu

Carrie Ann Olson
Extension Educator &
Associate Extension
Professor
Morris, Minnesota
olson166@umn.edu

University of
Minnesota Extension

Introduction

Using technology to deliver quality professional development opportunities is not new to Extension. Educators have been participating in professional development activities online for years (Williamson & Smoak, 2005; Murphrey & Coppernoll, 2006; Senyurekli, Dworkin, & Dickinson, 2006). However, with new technological advances, it is no longer enough just to upload content online and let the participant navigate through the course with little or no guidance. Rather, instructors need to be mindful of the participants' learning experiences and be purposeful in how material and activities are delivered (Robideau & Vogel, 2011; Robideau, Link, & Matthes, 2013). This article highlights the strategies and tools used by an online nutrition-based professional development course to create and support an engaged online community.

Program Description

Childhood obesity is a multi-faceted issue, influenced by many factors. One of these factors is food and beverage marketing, which has a strong influence on the decision-making process concerning the types of food children, adolescents, and parents consume, and may contribute to an unhealthy

diet (Federal Trade Commission, 2012). Recognizing a need for increased knowledge and accessible training for professionals working in this topic area, a team of multi-disciplinary University of Minnesota Extension educators worked collaboratively to develop Targeted Food Marketing to Youth (TFMY), a self-paced 8-week online course for professionals. The goal for this course was twofold: to increase professionals' knowledge of current food marketing strategies and to create an online learning environment that used a variety of strategies and tools to create a course that was interactive and engaging for both participants and instructors.

Strategies and Tools

One critical component of a successful online course is engagement (Ingram, 2005; Robideau & Vogel, 2011; Robideau et al., 2013). To create an effective and engaging online community of learning, multiple strategies and tools must be used (Ingram, 2005). With the rapid development of online technology, there are often many tools to choose from, but instructors must choose the strategies or tools that best support the goals of the course. Ingram (2005) states the tools selected for a course should help to create an engaged online learning environment by keeping the attention of the learner, allowing the learner to apply what he or she has learned, and to support collaboration among course participants and instructor. Below is a description of the eight strategies the instructors used to create the TFMY online learning community.

Online Introductions

Providing the opportunity for instructors and participants to introduce themselves at the beginning of an online course creates an online community, which fosters a shared sense of engagement. In the TFMY course, an introduction forum was added as the first task for participants to complete. In this forum, course instructors and participants were asked to introduce themselves by sharing about themselves and their work. They were also encouraged to respond to at least two other participants' introductions in an effort to create an "online meet & greet."

Narrated Presentations

Each of the TFMY course modules contains a narrated presentation by one of the course instructors. The narration of the presentation created a way for course participants to listen to an instructor rather than having to read a series of informational slides. This tool provided content on a specific topic delivered in a way that engaged the participant and presented a knowledge-building opportunity.

Case Study

For the TFMY course, a case study was developed and woven into each of the course modules. The case study gave participants the opportunity to problem solve and apply the module specific content. As a tool, a case study helps participants connect their learning to a real-life situation.

Discussion Questions

Each of the modules had a set of discussion questions based on the information shared in that module. Discussion questions asked about module content, opinions related to the topic, observations in their community, case study-related questions, and application of the materials to their work. The discussion forum is set up to have participants post their responses and comment on other participants' posts. Participants were encouraged to comment on at least two other discussion posts. A goal of the discussions for the course was for participant's to engage others and apply new knowledge learned to his or her own professional work.

Quizzes

Each of the modules in the TFMY course has a brief quiz based on the materials covered. The quiz served as a strategy for knowledge building but also a tool to gauge the effectiveness of the delivery of the content.

Evaluation Survey

The course evaluation component helps to promote collaboration between participants and instructor. The evaluation survey gives the participant the opportunity to provide feedback on the content and delivery of the module. Based on evaluation survey responses, the instructors have revised module content and delivery.

Real-Time Chat Sessions

To create real-time interaction between instructors and participants, two online chat sessions were used. One week prior to the chat session, participants were given an article to read that would be discussed during the chat session. The use of real-time chat session allowed instructors and participants a way to collaboratively participate in a course activity.

Weekly Communication via Instructor

In a self-paced online course it is important for participants to have regular check-ins with the course instructors. The TFMY course has six instructors, each taking lead at specific times throughout the course by sending weekly email communications, answering content- and technology-based questions, and monitoring discussion forums.

Conclusion

The TFMY online course used multiple strategies and tools to engage participants and instructors in an online learning environment. This interactive course provided specific content and activities so participants could develop an understanding of the current food marketing to youth research and resources and readily integrate it into current and future programs with parents, youth, and communities.

References

Federal Trade Commission. (2012). *FTC releases follow-up study detailing promotional activities,*

expenditures, and nutritional profiles of food marketed to children and adolescents . Retrieved from: http://www.ftc.gov/opa/2012/12/foodmarketing.shtm

Ingram, A. L. (2005). Engagement in online learning communities. In J. Bourne and J. C. Moore (eds.), *Elements of quality online education: engaging communities* . Volume 6 in the Sloan-C Series. Needham, MA: Sloan Consortium.

Murphrey, T. P., & Coppernoll, S. (2006). Facilitating the adoption of an online conferencing system —A recipe for success. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 44(3) Article 3IAW1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2006june/iw1.php

Robideau, K., Link, A., & Mathes, K. (2013). *Bridging the distance in online learning* . University of Minnesota Extension Fall Program Conference, Oct. 2013, Duluth Entertainment Convention Center, Duluth, MN.

Robideau, K., & Vogel, E. (April 2011). Are they "bells and whistles" or legitimate distance delivery tools? Workshop presented at 2011 DoD/USDA Family Resilience Conference, Chicago, IL.

Senyurekli, A. R., Dworkin, J., & Dickinson, J. (2006) On-line professional development for Extension educators. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 44(3) Article 3RIB1. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2006june/rb1.php

Williamson, R. D., & Smoak, E. P. (2005). Embracing edutainment with interactive e-learning tools. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 43(5) Article 5IAW2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2005october/iw2.php