

Crowdsourcing eXtension: Communities of Practice Provide Rapid Response

Abstract

This article provides an example of how you can use eXtension's Communities of Practice for crowdsourcing information rapidly and thoroughly. It contends that unlike traditional Google or Yahoo searches, asking colleagues within eXtension provides a depth of discovery with multiple layers of vetting already built in. In addition to that, it's free. The example herein stems from a recent inquiry to the Community, Local and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Community of Practice and provides excerpts from the responses.

Brian Raison
Assistant Professor
Department of
Extension
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
raison.1@osu.edu

Julie M. Fox
Associate Professor
Department of
Extension
Ohio State University
Columbus, Ohio
fox.264@osu.edu

Phil D'Adamo-Damery
Ph.D. Candidate
Virginia Polytechnic
Institute and State
University
pdadamer@vt.edu

Introduction

On Tuesday, April 29 at 12:50 p.m., North Carolina State University's Jannety Mosley sent a brief, one-sentence note to the eXtension Community, Local and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Community of Practice (CoP) listserv, localfoodsystems@extension.org. She asked, "Is anyone aware of programs or models in states other than NC where Extension works with university dining services or with the procurement of local foods at institutions?"

Within three minutes, she received her first response. Over the next 28 hours, she received 12 additional, meaningful responses (with cc's posted back to the entire listserv) and several more directly to her. Responses came literally from coast to coast.

This is just one example on one topic from one eXtension CoP. And guess what? There are 78 other CoPs covering every conceivable topic from A to Y ("agriculture" to "youth"). Yes, we need to add one on Zebras or Zoning to catch that last letter!

So have you thought about using this valuable resource? Unlike your traditional Google or Yahoo search, asking colleagues within eXtension provides a depth of discovery with multiple layers of vetting already built in. The idea is rooted in crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is "the practice of obtaining needed services, ideas, or content by soliciting contributions from a large group of people and especially from the online community rather than from traditional employees or suppliers"

(Merriam-Webster, 2014). The eXtension system has over 17,000 user accounts. Each month, approximately 2,000 people *actively* participate in some manner. That means you have the potential of reaching a lot of people with a lot of expertise specific to the topic/area you're searching.

CoP Background and Excerpt of Responses

In this example, the Community, Local and Regional Food Systems (CLRFS) Community of Practice began in 2012 and quickly grew to become the eighth largest in just 2 years. The CoP is comprised of over 275 members including Extension agents, educators, specialists, university researchers, and food systems practitioners. It is designed to provide information and networking opportunities for educators, community-based practitioners, policy makers, farmers/growers, families, and those individuals involved in building equitable, health-promoting, resilient, and economically balanced food systems.

As a community of practice, this group is working to: 1) create new accessible public content; 2) compile and summarize information published by our member organizations; and 3) offer a unique, online meeting place for people with diverse interests and affiliations to share information and learn from each other. The CLRFS offers resources you can use such as frequently asked questions through eXtension's "Ask the Expert," a webinar series, and feature and resource articles on a number of relevant topics pertaining to local, regional, and community food systems. You may learn more or join this community online at <http://www.extension.org/pages/70466/more-about-community-local-and-regional-food-systems-cop#.U7S5gPldWSo>

To exemplify the richness of responses to the question in this example, several excerpts are presented.

Extension here in Michigan has had a major role in the planning and implementing of a statewide network focused on farm to institution as well as the development of a local purchasing campaign specific for institutions called Cultivate Michigan (www.cultivatemichigan.org). Feel free to contact me if you want more info on the project and the role that extension has played.

Extension Educator, Community Food Systems

Michigan State University Extension, Greening Michigan Institute

Here in Wisconsin, Extension coordinates a program called the Institutional Food Market Coalition to facilitate relationships between food growers, producers, distributors and institutional food buyers.

Here is a link with more info: <http://www.ifmwi.org/>

Department Head & Community Food Systems Educator

Dane County UW-Extension

Iowa State University Extension and Outreach through our Value Added Agriculture Program and the Hotel Restaurant and Institutional Management Program, as well as other programs, conduct educational activities and develop educational outputs geared toward local food procurement for institutions. www.leopold.iastate.edu

Marketing and Food Systems Initiative Program Manager

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture-Iowa State University Extension

In addition to working on campus, UWEX is maintaining the Institutional Food Mark Coalition -- <http://ifmwi.org/annualmeetings/2014.aspx> for more information on the May event.

Associate Director

UW-Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems

We have delved a little into this at Utah State University, especially with our Extension Sustainability Utah Farm-Chef-Fork program. Our spring trainings with farmers and chefs just wrapped up:

<http://extension.usu.edu/sustainability/htm/programs/utah-farm-chef-fork/>

Assistant Professor, Sustainable Communities Extension Specialist

Utah State University Moab

University of Vermont Extension is involved in many ways in local foods institutions, and leads the transdisciplinary [Food Systems Initiative at UVM](#).

<http://foodconnects.org/windham-farm-and-food.html> - Extension has supported this project which has been really successful at linking up farms of all sizes with schools and institutional markets.

Coordinator for eXtension Farm Energy CoP

University of Vermont Extension

At Ohio State University, a number of our CFAES (<http://cfaes.osu.edu>) research and Extension programs focus on institutional local food procurement. Ohio's Farm to School provides information - <http://farmtoschool.osu.edu>.

The Ohio Direct Marketing Program provides education for farm to institution, using the MarketReady program as a foundation - originally developed by Tim Woods, from the University of KY. <http://directmarketing.osu.edu> . A few years ago, our Agroecosystems

Management Program (AMP) published results from a detailed survey of institutional food service providers, primarily focused on many private and public institutions of higher education within Ohio, were used to prepare a guide for farmers and institutional buyers entitled "Ohio's Specialty Crops: a Boost to Food Service Menus" - <http://amp.osu.edu/guide-to-ohios-specialty-crops>

Associate Professor; Associate Chair, Department of Extension; OSU Extension in the City

Ohio State University Extension

Conclusions

So whether it's local food or any topic ranging from agriculture to youth development, eXtension offers a rapid response that you can count on. As King & Boehlje (2013) note, "eXtension continues to have phenomenal potential to allow new and expanded audiences access to Extension expertise and solutions." Those audiences include us—those internal to the land-grant system.

References

King, D., & Boehlje, M. (2013). A return to the basics: The solution for eXtension. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 51(5) Article 5COM2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2013october/comm2.php>

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