

Facebook Groups Improve Volunteer Communications

Abstract

Communicating with volunteers is often challenging in today's fast-paced world of high-tech communication devices and social media. The growing number of Facebook users makes Facebook Groups a useful communication tool for Extension volunteers. Facebook Groups provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests. This article provides examples from three Facebook Groups demonstrating how this tool improves communication while also providing education, sharing, and socialization among its members.

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Introduction

Good communication is critical when managing volunteers. Today social media is used more and more by Extension professionals to build stronger connections with volunteers.

Facebook can be an effective tool in the social media toolbox (Mains, Jenkins-Howard, & Stephenson, 2013). It is particularly strong in building new relationships and keeping in contact with longtime friends. Young (2011) found that Facebook supplements traditional forms of communication (face to face, telephone), while maintaining a larger and more diverse group of acquaintances.

The demographic profile of users on a central Illinois ILRiverHort Extension Facebook Page closely mirrors that Unit's volunteers. Facebook Insights show administrators useful information about a Page's activity and user demographics. Insights from July 10, 2014 indicated that the makeup of the Unit's ILRiverHort Facebook Page was 73% women, of which 25% are between the ages of 45-54. The next largest group of users is women aged 55-64 at 17%.

Background

Facebook Groups have proven to be a useful communication tool for Master Volunteers. Facebook Groups provide a closed space for small groups of people to communicate about shared interests. Groups are closed, with only members of the group allowed to view and make posts or add new members.

Mains (2013) discussed how Facebook Groups and Pages can be used to enhance educational efforts.

Groups generate interest in specific subject areas where individuals can share information, opinions, and ideas (Pineda, 2010).

Another advantage of Facebook Groups is the ability to separate personal pages from professional activities. Hill (2014) explained how Facebook often invites clientele into your personal life. However, with Facebook Groups a user does not have to be your personal "friend" to be a member of the Group.

Three Facebook Group Examples

Master Gardener Plant Detectives

Our first Facebook Group—Master Gardener Plant Detectives—began in October 2011. The group has 76 members, which includes Extension staff and volunteers (Facebook Insights, 7-10-14). Only staff and certified Master Gardeners are allowed to enter the group.

Our Extension Unit is comprised of four counties, two of which are primarily rural. Only one county has Master Gardeners available in a help-line office to answer garden questions. Thus we created a special group of Master Gardeners called "Plant Detectives" who are on the front line for answering horticulture questions that come into our Extension offices. Plant Detectives answer gardening question referrals from an office in many ways, including in person, via email, and on the phone.

The Facebook Group began as a way for Extension staff to connect with Master Gardeners when questions came into an office. Extension staff post questions and pictures, which Group members answer. Posts asking for help are usually answered quickly, sometimes within a few minutes. A post on August 26, 2013 of a mystery shrub was answered in four minutes.

The Group has evolved to do more than virtual volunteering. Today it is also an effective communication place used to share questions and ideas between Master Gardeners as they "Help Others Learn to Grow." On July 29, 2014 a member commented, "This is the best tip I've seen in a long time."

A post on July 9, 2014 served as a good way to evaluate members' perceptions as to whether the Facebook Group was effective and why. One Master Gardener wrote, "I think it is more efficient than traditional correspondence because of the increased timeliness; the ability to send photos easily (a picture is worth a 1000 words) and finally the capability to communicate with many people at the same time with time sensitive material."

River Valley Master Naturalists

The River Valley Master Naturalists (MN) Facebook Group began in August 2012 during the Extension Unit's inaugural Master Naturalist training class. The group has 40 members who share events and information about volunteer projects. Members include active and intern Master Naturalists, project partners, instructors, and Extension staff. Members often post pictures and other information they need to "Help Others Connect with Nature."

When asked in a July 9, 2014 post if they thought their Facebook Group was effective and why, one Master Naturalist said, "It's a great way for MN participants to be informed about the opportunities for volunteering and learning." Another wrote,

The FB group is a 'must have' for a group like ours. Even though we try to meet in person several times a year, not all members can. This keeps things pertinent and up to date on a daily basis, and the result is that the group is alive and active, even when we cannot meet up.

Wildlife Prairie Park Homestead Garden

One Master Gardener volunteer project has its own group. The Wildlife Prairie Park Homestead Garden Facebook Group was created by a Master Gardener as a way to give updates on work days and garden happenings. The garden is maintained by local school students in order to provide nutritional food for the animals of Wildlife Prairie Park. This Facebook Group began in April 2012 and has 34 members. A post on September 5, 2012 said, "Today's bounty! A whopping 40.5 lbs. which include, squash, melons, cucumber & greens."

The Group administrator said,

I think this has been a great tool because it provides a means of communicating with the families. It also allows me to share those special pictures of the youth when we are planting, weeding or harvesting. I also find that it is a great way to share some of the articles I receive from Extension.

A Group member said that it is a way for us to "find out right away if we have to cancel without having to individually contact people."

Summary

Facebook Groups have proven to be a cost-effective and efficient way to communicate with volunteers. These groups do not replace traditional methods of direct mailing, phone calls, face-to-face interactions, and texts, but rather supplement them, reaching volunteers using their preferred method.

References

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