A Model for Programming that Builds Upon our Strengths and Embraces the Future

Abstract

UMaine Cooperative Extension will take an integrated approach to program development with the Internet being the basic platform for outreach rather than a county office-based program. The resulting educational outreach will be a blend of asynchronous programming that is accessible to participants at times of their choosing combined with live events that will occur through the Internet, at office locations, and in the field.

This approach includes a website that will have UMaine Cooperative Extension's best resources (publications, video segments, Adobe connect presentations, PowerPoint presentations, links to other relevant sites and more), along with the marketing of live, county-based programming that is available statewide. This site will be updated and marketed to existing and new audiences. Staff will utilize the Centralized Database Management System (under construction) to track participants and market programming. Faculty and staff will agree on the core components of programs and resources that are featured and available through the website. Program planning will require asking the question, "How will this effort exist on the Internet and other electronic media?"

The resulting integrated approach is a resource that clients can access on their own schedule and provides information to address their priority needs. Our faculty and staff are freed from redundant client questions and are better able to focus on creating relevant programs. Potential challenges, which some may see as a downside, are the loss of some direct client interaction and the loss of local control for how programming occurs within a particular county.

Introduction

For almost 100 years the University of Maine Cooperative Extension has utilized the county office based model for the development and dissemination of educational outreach. That work has been guided by local constituent needs as expressed through advisory boards, client groups, surveys or other locally developed and implemented instruments. The connection of the customer to the county office has been strong and enduring with customers forming an affinity for the local faculty and staff resulting in strong support for the existence of the local office.

The expectations of the customer have changed and demand for asynchronous programming and access to resources has become commonplace. The educational market place now has a plethora of competitors that did not exist for most of Cooperative Extension's past. The continuous loss of base budget from UMaine has resulted in a significant downsizing of the faculty workforce and the regionalization of programming responsibilities. UMaine Cooperative Extension is not able to conduct educational outreach as was done in the past.

However, to implement it's mission, the UMaine Cooperative Extension must retain the strength of locally directed programming that addresses priority needs within our core curriculum areas and meet the expectations of our existing and new customers for greater accessibility through the Internet and other electronic media. Extension must be "High Tech and High Touch."

A New Paradigm for Programming

The County Office can no longer be the universal center for the development and dissemination of UMaine Cooperative Extension programming. UMaine Cooperative Extension lacks the faculty and funding to continue with this model. That being said, the county Extension Office must continue to be a highly relevant place to convene educational events and meetings. The County Extension Office remains the best way to foster direct human interaction as a part of our educational outreach. A new model is proposed where programming will be nested online and available statewide and beyond. The UMaine Cooperative Extension website will be the home for a program and contain integrated opportunities for customers to engage in self-directed learning that addresses their needs, on their schedule, and in the method that best suits them. This web-based platform will be augmented by educational activities that occur at county offices or out in field sites or other locations. The development of programming will require a process that determines not only what educational information needs to be shared, but what software is the most appropriate to convey the information? What publications does the customer need to access and how will that happen? What video segments need to be created to provide a deeper educational experience and convey complex or simple educational ideas? How will the program be marketed to existing customers and to attract new customers to UMaine Cooperative Extension? How can the program (website with accompanying resources) be developed as efficiently and economically as possible? The paradigm shift from locally determined programming that is conducted by local staff for a targeted local population is augmented by local needs being aggregated across the state or region with the development of a uniform online response that addresses the highest priority common needs.

This new paradigm is not without challenges and losses. Faculty and staff may perceive a loss of local control, loss of access to customers and the requirement to change how work is developed and implemented. Self-directed learning may have many customers becoming "invisible" to our staff and it will be difficult to ascertain the impact of online programming and resources, which is a requirement of faculty work. The assessment of impact will remain focused on those who are connected to programming at the local level. As technology advances efforts to assess value from online customers will be forthcoming.

Infrastructure Support

This new paradigm will require effective infrastructure support to allow faculty and programming professionals to concentrate on educational content and effective integrated programming and not on the technical requirements of the University's Content Management System, Extension's Centralized Database Management System and other

technical tools. Specifically, Cooperative Extension will need to provide support in the areas of:

- Website creation, monitoring, updating and changing
- Embedded publications that are consistent with the Content Management System
- Educational software that is compatible with the Content Management System
- Utilization of the Centralized Database Management System to track participants
- Aggressive marketing of educational programs through new outlets (social media) and traditional outlets, including paid advertising
- Exploration of new venues to market or present programming such as statewide public access television, eXtension and Public Television
- A dedicated training and technical support effort to share ownership of program development and maintenance with support staff that work with faculty and programming professionals

Conclusion

This new paradigm for integrated programming represents an opportunity to reach more citizens with more educational content at lower costs then ever before in UMaine Cooperative Extension's history. The consistency of programming will enhance organizational marketing and customer understanding of Extension's work and it's relevancy to Maine's economy, environment and society. This initiative can only succeed if faculty and programming professionals commit to working closely together to find consensus on the content and management of programming. And, the organization must provide high quality infrastructure support. The expectations of Extension's customers have changed as has the resources available to hire staff and conduct educational outreach. Change is required to be a sustainable and relevant educational organization, this model represents one way to address those challenges.

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