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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Extension Is Unpopular—On the Internet

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Abstract: The first Extension-authored link in Google Search (2011a) for "how to garden" was ranked an abysmal 82nd. Worse, Internet users selected the top-ranked site significantly more often than they selected the second-ranked one, and they rarely selected any site ranked lower than #10 (Granka, Joachims, & Gay, 2004). An Extension-commissioned poll in Alaska found only 16% of the "Net Generation" had even heard of Extension, compared with 73% of those 60 years or older (Dittman Research & Communications Corporation, 2010). Extension's websites are so unpopular, those who seek research-based, unbiased information will likely not find it. This article proposes solutions.

The Nation Is Growing Online—Is Extension?

From 1997 to 2003, the number of U.S. households with an Internet connection increased from 19% to 55% (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). In 2003, 77% of those Internet users searched for product or service information, and 36% for information about government services or agencies. A University of Alaska Fairbanks Cooperative Extension Service (UAF CES) commissioned poll found that 88% of Alaskans used the Internet and that the Internet was the most preferred method of getting information from Extension (Dittman Research & Communications Corporation, 2010). Nearly 15 years ago Tennessen, PonTell, Romine, and Motheral (1997) suggested that the Internet and computers could usurp the County Extension car in importance. Based on the poor ranking of Extension-authored sites in Google Search results (2011a, 2011b) and personal observations, Extension has placed little import on the Internet as an outreach vehicle.

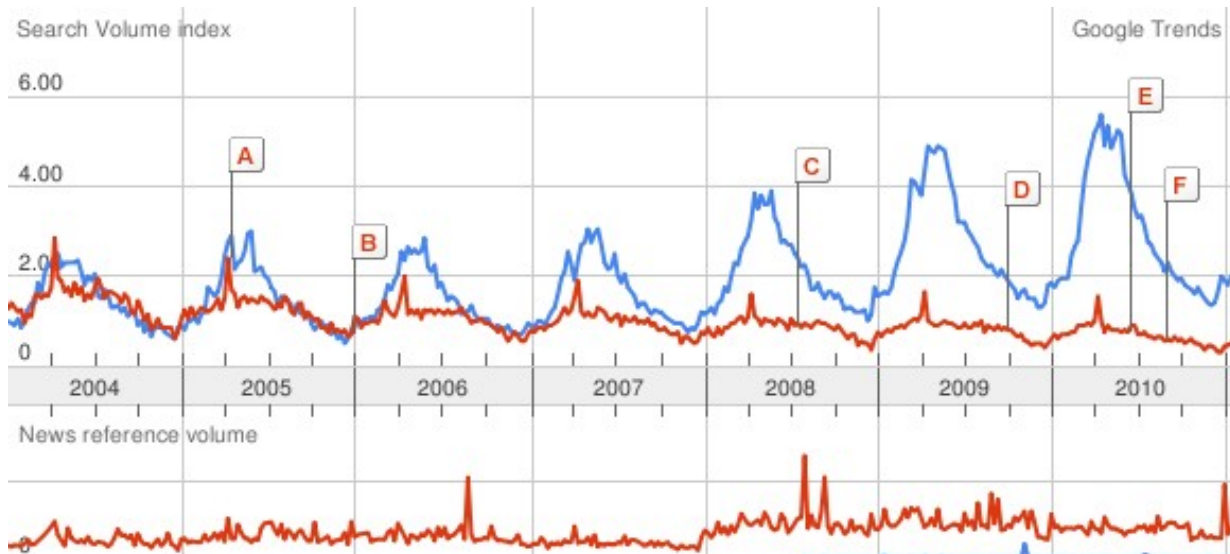
Searching for Extension

As a service institution tasked with providing research-based information to the public, Extension should author websites with information that is easy to find, research based, and is not ad driven. Morville and Callender (2010) elucidated the sadness and joys of searching on the Internet:

Every increase in search costs diminishes our quality of life. . . . Often we surrender. We simply fail to search. We live uninformed without seeing what we miss, for the cost of the unsearched is an unseen drag on commerce and culture, as invisible as it is incalculable. . . . It doesn't have to be this way. When we design with our users in mind, search can be an engine of inspiration and joy. We find what we want. We discover what we need. (p. 19)

In the U.S., between 2004 and 2010, searches for "extension service" declined, while searches for "how to garden" increased every year (Figure 1, Google Trends, 2011). In April 2010, "how to garden" was searched more than five times as frequently as "extension service." Overall, searches for "extension service" have declined by more than 50% from 2004 to 2010. Now more than ever, Extension needs to focus on searchable content rather than on "Extension."

Figure 1.
Search Volume of "How to Garden" Compared with "Extension Service"¹



¹ Relative search volume of "how to garden" (light grey) is compared with "extension service" (dark grey) in the United States from 2004 to 2010. The scale is based on the average traffic of "extension service" and is a relative, not fixed volume (Google Trends, 2011).

eXtension

The solution to this confusing maze, created by 986 Extension sites, could have been eXtension <<http://www.extension.org/>>, but it's not. I searched "how to garden in Alaska" within extension, and the top search result was a directory for Master Gardener Coordinators; seven out of 10 links advertised events that occurred in the past. The only relevance to Alaska was the time zone. Browsing eXtension was equally unrewarding. After four clicks I found a general gardening article that lacked specificity to Alaska. For a website with information about everything, everywhere, eXtension should have an impeccable search function and information worth searching for.

It's a Popularity Contest

In Alaska, 73% of those 60 and older had heard of Extension, compared with only 16% of survey participants 18 to 29 years old (Dittman Research & Communications Corporation, 2010). As a member of the latter demographic, this explains why, at a dinner party with my peers, at least eight out of 10 people I meet will get a 15-minute monologue on the Land Grant Mission in response to the question: "What do you do?" Because targeted searches for Extension have decreased and because of a lack of awareness of Extension, Extension must drive traffic to their sites by being popular. And by the way, in my opinion, this won't happen by branding the tripartite mission as Abrams, Meyers, Irani, and Baker (2010) recently proposed. Not only is

the idea dated (the majority of Abrams et al. citations were at least 10 years old), but "tripartite" is also unlikely to become a popular search term anytime soon.

A study showed that people using an Internet Search Engine visually fixated on links ranked one and two, and they clicked substantially more often on link number one compared with number two (Granka, Joachims, & Gay, 2004). Visual fixation declined more with links ranked three and below and even more with links ranked 10 and below (the next page of search results). I Google searched "how to garden," and the first Extension-authored site was ranked number 82. From the perspective of an Internet searcher, with such a poor ranking, the site may as well not exist. Extension-authored sites are overshadowed by more popular, ad-driven, garden websites such as The Helpful Gardener <<http://www.helpfulgardener.com/>> and Garden Guides <<http://www.gardenguides.com/>>. It's a popularity contest, and Extension is the most nerdish kid in school.

How Do You Design a Website About Everything, Everywhere?

For an organization that is everywhere (in the U.S.) and provides information on just about everything, building a navigable website is a challenge. A small, simple website is "infinitely better" than a "giant contraception with old content and broken links (Lynch & Horton, 2009, Chapter 1). According to Google Custom Extension Search <<http://www.extension.org/search>>, there are 986 Cooperative Extension Sites. That's nearly 20 websites for each state. Cram (2011) blames a lack of funding, political infighting, and a decentralized operating model for subpar, higher-education websites. Extension websites should try hard not to mimic the complexity of their organizational structure. Web-style dictates that design should be simple and help users find important and relevant information easily (Lynch & Horton, 2009, Chapter 2). Building an internal and an external site can help simplify the public persona of Extension. When clients search for information on gardening, canning, or energy, they won't have to wade through information on strategic plans, annual report forms, or internal policies.

Master Gardeners Can Help

When I Google searched (2011b) "gardening in Alaska," a link authored by Garden Guides was ranked third (2011b). I clicked on it and instantly had over 10 relevant articles about gardening in Alaska. Then I clicked on "When to Start Planting a Garden in Alaska." This particular article was written by a woman from Ohio who was a travel agent and cruise school instructor (Mitchell, 2011). Based on a 300-word essay and a résumé, Garden Guides <<http://www.gardenguides.com/>> hires freelance writers for \$15 an article (Demand Media Studios, 2011). They are capitalizing on the dearth of easily accessible gardening information online— and making a tidy profit by selling targeted online advertising through Demand Media. Extension could use the army of Master Gardener volunteers it's educated (17,269 between in 1998 and 1999, according to McAleer, 2005) to build high-quality, current, research-based, gardening content for the Internet.

Evaluation of Impact on the Internet

Extension is accounts for public funding by documenting its impact on the public. The June 2009 issue of the *Journal of Extension* (nearly 30 articles) was dedicated to evaluation methods (Hoelscher, 2009), for example: the 360-degree, tri-fold, qualitative, PRKC, and ServSafe methods (Boyer, Benson, Boyd, Forrester, Franz, Gerht, Pelland, & Roan, 2009).

A simpler way of documenting program impact, at least for Internet programs, is Google Analytics (2011). Google Analytics tracks the number of unique visits, page visits, percent new visits, and geographic location of visits. This information is invaluable for program evaluation and planning. Extension should make Google Analytics available to administrators, faculty, and staff for reporting purposes. If administrators and funders value this type of impact, it will motivate Extension faculty to develop high-quality content for the Internet.

Top 10 Ways Extension Can Have More Impact on the Internet

1. Structure public websites based on stakeholder needs, not on the organizational structure of Extension itself.
2. Develop internal websites for Extension staff and faculty.
3. Collaborate statewide on websites to limit inter-county competition.
4. Fund development and maintenance of websites.
5. Hire new Extension faculty and staff with expertise in Web-based media and technology.
6. Make Google Analytics available to faculty and staff so they can document their own impact on the Internet.
7. Encourage staff, faculty, and volunteers to write fewer articles, and ones of higher quality, that reflect current interests of clients. Use Google Trends to identify what clients are looking for.
8. Write content for the Web in Web-style, not print-style. Include more color photos and bullet points, and use a Web-style guide such as: <http://www.webstyleguide.com>
9. Strategically use key words, links to other sites, and content to improve rank in Google Search.
10. Help users find relevant and important information within Extension sites by design and by improving search functions.

Discussion

Before the Internet, a decentralized model worked well for Extension; now a centralized model could improve efficiency, quality, and searchability of Extension websites. The value of hands-on Extension workshops is inarguable, but not so for individual consultations. Only 8% of survey respondents in Alaska chose individual consultations as one of two preferred ways of getting information from Extension (Dittman

Research & Communications Corporation, 2010), but it is likely the most costly outreach method for Extension.

In order for Extension to remain relevant to an online public, it should allocate people, time, and money to developing and maintaining Internet content. The public needs and wants relevant, unbiased, research-based information online. Surely a publicly-funded institution (nearly 5 billion in 2007 from NIFA alone; USDA, 2008) such as Extension can compete with websites that lack public funding and are known to be inaccurate, biased, and profit driven.

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