Five Social Media Tools for the Extension Toolbox

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Abstract: Social media tools can be used to assist in the dissemination of research-based information. Five social media tools, wikis, blogs, podcasts, Facebook, and YouTube, may extend Extension's educational reach into the community. Extension educators will find social media tools easy to use, readily available on the Internet, free of charge, and an interesting addition to the toolbox of dissemination strategies.

Changing Times, Changing Tools

Face-to-face teaching is not the only way to reach learners. An increasingly popular way is asynchronous learning online that is available anytime. Asynchronous learning allows users to access the Internet to obtain information outside of the constraints of time and place, and among a network of people. Online asynchronous learning can include social networking tools such as wikis, blogs, podcasts, Facebook, and YouTube.

Extension educators need to keep abreast of new technology such as social media tools. This includes time for training and experimentation with these new media. Unfortunately, due to time constraints and other barriers, many educators continue to use existing methods of disseminating information rather than adopting new outreach methods. Social media tools provide opportunities for communities to share information and keep an electronic log for future use and review of documents. These tools are available online and free of charge.

Unpacking the Toolbox

Below are descriptions of social media tools that Extension educators can consider for their toolbox of online dissemination strategies.

Blogs

Blogs, originally known as "Web-logs," are a method of sharing expertise and information via commentary and description of events. Bloggers vary from professionals to lay people who share information and Web links. Blogs are open to the public and found widely on the Internet. Readers can leave public comments on a blog in an effort to increase the blog's interactivity. Extension educators may want to join a blogging community of professionals because they can bring research-based information to consumers. Consumers use

reliable blog sites for product reviews and commentary. Because blogs can be established by anyone, it is crucial for Extension educators to establish a positive reputation and community following.

Wikis

Wikis are a tool for working collaboratively on a project, whether working at a distance or nearby. A wiki may be made available publicly and, therefore, found by anyone searching on the Internet. Wikis can also be private and open to only a select audience of contributors or collaborators. Wikis provide a log and date stamp of the work that has been completed by contributors working on the same project and usually generate e-mails automatically to members of the site.

Wikis ensure that everyone involved in a project reads information from the same page. In Extension work, wikis can be used to share information, create agendas or curricula, post class resources and Web links, or for planning an event or course. Extension educators can invite community members to participate in a class wiki that is stocked with a variety of resources such as fact sheets, reviews, articles, and links to additional information.

Podcasts

Podcasts are brief audio or video messages created by an individual or group and readily available on the Internet. Messages created with audio-only include the voice of the Extension educator vocally sharing his or her educational message. Audio podcasts are available at a variety of Web sites, including iTunes. Some podcasts feature enhanced video, meaning the video includes voice recording, music, pictures, and/or animation. Podcasts are useful for demonstrating how to perform a task or sharing essential research-based information.

Podcasts can easily be uploaded online for sharing with the global community using video-sharing Web sites. Because users are usually well versed at locating, downloading, and playing videos that are available online, little or no instruction is generally needed. Extension educators can publish demonstrations, seminars, or workshops through podcasts (Xie & Gu, 2007).

Facebook

Faceboo*k* provides users with an interactive Web page-like format to share information, photos, articles, and Web links. This venue makes it easy to post a message that can be shared with small or large communities of users. Messages, photos, and video clips can be posted easily for interested audiences (i.e., Facebook friends). Facebook attracts followers who are organizations or individuals interested in the creator's postings. Extension educators may find it useful to communicate information regarding upcoming events, celebrations, informational pieces, and publications.

YouTube

YouTube is a popular video-sharing venue online that attracts millions of users daily. Extension educators find it useful to disseminate educational messages, video, and TV news clips for the global audience (Kinsey, 2010). Sharing a link to a YouTube video is simple and can easily be attached to an email message. Visual literacy (reading and writing) is heightened for users in this interactive venue (Educause Learning Initiative, 2006). Viewer demographics (country, state, age, and gender) can be tracked, and data can be collected regarding the way the viewer found the video and information about the length of time the user browsed the Web site. YouTube's popularity makes it an attractive tool for Extension due to its viral nature, ease of use,

and accessibility by audiences of all ages.

The Next Steps

As with any new educational method, Extension educators should take time to deliberate the usefulness of social media tools for use in their community setting. Features to consider are ease of use, technical support required and availability of assistance, and the connectivity constraints of the learning community. It is helpful to speak to educators who are currently using social media tools to determine their perception of the value of the tool's outreach capacity. In addition, locating a social media tool's training video online can provide an overview and insight into its use. Online searches for demonstration videos can make the task of using social media.

Summary

Extension educators can expand their outreach by using free online networking tools. Engaging people in asynchronous learning provides flexibility for the user and for the instructor. Blogs, wikis, and podcasts are easy to produce and post online. Online social networks such as Facebook and YouTube are very popular and can reach large audiences, making it easy to disseminate information quickly. To make the most of social media tools, Extension educators should consider a variety of outreach methods and choose those that will provide the widest outreach for the time they have available to produce educational content.

References

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