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Strengthening 4-H Program Communication Through Technology

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Abstract: Advances in technology are transforming how youth and parents interact with programs. The Strengthening 4-H Communication through Technology project was implemented in eight county 4-H programs in Northwest Minnesota. This article outlines the intentional process used to effectively implement technology in program planning. The project includes: assessing current communication tools used; evaluating participants' preferences for receiving information; educating staff on current research trends; and training teams of youth and adults with the Forrester Research Model (2011) to implement social media as a program communication tool. The process helps staff identify audience and purpose of using technology for their specific needs.

Program Planning with 21st Century Families

Twenty-first century families are communicating in new ways. Advances in technology have changed the way young people and their parents interact with school, programs, family, and friends. Today's youth, the "net generation," cannot remember a time without a computer in their home (Draves, 2007). Their learning styles naturally lean toward a balance between face-to-face interactions and Web-based experiences. Social networks, online games, iPods, and mobile phones are now fixtures for today's youth culture (Ito et al., 2008). Therefore, organizations now consider an array of communication tools in their program development, including email, texting, and social networking. Although this may seem like an additional task to program staff's already busy schedule, social media can be integrated into existing communication plans with many benefits to the program (Rhoades, Thomas, & Davis, 2009).

Organizations also recognize the barriers that exist for families. The project described here focused on Northwest Minnesota, where there are communication barriers such as limited access to high-speed Internet, unreliable cellular phone coverage, and geographic isolation. The eight counties in this region occupy the most sparsely populated rural area of the state, with city populations of fewer than 10,000. The main industries are manufacturing, health care, and retail trade, and the median household income is \$44,016 (Landrieu, Grant, Boyce, & Larson Nippolt, 2010).

Project Description

4-H Program staff in Northwest Minnesota responded to the research on the "net generation" and their families' communication preferences with a desire to learn more about using technology within their county programs. The Strengthening 4-H Communication through Technology project was implemented in two phases. Funding to support the project came from the Minnesota 4-H Foundation.

The objectives of this project were to:

- Determine the communication needs for county 4-H programs in Northwest Minnesota through focus groups and an online survey;
- Increase the knowledge and skill level of 4-H staff, volunteers and members on utilizing technology for communication purposes; and
- Train and support teams of youth, adults and staff in developing county 4-H communication plans.

Phase One

The first phase of the project focused on two key components. The first was to educate 4-H program staff, youth, adult volunteers, and parents on the current research trends in technology and communication. The second component included an assessment of local program communication needs through focus groups and an online survey.

Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 30 4-H Program staff, volunteers, parents, and youth. Participants completed an assessment tool that asked what and how program information is currently communicated, ideas of other possible strategies, any known barriers to utilizing technology, and their experience with other youth organizations' communication plans.

An online survey was distributed by email to 823 4-H households to collect additional data, with an 8% return rate. This survey included questions about comfort level of using technology, how other youth organizations communicate with them, barriers and positive aspects to using technology, and their preference of how to be communicated with.

The focus groups and online survey indicated that U.S. Postal Mail and email are the preferred modes of communication. Youth in the 4-H program rated social media higher as a communication tool, while 4-H adult volunteers and parents indicate less comfort with social media. For both youth and adults, email and websites were rated highest in comfort level, while Twitter was reported as having a very low level of comfort.

Phase Two

Phase two involved 4-H staff, youth, and volunteers from two counties demonstrating the highest interest in using social media. They went through an intentional process to develop a communication plan for their county. The participants broadened their understanding of technology tools, followed the University of Minnesota social media guide, and implemented the POST method from Forrester Research (2011). POST is an acronym for People, Objectives, Strategy, and Technology. This method provides an intentional development process that involves understanding the target audience, creating clear objectives for the media, and identifying a strategy before choosing a social media platform. The counties will annually review their strategy to acknowledge successes and make any necessary changes.

Project Findings

Using an intentional program development process for communication efforts was essential to the project. The results demonstrate the advantage of collecting data from all communication consumers, including staff, adult volunteers, parents, and youth. Program staff became aware that the audience (youth vs. adult) is an imperative consideration when implementing social media as a communication strategy.

The focus groups and online survey showed that U.S. Postal Mail and email are the top two ways county programs currently communicate with families and is also the preferred mode of receiving information. Two of the eight counties reported a higher rate of interest and accessibility than the other counties in social media and texting.

Technology infrastructure in rural areas can pose a barrier to implementing Web-based communication in youth programs. The survey was intentionally distributed through email as a means to assess how many 4-H families have an email account in the eight-county region. The percentage of 4-H families with an email account in their home ranges from as low as 15% in one county to as high as 88% in another. Because social media accounts require an email address, the assumption was made that a family without an email account is highly unlikely to communicate through social media.

It is not beneficial for a program to "jump into" social media tools without established interest and strategy. Following a design process to develop organizational social media accounts is critical. The POST Method (2011) provided a useful tool to engage participants in the design process while creating buy-in, ownership, and involvement to keep the efforts active. Both the communication consumers and program staff need to indicate an interest in and ability to use the technology, because the plan cannot be successful if program staff have low interest in or lack the time and/or skills to work with social networks. However, an intentionally designed social media plan can strengthen and diversify program communication.

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