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Day to Day Eats: Using an Educational Blog to Extend Nutrition Education

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Abstract

An educational blog was created for the purposes of extending learning beyond the reach of organized classes and supplementing the core themes of the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program. Focus group members reacted to the format, content, visual appeal, and writing style of the blog and addressed their likelihood of reading the blog because of these elements. Their overall acceptance of the blog as a relevant source of nutrition information confirms the usefulness of this mode of social media for expanding the sharing of information beyond in-person interactions.

Keywords: [Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program](#), [low-income audiences](#), [nutrition education](#), [social media](#), [blogs](#)

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Introduction

Through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP), nutrition education is disseminated to low-income families in a series of six or more in-person sessions led by trained paraprofessionals. Four core themes are emphasized: diet quality and physical activity, food resource management, food safety, and food security (U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, 2017). Positive and lasting behavior change has been documented in graduates up to 6 months after completion of the program (Koszewski, Sehi, Behrends, & Tuttle, 2011). Because people participate in an EFNEP series only once, other avenues for delivering food and nutrition information could be beneficial. Continued education may support and extend the retention of positive health behaviors.

Day to Day Eats is a blog targeted to families who have participated in an EFNEP series (Figure 1). In alignment with EFNEP's core themes, blog posts address nutrition information and healthful habits readers can implement in their daily lives (Figure 2). A comments section on the blog allows readers to engage in an online discussion, interaction that drives traffic to posts on popular topics or recipes shared on the blog (Mishne & Glance, 2006). *Day to Day Eats* links to established web pages on the Cornell University EFNEP

program website to provide tested healthful recipes from a credible source.

Figure 1.

Day to Day Eats Home Page

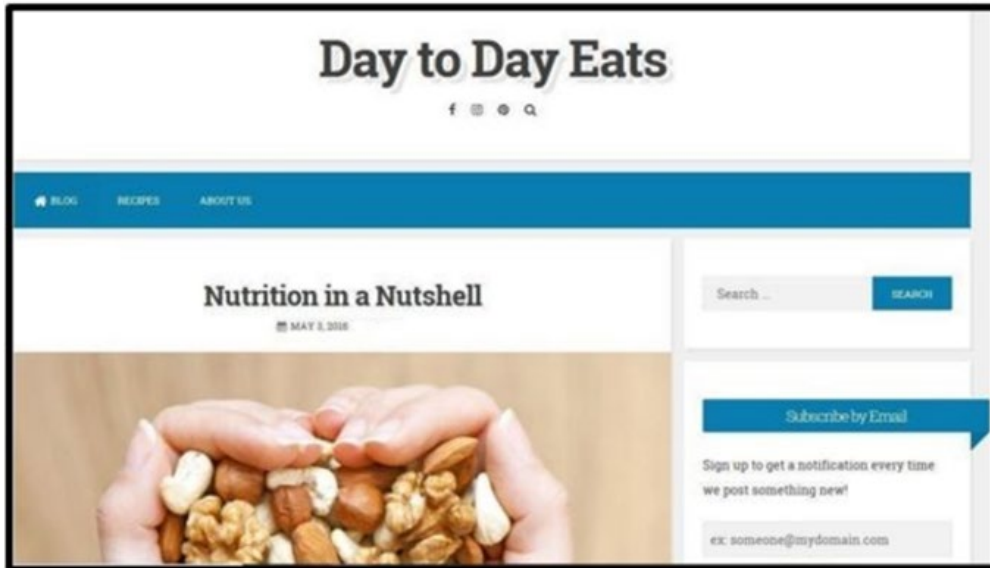


Figure 2.

Blog Post Previews on *Day to Day Eats* Home Page



Rationale

The exponential growth of social media in recent years provides an opportunity to communicate nutrition information in nontraditional ways. In 2005, approximately 5% of Americans were using social media; by 2018, usage grew to 73% (Smith & Anderson, 2018). Low-income individuals use social media at similar

rates to higher income individuals (Duggan & Smith, 2013). Therefore, we determined that social media could serve as a viable outlet for spreading food and nutrition information, including to low-income populations.

Focus Groups Confirm Usefulness of Blog

We undertook focus group research to ensure that the blog design and conceptual framework meet the needs of the intended audience. We developed a semistructured questionnaire to ascertain opinions about the blog writing quality, topic relevancy, and features intended to attract readers. To ensure question clarity, we pilot tested the questions with a convenience sample of graduate students who had considerable experience with focus group management. On the basis of their feedback, we refined questions to maintain a conversational atmosphere during each focus group.

A total of 10 EFNEP participants were recruited from four counties across New York State, and four focus group sessions were conducted. Discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and coded for emergent themes. Common themes were attraction to the recipes, appeal of the images, need for ideas on involving children in the kitchen, and potential for communicating with other users through the comments feature and links to other social media platforms.

Recipes were given high priority by focus group members because they simplify meal planning with step-by-step instructions for making healthful dishes. Participants also highly valued the ability to search for recipes by ingredient, with one summing up this sentiment as follows: "Sometimes I've got all these potatoes and instead of filtering through a bunch of recipes, you can go straight to potatoes. So that's pretty ingenious." Regarding ways to improve the recipes feature, participants suggested illustrating the preparation process to address language barriers and providing clearer direction regarding recipes children might prepare. Participants also suggested including more cost-effective recipes requiring minimal preparation time.

The appearance of the blog was described as "catchy and captivating" and the layout as "bright and inviting." Participants indicated that the length, tone, and readability of the posts made reading enjoyable. Images were critical for attracting readers, with one participant explaining, "There are a bunch of pictures, and that's what grabs my attention."

Participants regarded blog post topics as "very appealing" and "very relevant [to] issues and concerns [especially] for parents." These perspectives confirmed that the information provided on the blog is congruent with the audience's needs. When participants were asked to suggest additional topics that could be addressed, they most often suggested including ideas for giving children active roles in the kitchen and dealing with picky eaters.

Participants were asked whether they would use social media platforms such as Facebook or Pinterest to share content from the blog with their friends and followers. Half reported that they likely would connect to Facebook, but participants did not express great interest in connecting to other platforms. All participants reported that they would consider comments of other users when reading posts and recipes. However, only some conveyed that they would comment on a post themselves, indicating that they would do so, for example, to suggest that a recipe "needs changing" or "[is] great."

Lastly, participants made two suggestions related to improving blog accessibility: (a) include more images/visuals for people with limited English skills and (b) include activities appropriate for people with

physical disabilities.

Conclusion

The core themes that emerged from our focus group sessions—incorporating more recipes and images, providing information about involving children in the kitchen, and connecting with others—are similar to themes found by others working with similar groups (Leak et al., 2014).

Participants' positive reaction to *Day to Day Eats* and suggestions for improvement indicate a desire to use a social media platform to access food and nutrition information. The opportunity to use social media platforms expands the current reach of evidence-based food and nutrition education offered through EFNEP and is a strategy for sharing health and wellness practices to support a community of site visitors.

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