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Thinking Outside the Box of Evaluation Platforms: Adapting Qualtrics for Virtual 4-H Judging Competitions

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Abstract. Competitive events represent a major component of 4-H programming. These events are typically held in person; however, unforeseen circumstances, like the COVID-19 pandemic, have required Extension professionals to adapt these programs to virtual settings. This paper outlines some unique features of Qualtrics, a web-based tool commonly used to build surveys, that led Missouri 4-H to use the platform to administer agriculture and natural resource science contests.

INTRODUCTION

Competitive events represent a major component of 4-H programming (Radhakrishna, 2006). Hundreds of Missouri 4-H members compete annually in agriculture and natural resource science contests. Research shows that 4-H competitions teach participants responsibility, build self-confidence, and prepare youth to face challenges (Radhakrishna et al., 2006). Traditionally, these events are held in-person. However, unforeseen circumstances like the COVID-19 pandemic have forced 4-H professionals to offer 4-H program elements in a virtual setting at a time when positive youth development opportunities are needed to help ensure the success of youth (Arnold, 2020). Transitioning programming from in-person to virtual raises many challenges to be addressed, including choosing an appropriate platform, creating a schedule that accommodates participants, managing virtual scoring, and distributing results (Inks et al., 2020). Since youth were unable to gather to compete in the 2020 program year, Missouri 4-H decided to administer their agriculture and natural resource science contests through Qualtrics. The ease of accessibility, minimal required investment of additional resources, and design versatility made Qualtrics an advantageous choice.

QUALTRICS AS A PLATFORM FOR VIRTUAL CONTESTS

Qualtrics is a web-based tool commonly used to build surveys (University of Missouri, n.d.). Many Extension professionals are already familiar with the capabilities of Qualtrics for use in program evaluation. However, the authors of this paper found several elements of Qualtrics to be adaptable and relevant to administering a competitive 4-H event virtually.

QUESTION TYPE AND DESIGN

Qualtrics offers numerous question types for Extension professionals to build placing classes or other blocks of content. Videos can be embedded into individual questions, allowing participants to view content directly. This helps prevent accidental termination of an individual's entry as a result of link redirection to external sites. Each question type has validation options, either forcing or requesting a user's response. In the realm of competitive events, this tool is useful in mitigating participants who accidentally skip content or for requesting answers to demographic questions. Including "display" or "skip" logic for individual questions simplifies the user's experience by

only showing them questions that need their response. This is beneficial when participants are broken into sub-categories, such as age or experience level, and are viewing similar content or classes but answering different or additional questions.

SURVEY PROTECTION AND COMPLETION

By placing restrictions on movement in the form and limiting access dates, Extension professionals can better emulate the format of an in-person competitive event or training. The ability to control a user's progression through the form creates the option for professionals to prohibit participants from revisiting classes and materials once an answer has been submitted. Utilizing the scheduling feature also helps mirror an in-person event. It provides professionals the option to set a specific range of time when the form is open for participants to review and respond while also affording the luxury of sending out contest details in advance without concern that participants will access materials prior to the official start. Using this feature may also bring the added benefit of greater participation because participants are not required to complete the contest on as strict of a schedule as an in-person event. While contestants must follow the parameters of when the contest is open, they have the freedom to choose their exact start time.

BUILT-IN EVALUATION

A benefit that comes with using this platform is the option to directly link to an evaluation once the competition form has been completed. Instead of having to rely on participants accessing another independent link, they are automatically presented with the evaluation questions. Using this direct link feature simplifies data processing and analysis for Extension professionals, as the data from the contest and the evaluation are stored separately and can be accessed independently.

DISTRIBUTION TO PARTICIPANTS

Distributing access to participants is easy through the use of an anonymous or personal link that is emailed to each participant. Personal links allow participants to have their own unique access to the form. The anonymous link is beneficial when there are several participants or when resources are not available to support personal link distribution.

SCORING TOOL

One of the most valuable parts of using Qualtrics for virtual competitions is the ability to score the submissions within the platform. Prior to opening the form, Extension professionals can add values to each answer choice within a question. Values can be entered as positives or negatives depending on the scoring procedure for the event. When either the question or form is completed by the participant, their response is automatically scored, eliminating the need for professionals to spend time hand scoring submissions. Automatic scoring also benefits participants by allowing them to immediately see their scores following completion, which is not always possible at in-person events.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Qualtrics makes managing and analyzing data a simple process. Data can be exported in different file types for further computation and reporting. Questions can be isolated for focused review or compared to each other for statistical evaluation. Furthermore, it allows Extension professionals the ability to quickly compile participant rankings or outcomes, enabling a fast turn-around time for awards. Ultimately, this gives them the option to gather the information they need and present it in a way that can be easily consumed by participants and other stakeholders.

IMPLICATIONS

As Extension programming is expanding into virtual delivery modes, professionals are further exploring the electronic and web-based resources available to them and discovering new ways to use these resources to achieve program goals. When in-person events were not possible, Missouri 4-H's use of Qualtrics to help accommodate participants, complete virtual scoring, and manage evaluation data for agriculture and natural resource science contests proved to be viable and valuable. One limitation of using Qualtrics for virtual contests is the inability of participants to collaborate or network as they might in-person. The authors of this paper encourage Extension

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professionals to consider using Qualtrics as a platform beyond evaluation and to see value in its role as a tool for conducting virtual competitive events.

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