

12-1-2014

Farming—It's So Citified: An Urban Agriculture Marketing Campaign

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Recommended Citation

Browning, M., & Herrick, S. (2014). Farming—It's So Citified: An Urban Agriculture Marketing Campaign. *The Journal of Extension*, 52(6), Article 17. <https://doi.org/10.34068/joe.52.06.17>

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Abstract

The marketing campaign of the inaugural West Virginia Urban Agriculture Conference, a project between West Virginia State University (WVSU) and West Virginia University Extension Services and partnering agencies, was a tremendous success. The WVSU communications team developed an innovative, character-driven campaign combining urban and rural elements for a unique visual messaging strategy. The cornerstone of the campaign was Chicken Stu, the official "spokes-chicken" of the conference, who shared his journey from the farm to the city via social media. The campaign generated buzz, surpassed goals, and illustrates the impact of innovative social media marketing in promoting Extension initiatives.

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Project Background

Urban agriculture has significantly increased in popularity over the last few years among West Virginia communities. To address this growing interest, Extension Services at West Virginia State University (WVSU) and West Virginia University (WVU) partnered with local agencies to host the inaugural West Virginia Urban Agriculture Conference, offering expert instruction on regionally relevant topics. An innovative marketing campaign was developed to generate buzz and increase participation using character-based marketing tactics delivered through social media platforms, print communication, traditional media, and merchandise.

Mains, Jenkins-Howard, and Stephenson (2013) point to social media outlets such as Facebook as a tool for expanding the marketing efforts of Extension professionals and encourage consistency in language and graphics for branding. With this in mind, the communications team at WVSU developed an integrated marketing approach that resulted in an easily recognizable, cross-platform arsenal of visual and written campaign elements, with social media as the primary vehicle for audience reach.

Marketing Strategy and Tactics

Planners set a 200-attendee goal based on other farm-focused conferences held in the region. Initial marketing ideas included developing a standard logo, website, and Facebook page. Kinsey (2010) suggests that social media tools such as Facebook and YouTube, both of which were proposed for this project, are increasingly popular and should be considered as dissemination methods for Extension efforts. Expanding upon those ideas, the marketing team developed a more unique logo approach using the image of a chicken wearing a necktie, therein visually blending urban and agricultural elements (Figure 1).

Figure 1.

The WV Urban Agriculture Conference Logo



Additional marketing elements then followed using blended imagery accompanied with a tagline, "Farming. It's so citified." The supporting images were used for fliers, social media, and merchandise, and highlighted additional conference themes (Figure 2):

- A businessman walking a pig on a leash
- A silo in the center of a city block
- A woman in a dress walking a goat on a leash
- A parking meter in a flower garden
- A latte with a wheat stem as a straw
- A man in a business suit with a beekeeper's hat and net on his head and bees circling around him
- A traffic light with red, yellow and green bell peppers representing the stop, caution and go bulbs

Figure 2.
Additional Visual Elements Carried the Tagline and Theme.



Social media became the primary engine for generating conference buzz. The marketing elements were released on a conference [website](#), [Facebook](#), and [Twitter](#) account along with additional information about conference offerings, partners, and registration details. The images and tagline resonated with audiences and generated excitement based on social media comments, likes, and shares.

To further expand the marketing campaign, the chicken depicted in the logo was "personified" as Chicken Stu. Stu launched a [Twitter account](#) to tweet his journey from the barnyard to the city. A Stu doll was created to give a visual depiction of his experiences in an urban setting and to stage photo opportunities with conference partners and others. Stu visited well-known landmarks, as well as an actual urban farm and even the Governor's Mansion for a photo opportunity with the Governor and First Lady of West Virginia.

Chicken Stu posters, tote bags, and t-shirts, as well as items featuring the additional campaign images, were made available for purchase during the conference. Finally, Chicken Stu appeared in a [short teaser film](#) that was released prior to the conference and again in "[Stu: The Movie](#)," which showcased his time at the conference in a day-in-the-life format. Both films were uploaded to YouTube and shared through social media. A press release and media advisory were also released through traditional media channels.

Outcomes

The marketing campaign generated considerable attention in the region and contributed to surpassed expectations and goals, including:

- 232 attendees (goal: 200)
- 470 Facebook likes (goal: 200)
- 107 Twitter followers (goal: 100)

An informal survey of attendees revealed that social media was how the majority learned of the conference. Merchandise sales totaled \$1,300, and the remaining inventory was sent to a local foods market for continued sale. "Stu: The Movie" had 100 views on YouTube within 12 hours of its release. Campaign planners were asked to contribute to the West Virginia Farmers Market Association's "Farmers Market Planning Toolkit" as an example of a successful marketing idea. Comments about the campaign included:

- "I think this is a great campaign!"
- "The promotion of this event is what is really pushing it to the top."
- "Best logo ever."
- "...intriguing marketing campaign."
- "Hilarious!"
- "Genius and extremely adorable."
- "Ridiculously creative and great branding tools!"

Cooper, Cox, and Corbin (2012) cite the Internet as offering opportunities for recruitment, education delivery, and peer support for Extension programs, and this marketing campaign has and will continue to leverage online platforms for audience reach to ensure that the campaign maintains top-of-mind awareness. Following the event, social media accounts transitioned into a platform for sharing urban agriculture concepts, ideas, and events, and Chicken Stu enjoyed his experience so much, he remained in the city to continue being the voice of urban agriculture in West Virginia. These steps are ensuring the sustainability of the project throughout the year, keeping momentum strong for the second annual conference and providing an innovative platform for information sharing for Extension educators.

Implications

The project described here points to the increasing effectiveness of social media as a marketing strategy and the positive response that can come from injecting creativity and innovation into Extension-led initiatives and exemplifies how a good idea can be implemented on a limited budget. Costs to create the online presence for the conference were minimal, the social media components were free, and merchandise expenses were recouped in sales along with a generous profit margin. By sustaining the platforms beyond the life of the conference, a new, ongoing vehicle for information and education from Extension professionals has been established.

Acknowledgements

The West Virginia Urban Agriculture Conference was a joint initiative by WVU Extension Service, WVSU Extension Service, and the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, in partnership with the Capitol & Elk Conservation

Districts, WV Farmers Market Association, WV Conservation Agency, SARE in WV, Charleston Area Alliance, and the Kanawha Urban Ag Alliance.

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