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Using a Food-Themed Calendar to Engage the Public and Promote Extension from Field to Fork

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Using a Food-Themed Calendar to Engage the Public and Promote Extension from Field to Fork

Abstract

A monthly, Web-based food-themed calendar was created to provide Extension research-based information from farm to fork to consumers and multiplier groups working with consumers. It provides resources for selected national food-themed days, weeks, and months. This approach helped optimize the use of social media and search engines in promoting content, leading to visits and links to our organization's website. The calendar received 45,875+ page views. It has been linked 493 times from 186 websites, including other universities, blogs, and social media sites. The calendar was listed in the top three recommended webpages by search engines.

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Introduction

Where can you find most adults today? Answer: On the Internet! Ninety-five percent of adults ages 18-29 use the Internet, with 30-49 year olds at 89% and 50-64 year olds at 77% (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2012). How can we help the general public and multiplier groups find Extension? Answer: Engage them with an Internet-based food themed calendar. Everyone eats and food is intertwined with agriculture.

Objective

Our goal was to develop Internet-based content that not only reached and was useful to the general public, but also to multiplier groups such as educators, health professionals, and media outlets who work with the general public. A monthly food-themed calendar seemed like the perfect solution. We created a calendar that provided resources, tips, and recipes for selected national food- and health-themed days, weeks, and months. Food content curation into a calendar allowed us to repurpose our materials to reach a larger audience (Franzen-Castle, Henneman, & Ostdiek, 2013). A calendar approach helped optimize the use of social media and search engines in promoting content, leading

to significant increases in visits, content downloads, and links to our organization's website for more in-depth information (Franzen-Castle & Henneman, 2012). Using food as a starting point, we were able to expand to other food-related disciplines such as horticulture, crop and animal agriculture, youth/4-H, and family health issues.

Description

The calendar is available on our Extension website. It provides an engaging method for reaching people through social media to bring them back to our website. Visits to our website indicates the effectiveness of this calendar approach. The calendar generates traffic as well as links from external websites, which drives users back to our website and enhances search engine optimization.

Extension educators are encouraged to use social media tools to aid in the dissemination of research-based information (Kinsey, 2010). The calendar was excellent for promoting, via social media and listservs, short "bites" of food-themed information several times a month. For example, during January, we featured a combined total of 22 national food days, weeks, and months with 114 links to sources of more information. Social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Pinterest) were used several times monthly to promote these with a short message, such as, "Today is National (name of food) Day (Week, or Month)—for more information on choosing and preparing (name of food), visit (Web address)."

National Ag Day offered an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the contribution of agriculture in our everyday lives. On National Bean Day, we gave tips for incorporating healthy, economical dry beans into family meals. National Herb Week provided a chance to teach about planting and preparing herbs. During National Beef Month, we highlighted nutritional benefits of an agriculture meat product important to our state. Each day, month, and week is illustrated with a related photo for added appeal and to facilitate sharing on social media, since photos are automatically included when a link is shared from a Web page.

The target audience was the general adult population plus multiplier groups (educators, health professionals, and media outlets) who work with this audience who use the Internet. This group was chosen because the Internet has become the "go to" place for information. More people seek information from the Internet than they do from professionals, family members and friends, and print materials (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2007).

Extension is identified on every calendar Web page. Also, Extension is mentioned in our email signatures when we promote the calendar to various listservs when a new month is posted. Information not personally developed comes mostly from government agencies and other Extension offices and resources. The goal is to link predominately to Extension websites, both to our website and other Extension websites nationwide. We are consistently showcasing Extension as a contributor of non-biased, research-based information. These Extension website pages have logos and text on them identifying them as Extension sites. Extension is identified on all social media accounts used to promote the calendar.

Evaluation

The calendar multiplies our educational efforts by assisting others find research-based, unbiased information. Statistics show increased visits to Extension's website as people have become more aware of our calendar. According to Google analytics for the 2012 calendar year, the calendar received over 45,875 page views, a 17% increase over the previous year. It was linked 493 times from 186 websites, including other universities, blogs, and social media sites.

The calendar was listed in the top three recommended webpages by search engines for "food theme calendars." A Web feedback form indicated the helpfulness of this monthly content curation.

Comments from calendar users include:

- "Having all this information in one place makes it easy when looking for something specific like 'pumpkin'. Gave me lots of ideas!"
- "I love this calendar. It is packed with ideas."
- "Love it! Had been trying to come up with some fun ideas! Thank you for sharing."
- "Please keep the monthly information coming!"
- "Pasta month was a great tie in to lessons on whole grains. I taught a nutrition class with a cooking component on Oct 25, World Pasta Day. I had 17 adults eat whole wheat rotini and veggies for the first time ever!"

Conclusion

The calendar multiplies our efforts by assisting others with finding research-based, unbiased information they can use in regular programming and their daily lives. It is a "go to" resource not only for the public, but also for multiplier groups. Statistics show increased visits to our website as people have become more aware of our calendar.

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