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Use of an Extension Horse Conference to Improve Profitability for the Horse Industry

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Use of an Extension Horse Conference to Improve Profitability for the Horse Industry

Abstract

An annual horse training conference has been used to improve profitability for horse owners through providing owners an affordable opportunity to learn from high-profile equine professionals. This conference has contributed to \$9,300,000 increase in value of horses over its 21-year history. Furthermore, by attracting the country's elite equine professionals and designing an annual quality event that is unmatched in the region, equine Extension and teaching programs can gain much credibility to the horse industry regionally and nationally.

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Introduction

Extension programs are used to provide new information, build linkages, and develop industry relationships (Parish & Smith, 2012; Porr, Brown, & Splan, 2011). The horse industry is often underserved but vital to a state's agricultural economy. In Nebraska, the horse industry annually generates over \$700 million to the state's economy and ranks 5th in agriculture revenue generated. Additionally, Nebraska ranks 18th in the United States in the value from the sale of horses, ponies, mules, burros, and donkeys (USDA 2007 Census of Agriculture). However, prior to 1992, few statewide, equine-focused educational programs had been held within Nebraska. Thus, an annual event was developed in 1992 to serve the expansive, statewide equine community. Its purpose has been to improve profitability for horse owners through exposure to highly sought after and respected horse trainers.

Conference Planning and Organization

The conference was developed to focus on delivering a unique event attracting a broad spectrum of horse enthusiasts from beginners to professionals. In contrast to traditional "horse and rider" clinics, the format was a "demonstration" type conference, thus allowing for a larger audience and greater programmatic reach. This unique format has since been modeled by other Extension programs and

by at least three professional equine clinicians. To best use the expertise of professional trainer, the conference has been structured as a 2-day demonstration using either the trainer's horses, recruiting outside horses and riders, or a combination of the two.

The majority of conferences (17 out of 21) have been conducted with a combination of the trainer providing three to four horses plus recruiting three to five additional riders with their horses, which are used to demonstrate training methods to the audience. In addition to the training sessions, one to two 30-to-45 minute presentations on various equine related topics such as nutrition, health care, grooming, taxes, equine insurance, and the UNL Undergraduate program have been conducted.

This event is held each winter in the UNL Animal Science Complex arena, which is adjacent to the UNL Animal Science building. Conducting the event in this facility contributes to visibility of the UNL Animal Science horse program and student recruitment. Assistance in conducting the event has been through volunteer undergraduate students (1992 - 1994) and student organizations such as the Animal Science Graduate Student Association (1995 - 2006) and UNL Equestrian Team (2007 - 2013). Further promotion of the Undergraduate Equine program and Equestrian team occurs every year through presentations, informational displays, and the use of UNL Equestrian Team members as riders.

Promotion of the conference has evolved over the 20 years and includes direct mail brochures, press releases, print advertisements, Extension office promotion, website, and social media/Facebook. The conference has been self-supportive through registration fees charged to the attendees. Due to the excellent attendance, over \$65,000 has been generated to the UNL Horse program.

Conference Evaluation

Evaluation of Extension programs is crucial to long-term sustainability of a quality program (Hatchfeld, Bau, Holcomb, & Craig, 2013). To assess the value of this event, participants completed a short end-of-conference evaluation following the program. Participants self-reported any increase in knowledge and anticipated changes in profitability of their horse operation. A 21-year summary of responses includes the following.

- 91.7% of the participants over the 21 years indicated they would adopt new training methods after attending the conference.
- 95.5% would do things differently with their horses after attending.
- 66.7% indicated they would use these new methods on their own horses.
- 20% reported these new methods would improve their horse training business.

Attendance at a horse conference has improved the profitability for horsemen as the following.

- 40% of the attendees indicated information obtained would increase their income from their equine business by 25 - 50%.
- 30% indicated their training bills would be reduced by 25% - 50%.

- 40% felt the value of their horses would be increased by 25%.
- 25% of those attending the conference indicated the value of their horses would be increased by 50%.

Providing a sustained quality program over multiple years allows Extension to build a following of loyal, repeat users and justify program continuation (Hachfeld et al., 2013). Additionally, once producers realize the benefit, they are more likely to return. For example, attendance at this conference has ranged from 300 to 600 people from Nebraska, Iowa, South Dakota, Kansas, Colorado, and Minnesota. Many of the same individuals attend this conference each year. Between 2007 and 2012, 36% attended one-three conferences, 36% attended four to 12 conferences, whereas 28% were attending for the first time. Much of this repeat attendance may be attributed to the satisfaction of participants. Between 1991 and 2011, 73.9% of those attending ranked this event between 8 to 10 (10 being the highest), and only 7.3% ranked it below a 5.

The majority of attendees (73.9%) indicated they owned between one-6 horses with an average value of \$4,800. The self-reported increased value of horses as a result of the new training methods learned was estimated to be between \$1,200 to \$2,400 per horse. Thus this equates to nearly \$9,300,000 increased horse value over the 21 years of Horsin Around.

This conference can be used as a model to develop Extension programs focused on serving a specific industry and build long-standing relationships with clientele. Horsin Around has provided an important service to the horse industry for over 20 years. It has made a difference in the value of horses as well as increased the visibility and credibility of extension programming.

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