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"Connecting" with Your Clients [on Facebook]

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Abstract

Connecting with your Extension clients through Facebook can have a very positive effect in spreading programs throughout your county. This article analyzes the advantages, disadvantages, and important considerations to contemplate before you begin using Facebook as a tool to advance your Extension programs. I urge all Extension agents to grow fluent in social media and capitalize on this widespread technology.

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Introduction

Do you have a personal Facebook account? Why? Maybe you have never asked yourself this question. Is it to socialize with friends, keep in touch with family, or spy on your kids? Do you use it to promote your Extension programs? For whatever reason, *now you're connected*. Are you connected to your clients? Did you have any reservations before you approved their "friend request?"

Facebook Is a Tool

Extension "has historically been a leader in adopting new tools and practices (hybrid corn, irrigation, etc.), so why not information technology for educational program delivery, content management, and clientele service?" (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011). I urge all Extension agents to grow fluent in social media, specifically Facebook, and capitalize on this widespread technology.

Facebook is an easy way to keep in touch with anyone—whether the relationship is distant or close. Through Facebook, you can conveniently message or chat directly with connections, tag them in photos, and comment back and forth in public or private (Occhino, 2009). Facebook must be thought of as a tool to drive traffic to university sites where the public can find Extension's research-based information. It can also be used to advertise upcoming events, generate interest in programs, and answer questions. If used correctly, Facebook can become a powerful tool to accomplish the mission of Extension (Mains, Jenkins-Howard, & Stephenson, 2013).

What Is Your Agenda?

Your agenda on Facebook will determine what type of account(s) you should have. Consider for example, Facebooker A, who doesn't want to mingle his personal and professional lives. He doesn't connect with clients on his personal account and has high privacy settings. This is perfectly understandable. Rather, he sets up a "public figure page" or an "organization page" on behalf of his county Extension office in order to interact and engage clientele, but in this way, he maintains his privacy.

Facebooker B believes that her job is who she is and chooses to connect with everyone on her personal page. She also has an "organization page" for her county. She promotes county programs on both pages in order to reach a broader audience. Her main agenda on her personal Facebook page is promoting her programs and sharing information on Extension related topics, but approximately 25% of the time she posts things about her personal life (family pictures, hobbies, and interests). Every time she posts she asks herself "Is this appropriate for me to post as a representative of my university?" Most professionals using Facebook will fall somewhere between these examples.

Considerations: Put Your Best Cyber-Foot Forward

Be conscious of what your profile picture says about you; it carries weight in how your image is conveyed. Do you look professional? Family friendly? Or like a party animal?

Remember your privacy settings. On the Facebook Timeline you can categorize your friends into groups, and with each post you can select which group is going to see that post in their "news feed." Privacy settings are tricky and frequently updated—stay on top of it.

What information is available on your profile? Consider removing the details that might inhibit connections. Depending on how you decide to leverage social networks, keeping political and religious views private is usually a good idea, same with your interests, favorite movies, and TV shows.

As a figure in the public eye, the things you publish online will affect you, whether you are friends with your clientele or not. Use good sense in every social network you belong to (Bercovici, 2013).

Advantages of "Friending" Your Clientele

Facebook makes friend recommendations for you, which makes it an excellent tool to expand your influence and agenda (Kocher, Lombardo, & Sweitzer, 2013).

Through social media friends can "comment on" and "share" Extension resources that you post with their friends, instantly. A personal referral from a friend is the single most powerful tool (Alsever, 2011). Imagine how your reach could spread: "one post can theoretically be spread worldwide and viewed by millions within minutes, if not seconds...with audiences...whom we don't have traditional connections" (Cornelisse et al., 2011).

Clients want simple, easy to find, proven resources that they can apply to their lives (Rader, 2011).

Analyzing a few organizations that are engaging clients via social media will shed some light on other strategies that are successful. For example, the Wisconsin Milk Marketing Board sponsors The Cheese

& Burger Society's Facebook page takes an innovative approach—fans are asked to post pictures of themselves and their burgers. People love to share pictures, especially of themselves. The Cheese & Burger Society has been especially successful because links, videos, and pictures get a better "EdgeRank," which is the algorithm Facebook developed to determine which posts will be displayed at the top of fans' "news feeds" (Mershon, 2011).

Another organization that has been a hit through social media is IdeaPaint, which sells a specialty paint that changes boring walls into dry-erase writing surfaces. IdeaPaint shares "How-To" videos for its products on Facebook (Mershon, 2011). How many factsheets have you written that can be turned into a "How-To" video? A great way to start sharing would be to dissect the content you have already written and start posting it piece-by-piece on your website. Facebook can then be used as a tool to drive traffic to your website.

"A key to creating ongoing engagement on your [Facebook page] is to use variety in your posts" (Mershon, 2011). Many organizations use questions, quotes, contests, and news articles in their posts to connect with fans.

Disadvantages of "Friending" Your Clientele

Marketing through Facebook may sound very compelling, but those with whom you connect will also be invited into your personal life. This can be a good thing—some people want to know that you are a real person with family, friends, and a sense of humor.

Be forewarned, however; those same features that make social media so convenient and useful when building relationships with Extension clients and reaching their contacts, can also have an adverse impact on your image. This is where it gets difficult to separate your professional role in Extension with your personal life. How do you know if you should or should not confirm a "friend request" on Facebook from clients? The answer is really up to you and your level of social comfort online. If you don't want to be personally connected with people, direct them to an alternative page such as your county page, with a tactful message. People may become offended if they are simply "denied "as a friend.

Holmes (2012) warns of the "friend factor." This is when a "friend" you are connected to "shares" something you have posted with their social network without your approval or permission. This type of sharing through "social media communications…may lead to potential disciplinary actions for you if [your] University's civil rights policies are violated. What you do or fail to do when employing social media could have serious ramifications for you, Extension or [your] University." Having to "untag" your name from a picture or delete a comment on your "wall'" are just some of the hassles involved with allowing your life to be viewed publicly online.

You may not desire to chat on Facebook. If this is the case, go "offline" in your account settings so clients cannot send you instant messages. If you do not, some could get the impression you are ignoring them if you do not respond.

No public figure can escape negative comments. Connecting to clients opens you up to the possibility of criticism and negative feedback regarding your service. Always remember to respond positively

and thank the person for bringing the information to your attention. It may not be appropriate to address detailed concerns publically on Facebook; consider telephoning the person to follow-up if there is an issue.

If you decide to connect with clients on Facebook, expect to change the way you share and post. You will have to think about your social contributions more earnestly by asking yourself "Will this post or comment be allowable if one of my clients were to read it?"

Conclusion

My Facebook account has been extremely useful in growing my county programs. A personal policy I use for posting is: 40% work related, 25% family and personal related, and 35% hobbies and interests. Posting work-related events and articles attracts the attention of my friends—who are also prospective members and volunteers in my programs. Facebook is also a great way to stay in contact with 4-H youth, especially to remind them about upcoming events. How you use Facebook to advance Extension programs and the extent you wish to share your personal life with clients is contingent on your comfort leveland your reasons for using social media in the first place. The way "the world communicates is changing and requires Extension to change as well. Social media provides abundant opportunities to interact with and meet our clientele's needs on platforms that they are using and embracing in their everyday lives" (Cornelisse et al., 2011).

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The Discussion Forum for this Commentary can be found at:

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