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Extension Program Marketing and Needs Evaluation Using Craigslist

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Abstract: Craigslist is a mostly free Internet classified ad website that is accessed by over 30 million American viewers each month. This article describes how Craigslist was used to market Cooperative Extension Service programs in the Mat-Su District of Alaska. The result was much larger program participation than obtained through traditional marketing sources such as newspapers and newsletters. Program marketing through Craigslist also resulted in more non-traditional audiences than normally experienced in the Mat-Su District. Participants tended to be ethnically and culturally more diverse, younger and less financially stable. Most had never heard of the Cooperative Extension Service.

A Failure Averted

Imagine this common Extension program scenario: You've spent weeks preparing your 2-hour introductory gardening program to take place this evening. You've done the usual marketing practices of mailing and e-mailing press releases to local media. You've sent program invitations to lists of people who have indicated they would be interested in gardening programs, and you've advertised the program in the usual Extension newsletters. You've done all the right things so there should be plenty of sign-ups, right?

Unfortunately, the day of the program has arrived, and only four people have registered. You had hoped for an audience of around 20. Not that these four people are unimportant, but they are the same four people who attend pretty much every Extension program you conduct. Do you cancel the program, or slog out another evening away from home for little overall impact?

This story describes a situation in the spring of 2008 that took place in the Mat-Su Cooperative Extension Service District in South Central Alaska. A combination of factors had seemingly conspired to negatively affect the marketing of this program. First, the local newspapers (usually more than eager to run Extension program announcements) had not picked up the story. Second, several consecutive weeks of really pretty weather had put local Alaskans in not much of a mood to sit indoors through a class.

Out of frustration, I decided to advertise the class on Craigslist <www.craigslist.org> under the "farm + garden" section. It was 11:00 a.m. That evening, 8 hours later, 54 people were staring back at me, anticipating an evening spent learning how to garden. A potential program failure had been averted thanks to a change in marketing tactic.

What Is Craigslist?

Craigslist is an Internet-based classified advertising Web site that is free for most users. It hosts classified ads for all 50 U.S. states and more than 500 cities worldwide. According to Craigslist (2008), 30 million Americans visit the site each month seeking merchandise, jobs, housing, services, activity announcements, and personal interest forums.

Advertising Extension programs on Craigslist has many advantages besides being free. One of the biggest advantages is that users sort themselves into narrow categories of interest. This means that Extension programs can be targeted to specific audiences. For example, we recently conducted a program on calculating when it's time to trade in your gas-guzzling SUV for a more fuel-efficient model. We advertised the program under the "cars + trucks" section and had 24 people sign up for the class. Almost everyone in the program indicated they had been searching the "cars + trucks" section because they had been considering selling their SUV or were looking to buy a more fuel-efficient model. They saw the ad for our class and decided to attend in order to make an informed decision.

Another advantage to program marketing on Craigslist is that its viewers cut across almost all ethnic, age, and socioeconomic groups. Here in the Mat-Su District, our typical Extension audience overwhelmingly tends to be white, over forty, relatively well educated, and economically stable. We have noticed that audiences attending Craigslist marketed programs tend to be just the opposite. They are racially and culturally more diverse, tend to be in their mid-to late twenties, often appear to have less, if any, college education, and seem much less financially stable. Most have never heard of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Needs Evaluation Using Craigslist

I first really became aware of Craigslist when a Master Gardener told me about a particularly good deal she had gotten purchasing a greenhouse on the Web site. Wanting to find a similar deal myself, I checked out the "farm + garden" section. While scanning the ads, I noticed that the buying and selling activities of people tell you a lot about their community.

In the Mat-Su District, there was tremendous interest in poultry. By reading the ads, it was easy to determine there was a relatively low level of poultry knowledge. Misidentified breeds, incorrect feeding information, and exorbitant prices being asked and paid for relatively common birds were dead giveaways.

Despite the obvious local interest in poultry issues, there had been no Extension programming regarding poultry in our district for many years. I started posting ads about freely available advice regarding chickens, and my e-mail and phone literally exploded with inquiries. Because I almost never received poultry inquiries, I had assumed there was little interest. Was I wrong!

Lessons We've Learned Using Craigslist

Since we've been using Craigslist to market our programs and offerings, it has become almost irrelevant whether we get program publicity through traditional sources, i.e., through newspapers and newsletters. A well-thought-out and placed posting almost always guarantees a good audience. Here are some tips we've learned.

Emphasize the university connection-There are a lot of scams on Craigslist, and Cooperative Extension programs often seem "too good to be true."

Use pictures to convey a thought or outcome-Pictures draw more attention to your ad and help viewers see the benefit of your program.

Multiple listings for the same program are not allowed-Craigslist has the ability to identify and delete multiple listings. Choose your listing category carefully.

Don't delete and repost the same ad-People attempt to do this so their ad stays at the top of a category list. This is known as "toplisting" and can result in Craigslist deleting your ad.

For once, procrastinating is good-We've had the largest audience numbers using Craigslist by posting ads only 1 or 2 days before the program.

Post in the morning-Most people seem to be checking Craigslist from their work computers. Posting in the morning makes your ad most visible throughout the workday. Your ad will be checked out the most on the day it is posted, and hits to the ad will decline rapidly after that.

References

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