

4-1-2008

The Use of Radio Broadcast, Internet, and Podcasting in A Family Life Education Program

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Recommended Citation

Smith, S., & Davis, D. (2008). The Use of Radio Broadcast, Internet, and Podcasting in A Family Life Education Program. *The Journal of Extension*, 46(2), Article 16. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol46/iss2/16>

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April 2008 // Volume 46 // Number 2 // Ideas at Work // 2IAW1

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The Use of Radio Broadcast, Internet, and Podcasting in A Family Life Education Program

Abstract

This article discusses the use of three technologies in an Extension family life program: a professionally produced radio program, Family Album Radio, available to stations nationwide; an Internet presence through a companion Web site; and a podcasting feature making the program available to subscribers via the Internet. We explain the development of the program through a partnership across several units at a major land-grant institution and provide evidence of the program's success, using data from the program's Web site traffic. We conclude with a discussion of the potential of this multifaceted program for family life education.

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Introduction

Historically, family life educators have provided information through courses and print materials. More recently, educators have been disseminating information through the World Wide Web (Elliot, 1999; Hughes, 2001; Steimle & Duncan, 2004).

One largely unexplored medium in family life education is radio, which has the potential to reach thousands of listeners at a time and gives a program widespread visibility and name recognition. Radio can be even more powerful when combined with newer technologies. Here we describe how Family Album Radio links a professionally produced radio program with an Internet presence and podcasting to reach families all over the globe.

Components of Family Album Radio

Radio Broadcast

Family Album Radio is a two-minute daily radio program that is a joint effort between the University of Florida Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, UF/IFAS Extension, and the University's public radio affiliate, WUFT-FM. A multidisciplinary team of faculty and staff develops scripts reporting current research and trends pertaining to parenting and child development, eldercare, nutrition and food safety, and financial management. Scripts are professionally produced for widespread distribution. Radio broadcast began in fall of 2004, and in the spring of 2005, Family Album Radio was made available via satellite to stations nationwide; in summer of 2006 it became accessible through a digital radio format (Content Depot).

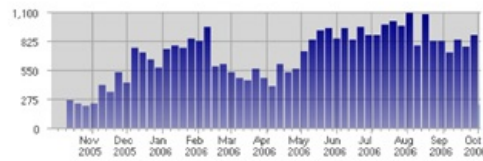
Internet Presence

The *Family Album* Web site went live when the radio program was launched, at

<<http://www.familyalbumradio.org>>. This companion site tells more about the show and provides links to resources. In addition, all shows are archived in both audio and text format on RadioSource.NET, so they are always available digitally.

During the first year (October 2004-2005), Web traffic remained consistent at approximately 250 visits per week. In the fall of 2005, Web site traffic began to increase with the introduction of a satellite uplink and the debut of the program's podcast (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Increase in Family Album Radio Web Site Traffic, 2005-2006



Podcasting

One of the latest and fastest growing technological additions to the Internet is podcasting, a Web feed of audio or video files placed on the Internet by a podcaster. With podcasting, listeners can tune in with an Internet connection and an MP3 player found on most personal computers. Anyone can subscribe to podcasts using a feed aggregator, some of which are free and others, for purchase. Once listeners subscribe, they are automatically notified when new content is available. In addition to downloading the shows to a personal computer, a listener can transfer them to an iPod or any other MP3 player for convenient listening. Podcasts are made available through directories such as the iTunes podcast directory <<http://www.apple.com/itunes/store/podcasts.html>> and others listed on the Family Album Web site <<http://www.familyalbumradio.org/podcasting.html>>.

Beginning in November 2005, Family Album was distributed to Internet users in podcast format. Each week, five segments are produced for podcast distribution, and listeners can download episodes by using the podcasting feature at the Family Album Web site.

The debut of podcasting resulted in a huge increase in traffic to the Family Album Web site. Figure 2 shows that in the 3 months after the first podcast, page view counts leapt from approximately 880 per month to almost 1,800 in November, to 2,700 in December, and approximately 3,600 in January, 2006. The .rss link (or podcast link) has been the most viewed page on the site, by far. Web site hits doubled from approximately 6,500 per month during the past year to almost 12,000 after the launch of podcasting.

Figure 2.
Page View Counts After Podcasting Debut



Potential of Family Album for Extension Programming

Radio broadcasting, Internet technology, and podcasting have been an excellent media mix to reach and educate thousands of families. In the regional market, the daily broadcasts of Family Album Radio reach up to 80,000 listeners throughout 19 counties in north central Florida. The program has also been picked up in additional Florida markets and other states. Any radio station (National Public Radio affiliates or other stations) can offer Family Album Radio.

Evidence of Interest in Family Album

Although it has been difficult to document the number of radio stations broadcasting Family Album Radio, Web site and podcasting traffic data provide ample evidence of the broad reach of the program through the Internet. Furthermore, Family Album's audience resides throughout the world. The geographic origins of visitors to the Family Album Web site in 2005 were primarily North America (64%), Europe (4.23%), and Asia (1.4%), with some visitors from Oceania, South America, and Africa. Since the launch of podcasts in 2006, North America visits (primarily the U.S.) climbed from a monthly average of 325 to 1,037 in December and 1,404 in January--an increase of greater than 400%. Similarly, visits from Europe climbed from 26 visits in November to 59 in December and 79 in January.

Although we cannot tell if those visits were a result of podcasting or a general increase in Internet traffic worldwide, these findings do indicate that Family Album has a growing international audience. Recently we launched an evaluation using an Internet survey tool that will help us document listener satisfaction with the program and its usefulness in their daily lives.

Extending the Reach of Family Album Radio in Extension Family Life Programs

Since we have audio files of Family Album radio broadcasts, we can create thematic CDs on a variety of topics to supplement Extension family life programs. For example, we are currently partnering with the United Way of North Central Florida and other community agencies on the United Way's national Success by 6 initiative. We have provided 1000 informational kits to expectant parents that include Family Album CDs, featuring 30 programs on parenting, nutrition, infant development, and childcare. We are also assisting county faculty in setting up their Web sites to link to audio files or podcasts of interest, such as shows on nutrition or family finance.

We are also exploring other ways to provide the information from radio broadcasts in user-friendly formats, such as webcasting and blogging. This is uncharted territory for most family life programs but may prove to be cost efficient, interactive, and compelling.

Conclusion

Family Album Radio's mission is to provide audiences with "timely, thought-provoking information on family trends, policies, and issues, and practical applications to help families improve their lives." Using a combination of evolving and emerging media has enabled us to reach a large audience with current information on family life.

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