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Rating Current Vermont Equine Industry Issues and Determining if Motivation for Participation in Change Efforts Exists

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Rating Current Vermont Equine Industry Issues and Determining if Motivation for Participation in Change Efforts Exists

Abstract

UVM Extension has played a key role in reaching beyond agricultural circles to develop public awareness regarding the statewide economic impact and importance of the equine industry. In order to continue supporting industry growth, UVM Extension surveyed the areas of current concern for industry participants. Survey results indicate that the current issues of greatest concern to participants were in the areas of insurance and liability, horse park/facilities, land use policies, trail systems, and agricultural use (of land). This project demonstrates a method that can be utilized in any Extension program to identify critical issues and/or to evaluate program effectiveness.

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Introduction

In 1999, the University of Vermont (UVM) and the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VT-AG) organized the first ever Vermont Equine Industry Summit in order to identify common, critical issues affecting the Vermont horse industry statewide. The feedback from this meeting gave direction for the UVM equine Extension program, which resulted in the creation of safety and biosecurity materials (Greene & Trott, 2004; Ather & Greene, 2005), as well as the "VT Horses Count: Equine Survey" in collaboration with VT-AG. (Greene, Ather, & King, 2003).

In order to keep current with the needs of the growing industry, UVM Extension conducted an online survey to rate the issues that concern today's equine industry. In addition, we wanted to ascertain the level of motivation of participants to work with the Vermont Equine Industry Committee (VEIC), a volunteer committee formed to assist with issues affecting equine businesses in Vermont. The survey goals were: 1. to determine key issues affecting the equine industry, 2. to identify motivation of industry members to address key issues, and 3. to collect contact information from motivated industry members.

Materials and Methods

Survey Development

The online survey (Perseus Survey Solutions[®]) collected feedback from business owners, consumers, and other participants involved in the equine industry. Several academic and business professionals completed a pretest, and suggestions were incorporated. The first (confidential) section rated issues important to respondents, their associated motivation levels to work on change, and business-specific data collection. The second section collected contact information for

follow-up.

Respondents rated thirteen known issues (listed in alphabetical order) related to the equine industry, and they could identify "other" issues. A Likert Scale including "extremely important," "somewhat important," "not at all important," and "not familiar with issue" was provided. The questions were open ended, to avoid leading the survey taker, and if "extremely important" was chosen, respondents could provide qualitative comments.

The list of the topics included the following.

- Act 250 (VT commercial permitting regulations that may affect equine businesses)
- Agricultural Buildings (Tax benefits for this classification)
- Agricultural Use (Tax benefits for farm land)
- Communications Network
- Horse Park/Show Facilities (VT is lacking adequate facilities for statewide shows.)
- Insurance and Liability (Prices of insurance for livestock operations in VT are rising.)
- Land Use Policies
- Marketing/Promotion/Tourism
- Medium Farm Operation Rules (VT regulations for farms with 150-499 horses)
- Northeast Kingdom Equestrian Trails (Trails in the northeast corner of VT)
- Premise and Animal Identification (VT was attempting to require this)
- Taxes (Not all horse operations receive the same tax benefits of livestock operations)
- Trail System (Concerns that trails are disappearing in VT)
- Other

Respondents also were asked to identify their levels of motivation to change or affect the identified issues and how this motivation might translate to hours of volunteer work per month.

Participants

The survey was distributed to an existing UVM Extension email database of past participants in equine Extension events and to email addresses from VT equine-related Web sites.

Results

The survey was distributed to 1,372 email addresses, of which 1,012 were successfully delivered. One hundred and forty responses were received, and 52 (37.7%) indicated that they own or operate a business that is in, or serves the equine industry. A total of 620 "extremely important" responses were counted, suggesting that an average respondent made 4.4 "extremely important" ratings out of the 14 possibilities. The key issues prioritized by survey respondents are provided in Table 1.

Table 1.
Issues Sorted by "Extremely Important" Rating

Issue	Extremely Important	Somewhat Important	Not At All Important	Not Familiar With Issue	Total Responses
Agricultural Use	78	44	2	14	138
Insurance and Liability	77	56	0	7	140
Horse Park/Show Facilities	72	56	4	8	140
Land Use Policies	71	52	2	14	139
Trail Systems	68	53	7	9	137
Taxes	61	55	3	20	139
Premise and Animal	51	59	17	13	140

Identification					
Communications Network	50	60	7	22	139
Agricultural Buildings	46	60	3	31	140
Northeast Kingdom Equestrian Trails	41	47	7	45	140
Act 250	31	60	9	37	137
Marketing/Promotion /Tourism	23	96	9	12	140
Other	15	21	14	58	108
Medium Farm Operation Rules	7	38	5	88	138
Total Responses	691	757	89	378	1913

When asked how motivated respondents were to participate in efforts to change, 11.6% were highly motivated, while 39.4% and 40.9% were motivated and slightly motivated, respectively. The amount of hours that respondents were willing to spend included more than 6 hours/month (6.3%), 6 hours/month (21.4%), 2 hours/month (57.1%), and 0 hours/month (15.1%).

Discussion

When evaluating the top five issues, in the case of Insurance and Liability, the seven respondents not selecting this as an important issue selected the "unfamiliar" response option. In equine-related activities, insurance and liability concerns appear at all levels of farm or sports management. Respondents wrote about the high cost and the limited availability of appropriate coverage for liability and general insurance.

The Horse Park/Show Facility issue revolves around the lack of a large, permanent, year-round show facility available in Vermont. In most cases, the respondents tied their support of an in-state facility to the potential for additional local income due to show-related revenues as well as their own equine-related interests.

Land Use Policy comments focused on the increasing development and resulting loss of farm land and safe riding trails and differing treatment of land used by dairy vs. horse farms. Comments emphasized that the definition of "agriculture" and "agricultural land" will have a significant role in the health of Vermont's equine industry. Land Use comments often overlapped with concerns regarding Act 250 and "Agricultural Use," and there are many linked issues to consider when addressing components of this issue.

The final two areas, Trail Systems and Agricultural Use, have been mentioned in the previous section. Those three topics have significant areas of overlap.

The feedback regarding motivation levels identifies a larger group of individuals willing to participate on a limited (2 hours per month) basis and suggests a benefit to investigating ways to energize that relatively large group (57.1%). Activating this additional industry segment to participate in less frequent efforts would be an opportunity for education, outreach or public-awareness events across the state.

Implication

For a small state such as Vermont, energizing even a fraction of those respondents into active participation on behalf of the industry would significantly increase the development of public awareness of the statewide equine industry and of public issues that positively or negatively affect industry performance. Respondents from a wide variety of equine interests were able to identify shared core concerns, and by identifying willing industry members, UVM Extension (and VEIC) can focus on uniting participants in action on these core issues. Finally, this survey method can be utilized by any Extension program to evaluate priorities and issues of, or effectiveness with, their clientele.

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