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Gardening in the Zone: A Collaborative Effort Between Iowa State University Extension and Mass Media Outlets

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Gardening in the Zone: A Collaborative Effort Between Iowa State University Extension and Mass Media Outlets

Abstract

A collaborative project among the Iowa State University Extension Service, a regional gardening magazine, and regional television stations has resulted in a new avenue to deliver educational programming related to horticulture. Gardening in the Zone is a series of 26 2-minute segments that are broadcast weekly from April through September during the evening news. These segments provide research-based information to a large audience that traditional Extension programming methods might not otherwise reach. It also provides a new venue through which to disseminate the Web address for the ISU Extension Web site with links to a number of educational publications.

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Gardening in America is important as both a leisure activity and as a revenue-generating segment of the economy. According to the National Gardening Association (2004) in 2003, 84 million people (78% of the U.S. population) participated in one or more types of do-it-yourself indoor and outdoor lawn and garden activities, with men and people 45 and older accounting for a significant portion of this group. Further, the 84 million consumers spent \$38.4 million in retail sales for lawn and garden products, or an average of \$465 per household. Finding a way to further educate this large consumer group, often through the Master Gardener program, is a program component of many state Cooperative Extension Services.

For gardeners, following the local weather forecast is an important part of their avocation. Yet gardeners aren't the only people watching the local television news to get the latest forecast. Over 80% of the viewers who watch the news do so for the weather report (NEETF, 2001). Additionally many viewers are in a "learning mode" when they watch the weather because they are prepared to see, hear, and internalize complex scientific information related to the weather (StormCenter.com, 2004). Because of these factors, offering educational programming before or after the weather segment of the local news provides a unique way to reach a potentially large audience of gardeners and non-gardeners alike.

Gardening in the Zone Television Segments

The project described here is a collaborative effort among Iowa State University Extension, a regional gardening magazine, and several regional television stations in Iowa. Each member of the group brings something unique to the project. ISU Extension provides the horticulture content experts and the video production personnel for filming and post-production editing. The existing relationship between the magazine and the initial television station provided the avenue to deliver the educational programming, as well as the personnel to market the segments to additional stations.

The first television station to broadcast these segments commands a significant market share for all of their news programming in central Iowa, and the 5 p.m. newscast is watched in nearly twice as many homes as the nearest competitor (ThelowaChannel.com, 2004). Additionally, this station has twice as many viewers in the 25-54 demographic category as other stations in the designated market area (ThelowaChannel.com, 2004). The addition of two other television stations in major market areas of the state led to approximately 90-95% coverage of the state, as well as reaching viewers in southwestern Wisconsin, northwest Illinois, and eastern Nebraska.

Project Design

A team of horticulture Extension specialists and the magazine publisher developed a list of 32 2-minute segments based on subject matter and timeliness throughout the growing season. Segments are aired weekly from April through the end of October during the 5 o'clock news.

The segments are hosted by a broadcast professional from the magazine and done in a question and answer, or demonstration type format. Each segment includes an introduction, content on the particular topic, and a close. To close the segment the host refers viewers to the ISU Extension Gardening in the Zone Web site <<http://129.186.89.193/gardening/>> and the magazine Web site, which appear on the screen. Extension's Gardening in the Zone Web site has a still image captured from each video clip and a link to the full-length clip. Segments are displayed in the order in which they air. In addition to the video clip, there are links to Extension publications relevant to that week's topic.

ISU Extension communications personnel worked with the initial television station to determine the necessary production values. Two pilots were developed for the station to review and approve, before additional segments were created. In addition to the filming and post-production editing, the Extension communications personnel developed the animated opening and graphics for the segments.

Project Benefits

The benefits of this collaboration to the ISU Extension Service are many fold. A key benefit is the opportunity to disseminate research-based information to a large audience, many of whom are involved in some way in gardening. Television provides access to an audience Extension might otherwise not reach. In so doing, the television segments introduce Extension to people who may not be familiar with the quality of educational programming available through the organization.

Each 2-minute segment provides a minimum of three potential contacts with the viewer. The first is the real-time broadcast of the segment. At the end of the segment, the viewer is directed to the ISU Extension Gardening in the Zone Web site, where they can view the segment for a second time. A third point of contact is links to associated Extension publications that appear next to the archived video segment. From this initial gardening related Web site visit, viewers may then explore the variety of other educational programming available through the ISU Extension Service.

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