



Local food producer website workshops

Abstract: The project aimed to help small producers and other local food businesses learn to use online tools to market their products and form stronger relationships with their customers.

Principal Investigator:

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Budget:

\$17,830 for year one
(\$9,330 for website
workshop program)

Q Can hosting free hands-on website building workshops and providing technical assistance help local food producers establish a web presence to grow their businesses and strengthen their online marketing?

A Many producers find that online marketing is a valuable addition to their business plan. Offering motivated producers the opportunity for hands-on training and one-on-one technical support will help them successfully and affordably create and maintain their own web presence.

Background

The original project was developed to research and evaluate a web-based local food sales template, but it became clear that this approach would only serve a small percentage of local food producers and would duplicate already existing options. So the project was reconfigured to help producers use existing online tools, services, and techniques to market their businesses. The goal was to provide an opportunity for producers to affordably and efficiently establish a web presence that would strengthen their marketing efforts.

Approach and methods

Google Sites, Google Apps, Wufoo, MailChimp, Facebook and Picnik were some of the Internet tools that were identified as possible aids to the producers who wanted to use the web to sell their products. These and other services were explained and demonstrated at small, hands-on workshops, via one-on-one email and phone support, through publication of an email newsletter, and by the creation of a web site serving both as a demonstration and an instructional resource. The project also began partnering with local organizations to recruit and support local food producers who wanted to establish an Internet presence for their businesses.

Results and discussion

Workshops were held in Creston, Iowa City and Decorah in 2010. These consisted of two 3-4 hour sessions about a week apart, led by a single instructor, with technical assistance for the larger workshops. Each participant had a personal computer and was able to build or update a website after some initial instructions.

An online website was set up to support producers. It included how-to instructional videos, step-by-step directions, a list of useful web tools, and an example Google site. The instructional videos covered topics such as adding links, photos or slideshows, editing templates and creating a form..



MARKETING



The instructor kept in touch with the participants via email, phone and Facebook. An email newsletter kept participants informed and demonstrated how a newsletter could be used to keep in touch with customers.

Conclusions

Participants from 26 farms or local food businesses were able to create new websites or make improvements to existing websites. Seventy-three percent of the participants updated their websites in the six months following their workshop attendance.

Meeting one-on-one with producers was labor intensive, but extremely productive. It gave both parties a chance to work through the producer's goals, and the opportunity to use digital photos to further enhance the collaborative effort between the workshop participants and the instructor. More than 350 photos were taken for use on 12 producer websites and additional photos were shot at five farmers markets.

Impact of results

Twenty-eight producers benefited directly by creating or updating their websites as a result of the workshops. Other interested Iowans have and will benefit from using the instructional website (www.iowawebsiteguide.com) or by subscribing to the electronic newsletter.

Leveraged funds

An \$18,000 grant from the Tides Foundation was secured to expand the website-building workshops and support the local food producers. In-kind workshop hosting and marketing expenses were donated by the Luther College Sustainability Department, Southern Iowa RC&D, Southwestern Community College, Iowa Valley RC&D, and Iowa City Public Library.

Note: This grant was originally titled "Researching and evaluating web-based local food sales template."

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