

Social Media: Cultivating Peer-to-Peer Farm Women Networks in New Jersey

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Abstract: - Annie's Project New Jersey provided women farmers with tools to help them succeed by focusing on five areas of farm risk - legal, human, financial, marketing, and production. The team expanded upon traditional or conventional Extension program delivery by delivering this program statewide utilizing a unique combination of in-person and distance learning technologies. Speakers had a live audience and were streamed to additional sites and presentations were recorded to facilitate continuous learning opportunities to the trained audiences as well as new online learners following the training dates. This continuously available training resource greatly assisted in the business plan development for their individual farm operations. The team also launched an active social media presence, further extending the outreach of the training and facilitating social media networking opportunities for the participants. This combination strengthened the peer-to-peer networking and knowledge sharing opportunities, thereby empowering farm women with better problem solving, record keeping, and decision-making skills. The use of social media tools in both the education of and networking among the participants sustained an interactive connection with educators and peers long after the course was completed. As a result 61.3% of participants had initiated networking via social media with other participants while plans were in place to launch a website (39%), a Facebook page (28%); host a blog (24%), or open a Twitter account (18%). There are 238 'likes' of the program's Facebook Page www.facebook.com/anniesprojectnj/ and according to Facebook Insights data, nearly 600 people have been reached since November, 2016. These results showcase the program's ability to make permanent changes in behavior for both session attendees and online learners, with additional progress on business plan development, networking, and sharing knowledge. Asynchronous education and archival online resources continue the outreach to women farmers, while social media platforms sustain the peer-to-peer networks and farm entrepreneurial opportunities.

Key-Words: - Annie's Project, farm women, social media, Facebook, networking, distance education

1 Introduction

Annie's Project, a widely known and nationally acclaimed risk management educational program in the United States designed exclusively for a farm woman audience, focuses on educating producers on risk management issues. From personal wills and estate planning to corporate structures and liability, *Annie's Project New Jersey* held workshops in the evenings because many women farmers often

had off-farm jobs during the day or they were busy managing their farms. The workshops were organized around the five areas of farm risk identified by the United States Department of Agriculture - legal, human, financial, marketing, and production - all within the framework of developing a farm business plan. This program was offered over a period of seven consecutive weeks to enable participants to complete this task as far as possible [1]. While a

significant component of *Annie's Project* is the opportunity for women to network with other women who are involved in agriculture in their geographical area [2], *Annie's Project* nationally has also been successful in providing a peer-to-peer support network for women farmers. *Annie's Project New Jersey* furthered that networking and support system beyond the classroom with the use of social media tools. *Annie's Project New Jersey* is unique in that participants used social media education for marketing and business development, employed social media tools to assist in networking during the sessions as well as after graduation, utilized recorded online asynchronous education modules, and continued to participate in social media venues to sustain their networks outside the classroom.

2 Background

The Rutgers New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station's Cooperative Extension team brought *Annie's Project* to New Jersey by securing necessary funding through four external competitive grants totaling \$287,619. These grants permitted the project team to offer farm business management programming to over 130 women farmers and business owners in New Jersey beginning in February 2011, and included funding to train 200 additional women through 2013.

Women in Agriculture - Annie's Project New Jersey and Farm Business Management is tailored to New Jersey farmers and differs from *Annie's Project* in other states in five key areas: 1) the focus on creating a farm business plan throughout the training, 2) the use of social media education and adoption for marketing and business development, 3) the use of social media tools to assist the participants in networking that is sustainable and interactive, long after the course is completed, 4) using a unique combination of in-person education and distance learning opportunities to expand the audience within the program, and 5) recording the distance learning sessions for asynchronous education of participants and additional women farmers following the completion of the 'live'

course. In this setting, the social media tools provided opportunities for this new "community" of women farmers to continue sharing information while also providing an electronic log for future conversations and reviewing resources [3].

3 Methods and Materials

Sixty-two women graduated in 2011 and another 75 took the course in 2012. Using a combination of in-person education and distance learning, this project in 2012 brought farm business management education to even more women across New Jersey. The live sessions were broadcast and recorded each week, allowing women to watch a lecturer from over 100 miles away as well as the opportunity to watch the video again. Once the 'live' course was completed, these videos were archived online at <http://farmmgmt.rutgers.edu>. There they remain available to anyone to view to broaden their knowledge on a specific topic or learn something new about successful agricultural business management practices.

In order to develop a support system for the women, one objective of the program was to facilitate networking and sharing of ideas amongst participants. While *Annie's Project* originated in the Midwest portion of the US, where agronomic crops are the primary agricultural crops, New Jersey is the most densely populated state in the United States with higher land and labor costs but with a comparative advantage over other states in that it also has a higher percentage of high-income consumers. Thus, successful farmers in New Jersey are often horticultural producers and many are direct marketers; they need to produce high value crops and products to succeed in agriculture in New Jersey [4]. Therefore, since over 40% of farmers in New Jersey are engaged in agritourism, the program had a strong focus on marketing, and included topics on social media as a marketing tool [5].

Each course had a social media educational component. Participants were educated in the course on different social media platforms and

styles, including how to set up and manage accounts.

On February 1, 2013, the project team launched the *Annie's Project New Jersey* Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/anniesprojectnj/> or @anniesprojectnj. This social media page serves as a clearinghouse for educational opportunities as well as an online portal where Annie's Project New Jersey graduates can share their farm management experiences, opportunities, and challenges with fellow women farmers who are living and working in the highly complex business of farming in the most densely populated state in the United States.

4 Results

A key component of the program was facilitating strong networking among the women in the workshop. The post survey revealed 61.3% of participants had initiated networking via social media with other participants, while 93.5% stated they shared what they learned in the course. Specifically regarding social media, 39% (21) planned to complete a website; 28% (15) planned to launch a Facebook page; 24% (13) planned to host a blog; 18% (9) planned to open a Twitter account; and 25% (13) chose "other social media" (n = 54, with multiple answers across the social media platforms).

In addition, the Rutgers Office of Continuing Professional Education Media Productions created a YouTube channel entitled "Rutgers Cooperative Extension: Empowering Woman Farmers" to archive videos of each session of the "Empowering Women Farmers with Agricultural Business Management Training," www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLbsiTongzFa6nZcscUwNg7TuwOiQ1nfsg. The site currently has 39 subscribers and 34 views for the 15 videos archived there. A similar YouTube posting for Annie's Project New Jersey, found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=FU6GIYS1s8k, has logged 547 views since August 29, 2012.

These results showcase the program's ability to make permanent changes in behavior, with

additional progress on business plan development, networking, and sharing learned knowledge. Graduates have continued to meet to continue learning about aspects important to women farmers through farm tours and a summer reunion. Students have used their business plans to add new enterprises, secure farm loans, and develop websites, Facebook pages, and point-of-purchase materials for their farms.

Currently there are 238 'page likes' of www.facebook.com/anniesprojectnj/ and according to Facebook Insights data for the page, nearly 600 people have been reached in the last 6 months (November 2016 – present).

The single most impactful post was on May 12, 2016 posted by Polanin that featured pictures of the "Empowering Women Farmers with Agricultural Business Management Training" (EMWOFA) in Bridgewater, New Jersey with international Extension professionals present. That post reached 769 people, again according to Facebook Publishing Insights data. Second was a post on March 14, 2016 announcing the support of that EMWOFA training by Farm Credit East. Third at 346 people reached was a post from Polanin on May 25, 2016 announcing the Annie's Project New Jersey Team was selected for the inaugural John and Anne Gerwig Directors Fund grant to further our distance education efforts.

Rounding out the top 5 posts since January of 2015 were a shared post by Brumfield on September 23, 2015 from the Huffington Post on two New Jersey farms included in "The 10 Best Places to Pick Apples" which reached 217 people; and a post by Carleo on October 23, 2015 announcing that Annie's Project New Jersey's graduate Jess Niederer was selected as the New Jersey Outstanding Young Farmer of the Year (201 people reached).

Over the time span of February 2015 to the present, posts have reached a total of 4,650 people. As this total comprises 46 individual posts, the average reach for the last 2 years has been 101 people per post. However, the first 21 posts (February 2015 to November 2015)

reached 1,121 people for an average of 53, while the next 25 posts (January 2016 – present) reached 3,529 people, for an average of 141 per post. (Data unavailable from Facebook Insights Publishing Tools prior to February 20, 2015)

5 Conclusion

With the expansion of online or E-learning, differences in individual and audience / group learning styles add to the question of adoption and use of modern technology. Benefits focus on the economic, geographic, and self-paced and self-directed aspects [6], while individual “monitor-based” classes can negate any opportunity for group learning, live audience interaction, and participation in positive group learning experiences [7]. In addition, presenters need to proactively interact with an audience they can't or will never see, breaking that “fourth wall” known in the film industry and looking directly at the camera to engage the remote audiences. Melding the best aspects of these two teaching technologies and strategies has resulted in a very successful and sustainable outreach effort for Annie's Project NJ and for our live, past, and future online audiences.

While adoption of social media tools may be more widespread in other sectors, some agricultural producers outside the USA have been found to be more “observational,” leery of the threats of misinformation, trolling, and increased messaging [8]. However, a Kansas, USA study within the agricultural sector found that the use of social media was very valuable in enhancing a marketing plan, especially with respect to expanding brand exposure [9]. The same has been shown to be true here in New Jersey, both for the educational outreach brand of *Annie's Project NJ* as well as for the individual graduates. As clientele and untapped direct fresh market consumer base spend more time online, Annie's Project NJ graduates have adopted and utilized social media tools to elevate their knowledge base, enhance their peer connections, and expand entrepreneurial opportunities for their farms and farm products following the course.

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