

A Virtual Response from the Alabama Farm and Agribusiness Team to a Very Offline Pandemic

Educational Objectives

The significance of the first worldwide pandemic in over 100 years cannot and should not be understated. COVID-19 affected virtually every facet of life for people worldwide, including the agricultural sector of the United States. The Alabama Cooperative Extension Farm and Agribusiness Management Team designed and implemented a virtual programming response to meet the needs of constituents in a timely and virtually accessible format. The learning objectives for this year of programmatic emphasis included (1) updating and empowering Alabama and Southern Region agricultural producers for success amid multiple industry shocks, (2) outreach to citizens to educate on and encourage appreciation of agricultural producers and production, and (3) build robust virtual relationships that will allow increased impact and continuity when traditional programming is considered safe and acceptable from a public health standpoint.

Program Activities

The Alabama Cooperative Extension Farm and Agribusiness Management Team implemented a virtual strategy primarily using social media platforms (i.e. Facebook) and using virtual programming technologies (i.e. ZOOM). Through the course of 2020 and into 2021 the team produced 73 virtual or electronic programs, 72 programmatic social media posts, and 2 stand alone video series.

Teaching Methods

Teaching methodology was multifaceted, but completely virtual. Contemporary extension methods such as lecture-based programming was offered via zoom. On farm video highlighting risk management opportunities were recorded, edited and marketed under The Alabama Cooperative Extension System YouTube page. Social media educational efforts included a diverse pedagogical strategy, with the most popular social media educational programming (Are you Smarter than a Farmer?) conducted using a game show format that solicited participant interaction with questions and followed that with guest subject matter experts answering the question.

Results

Virtual programming for The Alabama Farm and Agribusiness Management team increased exponentially in 2020 (post pandemic), and the response from constituents have been extremely positive. Social media was the leading outreach driver, with 72 Facebook posts achieving a reach of 34,000 individuals, 3071 engagements and 312 shares. The "Are you Smarter Than a Farmer?" program was the most successful of the social media programs presented, with a reach of 24,835 individuals, 2,567 engagements, 39 comments, and 205 shares. The "2021 Superbowl" outreach posts also were very impressive with a reach of 2,461 individuals, 137 engagements and 28 shares. Virtual programs not presented using social media (i.e. webinars), has combined 2020 and 2021 virtual contact numbers of 17,495. The two video series, "Replacement Heifer Sales in Alabama" and "Input Considerations for Cattle Producers" have garnered 911 views on YouTube.

Impact Statement

The impact The Alabama Farm and Agribusiness Management Team had using virtual programming during the pandemic was significant. That significance is manifested in both current impact (i.e. increased agricultural appreciation, agricultural knowledge, and risk management for producers), as well as programmatic impact for future years post-pandemic as educators gained vast insight into using virtual to supplement in-person programming.

Evaluation

A diverse evaluation scheme was/is being used to measure impact from virtual programming. Comments were monitored on Facebook and responded to appropriately, with numerous ones leading to more personal assistance to citizens and producers. Real time Qualtrics surveys were used for virtual programming. Comments on YouTube presentations were monitored, documented, and responded to as necessary.