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Unveiling a New Online Marketing Roadmap for Extension Programs: The Seven Fundamental Elements

Abstract

Navigating the ever-evolving digital marketing landscape can be daunting for Extension professionals seeking to promote their programs online. This article unveils a new, comprehensive online marketing roadmap designed to address this challenge, focusing on the Bricks-to-Clicks® Extension marketing case study program. Furthermore, an agribusiness and 1,259 entrepreneurs also learned these elements in the program. Results indicate that agribusiness sales increased by 54%, and the entrepreneur group also had an estimated positive economic impact.

Keywords: Marketing, social media, agribusiness, entrepreneurs

Introduction

For a century, Cooperative Extension Service (CES) made a name for itself as a supporter of agricultural communities. In the last several decades, it has broadened its focus to include public health and wellness, economic development, tourism, entrepreneurship, environmental protection, and other issues that affect the communities Extension serves. Yet marketing has not always been Extension's strength, making many CES programs among the country's best-kept secrets. Additionally, there is growing evidence of the value of marketing Extension programs

with digital tools (Garcia et al., 2018; Nehiley, 2001; Sneed et al., 2016). However, Extension professionals need an easy, step-by-step plan to implement an online marketing plan within a dynamic digital marketing landscape (Barnes, 2020; Barnes and Langdon, 2018).

This article presents a new online marketing roadmap including seven fundamental elements that every Extension marketing effort can use to reach, engage, and stay connected to a larger audience. We explain the elements and how they established an online marketing roadmap for the Bricks-to-Clicks® marketing program. Finally, this article explains how assisting with the implementation of these elements resulted in a 54% increase in sales for an agribusiness selling remote camera systems to agricultural landowners. We also estimated \$3 million in economic value for 1,259 program participating entrepreneurs.

Methods

To outline the seven elements, this study draws heavily from principles found in marketing literature. For each element, we discuss how we used marketing tools and frameworks from the literature to establish the marketing strategy for the Bricks-to-Clicks® Marketing Program at Mississippi State University.

Element one: A clear marketing message

If a message is unclear, the customer will not listen to it. Miller (2017) argued that our brains crave clarity and are wired to conserve energy, so they are not inclined to burn the calories necessary to make sense of confusion. A marketing message is clear and easy for our brains to grasp when it quickly identifies a problem or goal the target user might have, explains how the product or service being offered will help someone solve that problem or reach that goal and gives information about how to purchase or otherwise access the product or service.

We used the framework by Miller (2017) to establish the marketing message for Bricks-to-Clicks® Marketing. The marketing message explains the following:

- The service: free and low-cost marketing resources to help business owners grow their audience and sales.
- The problem the service solves: marketing is a team sport. At least it should be! But too many business owners go it alone — and wind up overwhelmed by an internet full of marketing “gurus” offering pie-in-the-sky ideas and overpriced solutions.
- How to access the service: Browse the marketing resources to access free videos and request an appointment for one-on-one coaching.

Element two: A clear customer target

A clear message without a specific buyer in mind may still fall flat. Creating a customer profile helps a marketer create a message that will resonate with their target. These profiles usually include primary data such as age, relationship status, average income, and education level but also can consist of niche characteristics such as career, social media habits, buying behavior, and life milestones. Social media ad creation tools allow marketers to be as broad or as narrow as they want (Barnes et al., 2018) — the key is to define a target to understand *why* someone would be drawn to buy a product or service. We used Hubspot’s customer personal tool to help us identify why business owners might be drawn to use the marketing resources provided by the Bricks-to-Clicks® Marketing Program (Hubspot, 2023). We also examined the Facebook advertisements manager and reviewed targeting options for reaching business owners in Mississippi and throughout the U.S.

Element three: Pictures of people smiling

Images of products alone are less effective than pictures of people using the products. In Bricks-to-Clicks® work, creating Facebook ads with product images displaying happy people tended to get more engagement and generate more sales — particularly when the people smiled (Barnes, 2016; 2017; Barnes et al., 2018).

Research shows that images of happy people can trigger mirror neurons, “a group of neurons that activate when we perform an action or when we see an action being performed” (Cognifit, n.d.). In other words, we see someone smile, and we almost can’t

help but smile, too — which increases the likelihood that we will purchase the product or service that person is smiling about (Söderlund et al., 2003).

Stock photo services such as Adobe and Dreamstime have various high-quality, affordable (sometimes free) images of people enjoying themselves. Hiring a professional photographer to take photos can give a marketer more opportunities to create custom promotional material if the budget allows. We used a mix of stock photos and professional images taken by photographers at Mississippi State.

Element four: A website that converts

A website that aims to convince an audience to use a product or service must convert visitors into customers (Miller, 2017). Putting the marketing message in the right place on the site, publishing reviews from past users, and giving customers a free resource can make the difference between passive viewers and active users.

Advice varies when it comes to where on a website the critical information should go — some experts say that it should go “above the fold” so that users don’t have to scroll to find it. Miller (2017) argues for this positioning because it allows users to answer these questions within seconds — or the chance to sell may be lost:

1. What is being sold?
2. How does this product or service help me have a better life?
3. How do I buy it?

Another powerful way to sell prospects on a product or service is to let other users sell for you. Testimonials can validate an Extension program's claims, giving new audience members the confidence to trust your message.

Finally, suppose website visitors can leave an Extension program site with a no-strings-attached resource such as a free management tool or video download. In that case, accessing the free resource builds goodwill with an audience and begins to establish Extension professionals as subject matter experts. Following this strategy can build a database of email addresses for future program opportunities. For Bricks-to-Clicks[®], we

used the website strategy and approach outlined by Miller (2017) and Miller and Peterson (2021).

Element five: A follow-up plan

Even as social media has become a marketing powerhouse, old-fashioned email continues to be an effective tool for engaging an audience, with revenue from such campaigns expected to reach nearly \$11 billion by the end of 2023 and almost \$18 billion by 2027 (Kirsch, 2022).

Capturing email addresses when a user downloads a free resource allows marketers to develop a deeper relationship with that user through automated follow-up emails. Such messages should follow a pattern. For example, the first email can say “thank you” and then tease what the recipient will get if they open the following email. The second email delivers on that promise, anticipates the prospect's objection, and overcomes it. A framework for a complete series of follow-up emails can be found in the book *5 Social Media Mistakes Your Business Should Avoid* (Barnes, 2020).

To build the email list for Bricks-to-Clicks® we created a free video course called [Website Mini-Masterclass](#), the [Traction bi-monthly newsletter](#), [podcast](#), and [Master Your Marketing](#), an interactive, online course that takes the mystery out of marketing so you can make money instead of wasting it. To offer marketing resources on the [Bricks-to-Clicks® Marketing](#) website, we used Poptin to establish a pop-up opt-in.

Element six: A social media plan

Like an effective website, an effective social media strategy is paramount to building audiences and increasing engagement. Extension professionals sometimes find social media intimidating (Barnes et al., 2018). Still, the first step toward integrating it into a marketing plan is to consider the target customer and compare that customer to users who spend time on a particular platform. For example, men and women between the ages of 35 and 65 are on Facebook. People between the ages of 25 and 35 are more likely to browse Instagram and Snapchat.

Adaptability is also critical to making social media marketing work. Tailoring content to what followers are discussing at a point in time will make a social page's content more relevant and keeps them coming back. For Bricks-to-Clicks[®], we use the framework outlined in Barnes (2020), including occasional Facebook advertisements. Finally, we primarily posted content that helps business owners solve their marketing problems with solutions offered in the Bricks-to-Clicks[®] marketing program.

Element seven: A marketing budget

Marketing budgets for Extension programs are tight. It's worth making the case to a director, though, that without funding, a program team's valuable content may not reach a significant audience. To supplement an Extension department budget, there also are grants such as the New Technologies for Agricultural Extension grant, which funds emerging and established Extension programs that want to increase effectiveness, visibility, and scope. Internal grants can sometimes be available to jumpstart an Extension program. The Bricks-to-Clicks[®] Program received an internal mini-grant to create content and serve business owners using face-to-face workshops throughout the state, primarily focusing on Facebook marketing. From 2013 to 2023, external grant funding provided sufficient funding to grow the program.

Results

The seven elements are the foundation for building the Bricks-to-Clicks[®] Extension program. In addition, we have taught these same elements to agribusiness companies throughout Mississippi. In what follows, we report a case study impact of an agribusiness that adopted the seven elements and the resulting impacts. Also, we provide some economic impacts for the Extension program when training other businesses about these same seven elements.

We taught the seven elements to an agribusiness selling remote live-streaming video cameras to landowners with feral hog infestation problems. The company is called Wildlife Dominion, and its camera product is HogEye. Feral hogs destroy farmland, so landowners often trap feral hogs to stop damage. The video cameras sold are attached

to hog traps, and landowners, with the touch of an application on their smartphones, can drop the trap gate when they observe enough hogs are in the trap. This maximizes the size of each catch, which in turn assists in minimizing farmland damage.

Discussion

We implemented all seven elements and focused heavily on social media marketing training from 2016 to 2018 (Barnes, 2020). Key results include:

- Sales increased 54% from 2017 to 2018 with no significant changes in inventory, prices, costs, or other factors that would otherwise explain the increased sales growth.
- Employment increased by 45% from 2017 to 2018 to keep up with increased production and sales.
- Wildlife Dominion began manufacturing more products in addition to its HogEye Camera in 2018.
- They routinely reach more than 1 million people monthly through their Facebook and Instagram accounts. Hogeye's Facebook page grew from approximately 50,000 page likes to more than 103,000 from 2017 to 2018. As of May 22, 2023, HogEye's Facebook page has more than 300,000 followers.
- They consistently generate more than 100,000 monthly engagements (likes, shares, comments) on Facebook and Instagram.
- Finally, one of their most popular videos recently reached over 20 million views in 2018. As of May 22, 2023, the same video has been viewed more than 58 million times. You can see it on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/HogEyeCamera/videos/did-the-last-pig-get-caught/811297856099978>.

The company continues to grow in 2023. Wildlife Dominion recently purchased a 50,000-square-foot facility to build hog traps, cameras, and more as revenue expands.

The Bricks-to-Clicks® Extension program continues to impact other companies as well. In a preliminary study, similar training to the seven elements had a positive economic

impact on 1,259 veteran-owned businesses in the U.S. (Barnes and Myles, 2023). Results indicated that the marketing training provided had a direct economic impact of more than \$3 million in benefits. Direct benefits included the value of the training provided, reduced marketing costs, and increased sales. Results did not include any spillover benefits to other businesses in the economy.

Conclusions

This study presented seven marketing elements that Extension agents can adopt and use to reach more of their target audience to increase attendance at online and face-to-face events. More to the point, we have shown how these seven elements established the Bricks-to-Clicks® Marketing Extension program. These same elements were also taught to businesses, and the resulting impacts were significant. Wildlife Dominion sales grew by 54%. Barnes and Myles (2023) found more than \$3 million in direct benefits for 1,259 participating businesses in the Bricks-to-Clicks® Extension program.

The seven elements, used together, can create an effective marketing campaign for any Extension program to attract the attention of clientele and boost event attendance. What would happen if every Extension program received this type of marketing campaign? One can only hope this will happen so CES remains a viable and relevant institution to extend knowledge and improve lives nationwide.

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