Project title – Leveraging technology and community partnerships to improve educational outreach and marketing impact in Lane County

Lane County is Oregon’s second largest metropolitan area with a population of 331,594 (2004 estimate). The Lane County Extension (LCE) office seeks to significantly expand county citizens’ access to Extension learner services and to become more widely known throughout the county as a premier provider of research-based, unbiased practical educational information. To achieve this LCE faculty and staff, in consultation with Extension and Experiment Station Communications (EESC) and the LCE advisory committee, will expand and enhance the LCE web site and tabloid newspaper as integral components of an innovative technology/outreach/marketing strategy that dramatically increases delivery of Extension educational programs and services to Lane County residents.

Project team – Lead principal investigators: Charlotte Riersgard (LCE staff chair), Bob Rost (interim Leader for Extension Technology-Assisted Education-EESC). Co-principal investigators: Evie Engel (Extension web coordinator/web content manager-EESC) Nghia Banh, (web developer-EESC), Tom Weeks (Graphics Designer-EESC) Paul Mickles (chair of LCE Citizens Advisory Council). Project team: Lucas Turpin (Information Technology Manager-Extension Computer Technology Unit) and LCE Faculty: Robin White, Carolyn Ashton, Ross Penhallegon, Suzi Busler, Nellie Oehler, Steve Bowers, Anna Galas, Shirley McSilvers, and support staff, Denise Ashley. Charlotte Riersgard leads the Lane County Extension staff, coordinates LCE educational outreach efforts, and is responsible for LCE budget management and identifying alternative LCE funding sources. Bob Rost leads Extension efforts to make better use of current and new information technologies to broaden learner access to Extension educational programs and information.

Project plan

Target audience – The overall target audience is Lane County citizens, but within that broad category this project targets citizens in the 18-34 and 35-54 age groups. The younger age group is perceived as underserved by the Extension Service in Lane County. The other age group is targeted due to their active role as decision-makers/voters and their crucial importance as potential supporters for the planned LCE Service District. This project also will improve outreach to rural areas beyond the urban centers of Lane County.

Justification for project’s importance and need – The principle investigators and team members believe far more community outreach can be achieved with the LCE website and tabloid newspaper than is currently being accomplished. In the case of county Extension websites, the same observation might be made for most county Extension offices in the state. This project provides a critical and timely opportunity to reinvent our use of county websites and tabloid newspapers to compete more effectively in the community education marketplace. The project will produce much-needed examples of how Extension can increase the effectiveness of web-based information delivery and print-based information marketing. This will result in increased learner access to Extension educational programs and services, and greater public awareness of the Extension Service as a leader in life-long learning. These outcomes will provide a model information outreach approach that all county Extension offices can learn and benefit from. This project aligns with the Extension strategic goals highlighted in the Extension 2006-07 Innovative Grants Program RFP, and with implementation goals from the OSU Extension Service Strategic Plan Implementation Strategy: 1) Improve access to high-quality learner services; 2) Increase funding and invest for excellence and impact; and 3) Increase effectiveness with appropriate technology.
Project goals and objectives – The goal of this project is to create a unique Extension information/education portal in Lane County supported by the combined and integrated information delivery capacities of the LCE tabloid newspaper and LCE website. The first objectives are to revitalize the LCE tabloid to make it more attractive, informative and useful to clients; and significantly upgrade the user-appeal and educational effectiveness of the LCE website via the addition of striking new visual features and user-oriented technology tools. Another objective is to significantly increase the variety and quality of content available to citizens via the LCE website by introducing a web content management process that will empower individual LCE faculty to easily access the LCE website on an as-needed basis to post educational materials and information for direct delivery to clients. A third objective is to partner and coordinate with the Eugene Register-Guard (R-G) for print and electronic distribution of the LCE tabloid newspaper. The R-G will distribute the LCE tabloid newspaper as part of the parent newspaper’s regular daily distribution throughout the county (60,000 print subscribers, 10,000 news-stand customers). In addition, an electronic version of the LCE tabloid newspaper will be posted on the R-G website, which is the leading news information website in Lane County. (According to registerguard.com research, the registerguard.com website records 2.8 million page views and 750,000 visitors per month. Registerguard.com currently has 18,000 subscribers and averages approximately 100 new online subscriber sign-ups per day.) This arrangement will give the Extension tabloid newspaper exposure to an extensive new potential clientele throughout Lane County who are currently users and/or subscribers to the Eugene R-G print newspaper and R-G online. A key feature of the LCE communications strategy is to use the tabloid newspaper in its print and on-line versions as a gateway to direct readers/viewers to visit the LCE website.

Anticipated project outcomes
Execution of this project will substantially increase client contacts, significantly raise the profile of the LCE office in Lane County, and boost the reputation of LCE as a premier provider of un-biased practical education and information. As a result of the project, LCE faculty will also be more adept and more comfortable with using the LCE website on a day-to-day basis to deliver educational information and programs directly to Extension clients in Lane County. And, LCE looks forward to a crucial longer-term outcome of this effort—that greater public awareness of Extension and increased use of Extension services by county residents, brought about by this project, will translate into a successful bid for an Extension Service District in Lane County in the 2008 general election. Establishing the Service District is essential to future LCE funding. The principle investigators and team members also believe this project will serve as a model for the rest of the OSU Extension in illustrating how client outreach can be vastly enhanced through creative and innovative use of web-based technologies in combination with traditional print materials.

Proposed project activities
Project activities basically fall into a series of four broad steps: 1) re-design the tabloid and web site to improve reader appeal, content quality, and information delivery capacity and capability, 2) create linkage between the tabloid and web site as mutually supportive components of an LCE outreach communications strategy to better serve county citizens, 3) implement a web content management process in the LCE office that will empower/enable county Extension faculty to easily and effectively deliver education/information directly to clients via the county website on a day-to-day basis and 4) contract and coordinate with a major local news media outlet (the Eugene R-G) to dramatically broaden the distribution of the LCE tabloid, and public awareness and viewer-ship of the LCE website. Here is a general list of specific project activities:

2. Redesign LCE tabloid to be consistent with design guidelines established by R-G. LCE staff will deliver photo-ready copy of tabloid to R-G.
3. Redesign LCE website to make it more appealing to users, more informative, content rich and easier to navigate.
4. Introduce new features and web technology tools to the LCE website including FAQ database search, multi-media features and on-line question forms.
5. Provide training to LCE faculty and staff to enable them to more efficiently use their tabloid and website for information/education delivery to Lane County residents.
6. Provide training to empower LCE faculty to easily and efficiently use the LCE website for direct delivery of education information and programs to clients.
7. Design print and web page templates that will create a common graphic identity between the LCE tabloid newspaper and LCE website.

Evaluation plan
It is the intent of the principle investigators and team members to treat this effort as a research project. Therefore, evaluation will be a core component of this program. Data in the form of web statistics and responses to web survey and tabloid readership surveys will be collected at timely intervals and compiled for use in a planned journal article about the project upon completion. The team will also have access to web statistics from registerguard.com estimating hits and views of the Extension tabloid posted on the R-G website.

Background research, knowledge, and practice relevant to the proposal
Web-based information delivery may not have displaced print-based media, but the web offers an information delivery capability so vast as to be unimaginable just a few years ago. And the web’s potential is still growing at what seems like a light-speed pace. To remain relevant in our rapidly changing information society, Extension must do more with web delivery of educational programs and information. An article appearing in the online Journal of Extension in the late 1990s noted, “Local CE offices that are not functional with the Internet, and its supporting digital technologies, may be less competitive and less capable of leading local communities in the information age.” (From JOE, Oct. 1997) We may consider ourselves functional in our use of the web in Extension throughout Oregon today, but we must do much more if we want to be considered local leaders in web-based educational applications and information delivery.

Oregon and Lane County in particular offer an ideal laboratory in which to test how we might expand Extension’s use of web-based educational outreach. According to a report by the Pew Internet & American life Project, August 2003, “In 2002, the Pacific Northwest was the most wired region in America; fully 68% of adults in Washington and Oregon use the Internet. This is substantially higher than the national average of 59%. The report added that an “indicator of how important the Internet is to people in the region is how often they turn to the Internet when they need a question answered. In the Northwest, 80% of users have made use of the Web to answer a question. This is the second highest proportion of users to do so in the country, behind New England (89%), another region with many veteran users.

According to statistics available from the Eugene R-G, 79% of Lane County residents have computers in their homes and 76% logged on to the Internet in February 2006. Registerguard.com currently reaches 42% of county residents in the 18-34 age group and 54% of county residents in the 35-54 age group. This represents a significant on-line audience in Lane County that Extension can serve via the availability of a more effective and more competitive web-based presence.
Proposed Budget

- Web and print tabloid design and development $5,000
  Funds will be used to hire private contractors for design and development work under the supervision of LCE and EESC project team members.

- Faculty/staff training on new software $2,000
  Funds will be used to send faculty/staff to training workshops and/or to hire private contractors to train LCE faculty/staff onsite in the LCE office.

- Contract with R-G $3,500
  Funds will be used to contract with the Eugene R-G to print and distribute the LCE tabloid newspaper and to post an electronic version of the LCE tabloid newspaper on the Register-Guard news website – registerguard.com.

- Hardware/software acquisition $2,500
  Funds will be used to purchase new software required by the project including Adobe Creative Suite II, and hardware including a 21” flat panel LCD computer monitor.

- Travel $1,500
  Funds to be used for LCE faculty/staff travel to receive training as needed; and for private contractor travel as needed to support web and print tabloid design/development/consultation.

Total $14,500