



Event-in-a-Box

Introducing Event-in-a-Box

Planning and managing educational programs and events to fulfill the land-grant mission – educating the people – presents challenges and opportunities. While unit size and resources vary, successful programs and events do have common qualities.

The Department of Communications gathered, updated and added to existing training materials to create the first edition of the Event-in-a-Box toolkit. The goal is to help make planning successful educational programs and events easier.

Knowing that the entire organization benefits from networking, a group of K-State Research and Extension professionals was asked to share their experiences hosting successful events, as well as some that have missed the mark.

Section I is devoted to sharing ideas.

Section II offers an Event Planner, and

Section III has a skill-building Self Evaluation.

Section I: We've got ideas!

Tomato Day Becomes Yearly Event

While some people look at a fresh tomato and see a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich, staging Tomato Day has become a successful educational staple for K-State Research and Extension, Sedgwick County. Tomato Day usually draws the largest crowd – more than 3,000 people – to the extension office each year.

The event is held at the Sedgwick County extension office in conjunction with the Farmers' Market during peak tomato season – from 7 a.m. (when the market opens) to noon (when the market closes).

Bob Neier, horticulture agent, said one of the challenges in staging an annual event is acknowledging the need to make it different – educational, interesting and fun.

Neier has found that trying to limit programs to 30 minutes keeps the crowd interested. Some successful topics include identifying tomato pests and diseases, growing tomatoes in a container, cooking with tomatoes and recycling yard waste. He urges presenters to keep programs moving “like the slice-and-dice demonstrators selling kitchen gadgets at the fair.”

Tomato-based contests - such as the best of a particular variety, best fresh salsa, largest tomato, ugliest tomato, etc. – add excitement. Contest prizes – \$5, \$10, and \$15 of Market Bucks – can be redeemed for fruits and veggies at the Farmers' Market. The contests attract about 100 entries, and winners return to the market to spend their prizes.

Children's activities increase the family-friendliness of the event. One activity, making crafty green tomato critters, is a perennial.

Programs are staged inside the Sedgwick County extension office building and outside in the market area. Vendors are positioned along either side of the sidewalk to guide people into the building.

Holly Scharping, Master Gardener and volunteer coordinator for the 2006 event, suggested using footprints cut from colorful construction paper to lead attendees from one event to another.

“Saying ‘just follow the green footprints’ makes it easy to send people in the right direction,” she said.

Scharping, who managed 80 volunteers helping with the event, suggested matching volunteers to their interests to trim time in event training.

“Master Gardeners make a great volunteer base for this event because they already are familiar with many of the topics,” she said.

Scharping said that she feels making herself available to answer volunteers’ questions is important. So is acknowledging the time commitment of the volunteers. She offers frequent personal thank you’s to volunteers rather than a once-a-year appreciation event.

Planning for Success

Organizers should nail down key details early, such as inviting presenters and celebrities. For example, inviting the local newspaper’s food editor to judge the salsa contest helps to build interest. He writes about the upcoming event and, when it’s over, prints the winning recipes in the newspaper. Neier also works closely with the newspaper’s garden writer and provides news announcements and sample handouts to all news outlets in Sedgwick County and the metro area.

Building relationships has been important, said Neier, who was pleased to see a row of bright red tomatoes with a tag line: “It’s Tomato Day at the Extension Center * Details, 1 C” across the top of the *Wichita Eagle’s* front page the day before the event.

The Sedgwick County office has invested in a Tomato Day banner that they hang on the high traffic side of their building about 10 days before the event. The banner company changes the date each year.

They print 2,000 extra flyers with the Tomato Day schedule for Farmers’ Market vendors to place in bags with customer’s purchases two weeks before the event. This is target marketing because market customers already have an interest in fresh produce and locally grown foods, said Neier.

While the event worked smoothly and according to plan, no one is immune to disappointment. In an effort to attract a more diverse audience, organizers invited a local cultural group to sell concessions featuring tomato-based foods. Results were disappointing, despite the crowd, Neier said.

Neier is not possessive about the event. He has been involved for 16 years, but, this year, passed the management responsibility to Ronda Jantz. Although this is her first year to be involved, Neier described the transition as “seamless.” Being willing to let go is really the only way to make future successes possible, he said.

Small Units Can Host Successful Events

While it’s true that smaller units have smaller staffs and more limited resources, according to Susan Schlichting, Ellis County 4-H Youth Development agent, basic event management boils down to:

- Knowing your audience, then matching timely topics to their needs.
- Being on the lookout for new and emerging audiences.

- Taking advantage of opportunities to build relationships. (For example, working with kids provides great opportunities to develop relationships with adults.)
- Inviting and encouraging others, including adults and children beyond the staff, to participate in planning the program or event.
- Planning hands-on activities to make an event interactive, rather than offering a “lecture.”

Interactive activities are an extension staple, said Schlichting, who has worked successfully with diverse groups.

She uses a one-page event planner to help turn ideas into successful programs and events. On the back side, she notes post-event comments, then files the planner with other materials to help her focus on the positives in building future programs. Schlichting also keeps a yearly event calendar and maintains an updated list of key media and promotional outlets and their contact information.

Identify Event Opportunities

People are busy. It's important to identify key opportunities.

For example, Shawnee County has turned radon test kit distribution into an annual opportunity. Alert staff members realized that clients who came to the extension office to purchase the low-cost kits were often first-time visitors with no prior contact or experience with K-State Research and Extension programs. They quickly shifted their daily schedules to offer tours and information about upcoming programs and opportunities to first-time visitors.

Sedgwick County capitalized on the confusion about Medicare plans for prescription drugs and turned it into an important educational opportunity. Jenell Smith, family and consumer sciences (FCS) agent, organized more than 140 programs to explain the drug benefits.

Cindy Evans, Shawnee County FCS agent, turned an under-utilized Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) into a program that helps lift low- to middle-income wage earners out of poverty. She organized a coalition of financial service providers and volunteer income tax preparers to educate people about the tax credit and help them complete the necessary paperwork. The efforts have yielded hundreds of thousands of dollars to Shawnee County residents, helped reach new audiences and nurtured partnerships within the community. For example, volunteers prepared 4,867 federal returns, including 1,400 returns that qualified for more than \$1.5 million in EITC credits.

FCS agents Diane Burnett (Miami County) and Susie Latta (Marshall County) are working to build similar programs in their counties.

In the Central Kansas District, Mary Lou Odle researched and developed an annual program on money management for women and a program on long-term care insurance. Sherrie Mahoney's weekly column in the *Salina Journal's* food section, “Make Time to Eat,” offers a quick and easy recipe, providing a consistent reminder of K-State Research and Extension's practical messages.

Linda Walter, FCS agent in Finney County, stages Corporate Meltdown, a seven-week program that focuses on weight management and health-promoting New Year's resolutions. According to Walter, making the community challenge fun contributes to its success. Building a community coalition to support the project typically extends program reach and shares the burden of managing a large project. Now in its seventh year, participants report losing a total of 3,558 pounds.

In a related program, Walter also developed a cookoff featuring 30-minute menus that she markets as “Ready, Set, Cook!” Inviting local celebrities to participate helps draw a crowd and makes learning fun.

Promoting K-State Research and Extension to Your Audience

Linda Walter is a longtime agent, yet she feels it is important to introduce herself with a short sound bite about what K-State Research and Extension is and what it does in the community.

Ann Ludlum, FCS agent in Bourbon County, said, “Nurturing the validity of K-State Research and Extension’s messages is important.” Ludlum cited competition from other agencies, the Internet and general media, as challenges in attracting an audience. Nurturing collaborations may first require introducing potential partners to offices, said Crystal Coffman, Miami County 4-H agent. Coffman partnered with the Paola Chamber of Commerce to host a coffee at the Miami County office.

“Some of those who attended didn’t know we existed!” Coffman said.

Working to build successful working relationships with internal and external partners can lighten the load on planning and managing events. It also can introduce K-State Research and Extension programs to a larger audience, said Beth Hinshaw, southeast area 4-H specialist.

For 4-H, Hinshaw identified participation in the Kansas State Fair and affiliation with the Wichita Garden Show as examples. When working on large annual events, such as the Kansas Youth Leadership Forum held at Rock Springs and Discovery Days at K-State, planning and organizational teams must continually keep program materials fresh to keep people coming back.

Want to introduce a new event? Do your homework first, Hinshaw said.

A new offering, Camperference – designed to attract students who are too old for camp but too young to be camp counselors – failed to launch the first time out.

“We learned from the experience and realized that we needed to allow more lead time,” Hinshaw said. “We did that this year and launched the new concept successfully.”

A New Twist on Agriculture-Related Events

For Rick Snell, Barton County ag agent, staging “The Battle of the Drills” proved a popular opportunity on a timely topic. Attendees had a firsthand opportunity to try planting wheat with several kinds of no-till drills.

Another successful event was a cow-calf conference attended by 725 people. While K-State area specialists and other agents lent their expertise, the fact that guest speaker Baxter Black had appeared on “The Tonight Show” the week before didn’t hurt.

Not all events are successful. Snell remembers planning a Grain Storage School that fell short. The number of attendees – five – barely outnumbered the guest speakers, he said. Timing for the topic, advertising and weather may have contributed to the disappointing results.

Cade Rensink, a relatively new Coffey County ag agent, relies on a courthouse basement and 4-H building as meeting sites for programs for 20 to 100 people.

Demonstration plots and field days are the biggest draws, he said. One, a *Sericea lespedeza* field day drew 120 people representing four Kansas counties and three other states. Rensink credits

the turnout to extensive advertising with regional ag publications and a solid program that included a chemical test plot, commercial vendors and free food.

To draw an audience, Rensink focused on more specialized programs rather than general information that is readily available on the Internet or at the local co-op. If you plan an in-depth meeting on an existing or emerging issue, you'll likely have a larger and more interested crowd, he said.

“We are experiencing a more educated audience,” Rensink said. “More and more young producers have a college education. The challenge is to offer specialized and technical information to serve a diverse audience.”

For staying connected, Rensink favors the county Web site, periodic newsletters and timely communications training to build skills in working with the media.

Collaboration Contributes to Success

Researchers and field staff also can face challenges. Field days at satellite units, such as the Sandyland Experimental Field, typically serve a small audience and often are personal in nature. Larger events, such as field days and appreciation dinners at the Agriculture Research Center-Hays, may require sponsorships to cover the cost of advertising and meals, said Spencer Casey, assistant administrator at the research center.

The Hays center celebrated its centennial in 2001. The celebration was well attended, and Casey credits at least part of its success to a willingness to collaborate with other agriculture agencies, such as Farm Bureau, and inviting vendors and business people to participate.

“Any field day that is not advertised or successfully marketed to the public will fail,” he said. “As a state agency, we do not have the money for advertising. That means that we have to seek sponsors who can underwrite advertising.”

The research center has a long-standing relationship with the surrounding community, and Casey feels strongly that it is important to nurture congenial relationships with stakeholders, neighbors and constituents.

“Customer service is essential to any organization’s well-being,” he said.

When faced with some potentially negative press about the “aroma” from the feedlot, Casey approached resolving the emerging issue positively and sought assistance from K-State Research and Extension’s Department of Communications.

With the help of Mary Lou Peter-Blecha, news coordinator, and Pat Melgares, marketing coordinator, Casey identified three key messages for turning a potential negative into a positive:

1. The research center is a friend to the community and wants to be a good neighbor.
2. The value of the feedlot, and
3. The value of the research center.

During the session with Blecha and Melgares, Casey said he also learned to choose his words carefully and to avoid potentially inflammatory or negative words such as “stink.”

Focusing on being pro-active, being open to discussion and inviting stakeholders to the facility for tours has smoothed the way for turning a potential negative into a positive, he said.