PA Food for Profit On-Line Project

Final Report for CNE10-076

Project Type: Sustainable Community Innovation
Funds awarded in 2010: $14,278.00
Projected End Date: 12/31/2012
Region: Northeast
State: Pennsylvania
Project Leader:

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Project Information

Summary:

Encouraged by the increasing consumer interest in local foods, farmers on small, traditional operations frequently consider selling farm-fresh and value added products directly to customers.

To assist them in determining whether to launch a food enterprise, the Penn State Extension "Food for Profit" workshop provides farmers training in assessing the feasibility, marketability and profitability of their potential venture. The recognized need for this type of education is demonstrated by workshop attendance of over 750 would-be food entrepreneurs in Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia since fall 2010. Most workshop participants are in the 30 to 60 year age range. Younger producers (who regularly market farm products through CSAs, farmers markets, and other direct venues) have not attended this workshop; they cite busy schedules and balancing the demands of off-farm employment with agricultural production as reasons for not participating. In addition, people in their 20s and 30s have always known a world of electronic communication, so they stereotypically are not as quick to travel to face-to-face meetings, but rather depend on the Internet for their education.

This project, creating a "Food for Profit On-line," was designed to provide the same information that one might receive at a face-to-face workshop, but 24/7, in a virtual environment more compatible with the busy schedules of younger, next-generation producers.

Although the original proposal for this NE SARE project described a series of MicroSoft Presenter-enhanced Power Points (adding voice-overs to the workshop presentations), the team quickly realized that such an end-product would not be accessible to all participants. Therefore, additional funding was sought to gain technical support from Penn State College of Agricultural Science's eLearning department, with a resulting HTML classroom with seven lessons, participant quizzes and evaluations, and links to additional Internet resources. Each lesson has both text and audio pods to ensure that participants with different learning styles and differing physical/educational abilities can easily gain information.

The resulting on-line version duplicated lessons in entrepreneurial readiness, business planning, food safety, niche marketing, packaging and labeling, and pricing for profit that the "Food for Profit" workshops offer. In 2012, an additional lesson incorporated the requirements of the 2011 Food Safety Modernization Act, introducing risk management strategies that a farmer focus group had identified to the project team. The result was a dynamic, effective alternative to face-to-face education.

Similar to the workshops, Food for Profit On-line was designed to be an ever-growing, evolving resource for local foods business owners, with updates and additions planned beyond the timeline of the NE SARE project. For example, the electronic classroom will be enhanced (in Summer 2014) by a set of video interviews with farmers who have been successful in direct marketing and adding value.

Delays in eLearning schedules and ever-evolving technology resulted in slower progress than was originally forecast, but the project team single-mindedly kept the process moving toward the project goals. Although the target of 200 participants during the pilot year was not reached, 23 users (both new FFP students and people who wanted a post-workshop review) participated in the on-line classroom with an average of 13 visits per student to the site, with 10 of these students completing at least 4 of the 7 lessons. Feedback from this group has led to further fine-tuning of the classroom for future students.

The official full-launch of the site (beyond its pilot phase) occurred in September 2013 -- this being announced at the JCDP Galaxy Conference in Pittsburgh PA. A web page within the Penn State site promotes this on-line resource, and individuals who find Food for Profit workshops inconvenient to attend are being directed to the Food for Profit On-line classroom.
Current portal for entry to project online course: http://www.cvent.com/d/gcqlhb

Project Objectives:

During the first year of the project (July 2010 to June 2011), the Penn State team performed the following actions:

Contacted specific seasoned Food for Profit presenters (Extension and SBDC), farmers who have successfully added value, and food entrepreneurs who are past participants of Food for Profit to ensure they were aware of the project to develop the on-line version of these materials and delineated their role(s) in this project.

Determined collaborators' level of commitment to the project, ascertaining who would be willing to provide video interviews, provide feedback to update and development of modules, and test-run the finished product.

Assigned the writing of scripts for Adobe Presenter versions of the current Food for Profit power point presentations; worked with PSU tech support to gain instruction and assistance in creating presentations with "voice over."

Conducted a video conference with the technology support person and a representative from PSU eLearning initiative to scope out the development of on-line classroom; created a timeline for development of this on-line program.

Identified additional print/PDF resources needed to support the on-line and face-to-face classes and delegated development and production of these to the Food for Profit Fact Sheet team.

Worked on developing six on-line HTML modules (equipped for special needs and standard audiences) for pilot testing in year two. Made plans to enhance the initial modules with video interviews to be added in Winter/Spring 2012.

Recruited additional Extension peers, community college business development consultants, and SBDC personnel (beyond the project collaborators) to be regional points of contact, so that class participants could be recruited, and so that the FFP on-line participants would be assisted in customizing what they have learned to their unique enterprises.

The second year of this project (July 2011 to June 2012) sought to build on the foundation that the team established with the College of Agricultural Sciences IT and eLearning personnel -- conducting final editing of the distance education class, launching the course site, marketing it to aspiring food entrepreneurs, and evaluating the impact 3 months after class participation.

To this end, the Team assumed the completion of the course in January 2012, and planned to pursue the following activities throughout the second year of the grant:

Facilitation of pilot course registrants' entrance into the on-line class and conducting a review of their post-module quizzes to assess the level of learning that took place. Evaluation of the materials' usability and relevance through a standard pre-test/post-test on-line survey that was incorporated in the on-line course.

Following up with participants, three months after course completion, to gauge the adoption of concepts/skills learned and how these impacted on enterprise start-up, management and sustainability. For individuals making the decision to start a food business, impact would be measured by reports of the following actions:

1) creation of a business plan
2) contact with government entities for registration, permits and zoning issues
3) target market identification and steps to promote products to this group
4) completion of food safety certification training
5) initiation of the food enterprise in a home kitchen, community kitchen or stand-alone business location
6) development of appropriate, effective packaging and labeling for value-added items
7) assignment of a pricing structure that covers all costs, accounts for the distribution method, and allows for a profit

Work with eLearning personnel to plan and schedule the filming and upload a set of video interviews of successful farmers who add value and direct market, integrating these videos in the Food for Profit on-line class in summer 2014. These videos will further enhance the learning experience for participants once the class has moved from pilot phase to a full launch.

Additional delays ensued due to the workload that eLearning maintains, and NE SARE was consistently made aware of these challenges, resulting in the provision of an extension of the project until October 31, 2013.

Introduction:

Encouraged by increasing consumer interest in locally grown and produced foods, agricultural producers often consider direct marketing or adding value as ways to retain a larger share of the profits on the farm. However, factors such as (1) increased complexity in business development and (2) increased legistlation (such as the Food Safety Modernization Act of 2011) have made starting a food enterprise far from intuitive.

To begin selling food to the public, farmers (who have primarily produced and harvested crops in the past) must develop a new skill set – so that they can prepare foods safely and legally, identify an appropriate niche market for their product line, set a price that the market can bear while covering costs, and create a finished

product that responds to both legal and market-driven expectations. In addition, they must become aware of the liabilities of selling a product ingested, and determine any strategies they can adopt for good risk management.

Since 1992, Penn State Extension has offered a one-day workshop, Food for Profit, at which farmers who want to add value and/or direct market are taught basic food business strategy. In participating in the 7 hour session, would-be food entrepreneurs are introduced to legal issues, food safety considerations, marketability and profitability, empowering them to determine if the notion of a food enterprise is a good fit for their farm. During the course of the workshop, participants are introduced to a network of sanitarians, Extension Educators, Small Business Development Center Consultants, and other professionals who can provide one-to-one guidance after the workshop ends. Demand for this workshop has increased significantly in recent years, resulting in more than 750 Pennsylvania, Maryland and West Virginia residents attending a session since fall 2010. However, post-workshop surveys indicate that most of these participants are 30 to 60 years of age. Since entrepreneurship is not exclusive to middle-aged individuals, new and different venues (beyond workshops) are needed to reach out to the next-generation farmer.

Young farmers have busy schedules – often balancing off-farm employment with the demands of agriculture – representing a key reason for their not attending workshops. In addition, this group of learners has grown up in a world of electronic communication, and may not see the need to drive to a traditional workshop setting to receive information. To meet the needs of this group of learners (as well as more senior counterparts) this project was designed to offer an alternative – an on-line classroom in which participants could receive the information supplied by Food for Profit, but 24/7, in a format compatible with production schedules, personal life and off-farm employment.

This NE SARE project responded to the needs of younger, next-generation agricultural producers and other local food entrepreneurs, by creating an electronic classroom with a series of lessons that resemble the sections of a "Food for Profit" workshop. Although the original proposal described a set of web-posted Power Point presentations (from the workshop) with MS Presenter voice-overs, the project evolved to an HTML product that has visuals, text segments, audio feeds, and links to additional Internet resources. In this way, it is accessible to all adult learning preferences, and to participants with differing educational and physical abilities. Quizzes at the end of each lesson and pre-/post-evaluations allow for measurement of student learning (to allow the authors to improve the quality of the educational experience, based on early learning assessments). In addition to information provided in the lessons, students are provided electronic copies of the Food for Profit fact sheets (located at http://extension.psu.edu/food/entrepreneurs/starting-a-business) and key handouts that workshop participants have found useful (a PDF of these handouts has been uploaded to this report). Paper copies of these documents are also sent to each registrant.   A mid-2014 addition of video clips featuring interviews of farmers who have successfully added value or direct marketed will not only enhance the classroom, but match the "guest food entrepreneur" who traditionally has provided experiential information to each Food for Profit workshop.

- [Age Groups of Participants, Food for Profit Classes, FY 2012](#)

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Research

Materials and methods:

This project built on resources of a successful face-to-face program, creating a fresh, accessible on-line classroom to broaden the reach of information for farmers and local food producers wanting to start a food business.

The Internet is a constantly changing, ever-growing environment. Between the time of the grant proposal and the initiation of work, electronic communication and education changed substantially. Instead of using MS Presenter software to add voice-over to the *Food for Profit* workshop slides, our team engaged the resources and assistance of the Penn State College Agricultural Science's eLearning unit to transform the MS Power Points into an html environment with text, voice pods, and quizzes at the end of each of 7 lessons. The NE SARE grant funding was used to leverage additional dollars to finance this product upgrade.

One key step in the design process was to contact previous workshop attendees, inquiring about the types of information they felt would be vital to include in the on-line version. In addition, a focus group of successful food business owners provided confirmation about the risk management strategies to be taught. Once the pilot classroom was created, interested workshop "graduates" were invited to sign into the classroom and provide feedback about the site's mechanics and content. This interaction with collaborative partners was invaluable in making a usable, effective electronic learning environment.

In addition to creating the HTML lessons, eLearning personnel were also engaged in the video interview project, so that professional clips featuring interviews of successful food entrepreneurs could be accessed by students (the on-line version of the workshop's "guest entrepreneur"). In this way, the educational needs of experiential learners will be addressed, as they listen to food business development stories and lessons learned.

Research results and discussion:

A number of the farmers adding value were consulted (via focus group and email conversations) about essential content for Food for Profit On-line. Through their participation in the class development, these individuals were given the opportunity to look at their established business anew – determining the types of information they had found useful as their business started and grew, as well as those topics that they should continue to research for future growth.

While education of our Extension peers was not a primary goal of this project, this site was promoted at the Joint Council of Extension Professionals' Galaxy Conference (Pittsburgh, PA; September 2013) as an educational tool for educators and faculty who frequently field questions about food business start-up and development. We anticipate that other Extension personnel will reference the site themselves, and refer their clients.

Education & Outreach Activities and Participation Summary

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

Education/outreach description:

We compiled a list of producers who successfully direct market and/or add value, along with a list of interested past-workshop participants, to solicit feedback about important aspects of food business development to ensure that the on-line class would be relevant and thorough. These contacts will serve as referrals for future users of the on-line class.

We created an informational brochure that was first distributed at the Joint Council of Extension Professionals' Galaxy Conference (Pittsburgh PA, September 2013) and which will continue to be a resource for future marketing of Food for Profit On-line.

- Food for Profit On-line Brochure

Project Outcomes

Project outcomes:

As described earlier in this report, the project team was successful in developing and launching an electronic version of the Penn State Food for Profit workshop. This on-line class provides research-based and experiential information to assist farmers and other entrepreneurs to make the decision whether to start, or not start, a local food venture.

During the pilot phase of this project, 23 users participated with an average of 13 visits per student to the site, with 10 of these students completing at least 4 of the 7 lessons, while others selected only one or two of the lessons. One question in the post-class evaluation was "How do you rate your post-course understanding of the steps needed to start a food enterprise?" 65% (15) of participants responded "considerable," and the remaining 35% (8) responded "moderate" (no responses of "minimal" or "non existent"), confirming that this on-line version of Food for Profit does fulfill our educational goals.

Assessment of Project Approach and Areas of Further Study:

Potential Contributions

As with all farmers wanting to expand to local food production and sales, young farmers (in their 20s and 30s) need to receive sound, complete information about the regulations, food safety issues, and business aspects of food business start-up and management. Because they may not attend a face-to-face workshop, Internet instruction provides the opportunity for this education. When students participate in Food for Profit on-line, their contact information becomes part of the Penn State

Extension database. As such, they will be notified of additional educational opportunities and be introduced to blogs, and social media opportunities to network and "keep the discussion going." In this way, the on-line FFP class serves as the doorway for lifelong education for next generation farmers.

Future Recommendations

In this project, we took the first step toward creating an internet-based resource for farmers who need information about the feasibility, marketability and profitability of their intended food products before launching their venture. However, more marketing will be needed for this resource to reach its full potential, with the same type of subscription as the face-to-face workshop.

This marketing, like the product itself, needs to be done via the Internet – publicizing the course through success stories of Food for Profit workshop graduates (via blogs) and using Facebook, Twitter and Pinterest to increase excitement about the resource. Our project team will work with Social Media educators within the Penn State Extension Team to make on-line promotion a priority.

The addition of video interviews (mid-2014) will allow the site to move from a purely "academic" environment because of the experiences shared and the "human touch." Students viewing these film clips will be able to see and hear "real people" who have applied the concepts and strategies that Food for Profit On-line teaches.

Sharing this resource with Small Business Development Center consultants, Farm Credit and Farm Bureau contacts, and contacts at the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture (PASA) will also ensure that the launch from pilot to "live" will be a strong one.

Information Products

- [Food for Profit On-line Support Materials](#) (Book/Handbook)

- [Food for Profit On-line Course Description](#) (Website)

- [Entry portal for the Food for Profit On-line Class](#) (Website)

[US Department of Agriculture](#)