

Growing Your Local Food System and Its Brands

Final report for ES18-138

Project Type: Professional Development Program

Funds awarded in 2018: \$79,999.00

Projected End Date: 03/30/2021

Grant Recipient: Mississippi State University

Region: Southern

State: Mississippi

Principal Investigator:

[James Barnes](#)

Mississippi State University

Project Information

Abstract:

Increased consumer demand for local foods continues to reshape local supply chains in favor of consumption of fresh, local foods. This project leverages existing Mississippi State University Extension programs to strengthen rural communities in Mississippi by teaching Extension agents how to assist local food producers with improving their online marketing efforts to connect with local consumers.

Online marketing training will be provided to Extension agents as professional development in four primary areas: Local Food System Economics; Digital Marketing Strategies; Social Media Marketing Strategies; and Branding and Visual Marketing Strategies. This proposal aims to train MSU-ES agents to deliver these timely Extension curricula to provide technical assistance to local food-based businesses, which supports the economic development of communities in Mississippi. The opportunity for assisting these types of businesses has never been greater given the many easy-to-learn concepts and practical tools that are available for improved online marketing.

Also, the proposed training will be used to train Extension agents on how to build better relationships between producers and consumers, through marketing education, community development practices, strategic problem-solving, and technology training. Agents will be able to assist producers, identify proper marketing channels, solve problems regarding distribution, and determine what steps are needed to prepare for distribution, enhance their local foods community, and develop effective marketing strategies for their products.

This training is an important economic development program in Mississippi that could be replicated across the U.S. for other Extension agents, communities, agricultural producers, and local food businesses.

Project Objectives:

Online marketing training will be provided to Extension agents as professional development in four primary areas: Local Food System Economics; Digital Marketing Strategies; Social Media Marketing Strategies; and Branding and Visual Marketing Strategies.

CHANGE OF FOCUS DUE TO COVID-19

The original plan was to create face-to-face training for agents, but lack of Extension Agent participation in our scheduled workshop led us to reach out to our partners to deliver content to mentors from additional organizations, industry partners, and agricultural associations to participate in the training. This led to such successful educational efforts as the Soil to Shelf Workshop, the statewide Women for Agriculture Training, The Mississippi Alabama Rural Tourism Conference, and the Mississippi Farmers Market Workshop.

Additionally, it was also decided to shift the focus to creating online content to make the training more accessible, not only to in-state participants, but also Extension Agents, and mentors in neighboring states. This shift ultimately proved timely and effective because COVID-19 required a shift in how to deliver content.

The shift to online from face-to-face provided ample opportunity to create resources to promote online learning by Extension agents while simultaneously providing access to resources for food businesses in Mississippi, and abroad. All content is ready-made to use by Extension agents for professional development, and agents can use these resources to work directly with food businesses in future face-to-face workshops beyond 2021.

Related to workshops, the advent of COVID-19 in early March 2020 drastically impacted our plans to have agents travel to attend professional development training. Likewise, significant funds were not used in this grant due to restrictions of face-to-face meetings and agents' ability to travel to attend workshops that were planned as part of this program.

However, a more online-focused approach was taken to create content for agents not only in Mississippi but also abroad in other states. This summary report documents the content and its online location where agents can take advantage of the online training produced in this project.

Education

Educational approach:

This project uses a three-phase process to implement all educational programming to Extension agents.

1. Virtual education. We are creating an educational curriculum for Extension agents in the form of online (Zoom) webinars (<http://extension.msstate.edu/content/growing-mississippi%E2%80%99s-local-foods-industry-webinar-series>).
2. Face-to-face workshops. We will deliver all the training face-to-face with Extension agents, mentor farmers, and farm service agency employees.
3. Community implementation. Extension agents and mentor farmers will work together to implement local food promotion projects/initiatives. We will provide technical assistance to these teams as needed.
4. *On April 26, PI and Co-PIs (the MSU team) met via Zoom with David Redhage

and others at SARE to discuss a slight modification to the educational approach. The following was agreed to by all parties as a modification to both the approach and some changes to the overall budget for promoting educational content.

1. The MSU team has produced a two-day in-service training for Extension agents. This content will be presented in the additional form of an online course. During the summer of 2019, the team will have each expert record his/her content (PowerPoint) and each session will be recorded by a videographer on staff at MSU Extension. The production goal will be to create an online course called "How To Grow Your Food Business." The marketing goal for creating brand awareness with Extension agents in Mississippi and beyond is to use some funds to create a social media account to promote the new course. This will be a budget reallocation but not a change in line items or other.
2. The MSU team reported that the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce had declined their funding to promote the project's work. Instead, they informed the MSU team they would do their part of promoting the work without the need for direct funding.
3. The MSU team will partner with several entities affiliated with the Mississippi-Tennessee-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference in October 2019. The purpose is to provide training to Extension agents and other stakeholders.
4. The MSU team will partner with the Up in Farms Food Hub, Alliance of Sustainable Farms, and participants at the Mississippi-Tennessee-Alabama Rural Tourism Conference. These new partners will facilitate all face-to-face training for the project in 2019/2020.
5. The MSU team will submit a budget modification to use the funds that were declined by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce toward promoting the educational content of this project, especially the newly-to-be online course, "How To Grow Your Food Business."
6. *The original plan was to create face-to-face training for agents, but lack of Extension Agent participation in our scheduled workshop led us to reach out to our partners to deliver content to mentors from additional organizations, industry partners, and agricultural associations to participate in the training. This led to such successful educational efforts as the Soil to Shelf Workshop, the statewide Women for Agriculture Training, The Mississippi Alabama Rural Tourism Conference, and the Mississippi Farmers Market Workshop.
7. *Additionally, it was also decided to shift the focus to creating online content to make the training more accessible, not only to in-state participants, but also Extension Agents, and mentors in neighboring states. This shift ultimately proved timely and effective because COVID-19 required a shift in how to deliver content.

Education & Outreach Initiatives

Local Flavor: Growing Mississippi's Local Foods Industry (Webinar Series)

Objective:

Mississippi State University Extension has a long history of educating farmers, citizens, and public officials on strategies to improve the local food supply. Local Flavor is a new Extension initiative that brings Extension faculty and agents together to support the development of Mississippi's local foods industry.

Local foods development is complex and requires expertise in multiple agricultural, community, and economic development arenas. Local Flavor connects those searching for information about food safety, agricultural production, business development, economics, and policy with resources across the state.

Local Flavor celebrates Mississippi's culture, agricultural resources, and entrepreneurial spirit while striving to provide Mississippians with improved access to healthful, locally grown food.

Local Flavor will be the lead organizational brand that all training relates to for Extension agents, mentor farmers and others.

Description:

[GCD_Soil_To_Shelf_agenda_flyer](#)

[MSU Ext 5 Ways to Grow Your Local Foods Business](#)

<http://extension.msstate.edu/content/growing-mississippi%E2%80%99s-local-foods-industry-webinar-series>

FINAL REPORT UPDATE, MAY 2021

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The following are the training resources produced for agent professional development as part of this SARE grant.

Outcomes and impacts:

We will survey all participants in April 2019 to assess the impact of webinars thus far.

Final Report Update, May 2021

Table 1. Stakeholders Reached with Educational Content Per Initiative

Year	Conference	Purpose	StakeholdersReached
2021	Mississippi State University Extension	Women of Ag Conference	85
2021	Mississippi State University Extension	Building A Vibrant Community Podcast	74
2021	Mississippi State University Extension	7 Ways Course - Online	163
2020	MS Department of Agriculture and Commerce	Farmers Market Workshop	100
2020	Mississippi State University Extension	COVID-19 Webinar/Publication	677
2020	Mississippi State University Extension	7 Ways to Quickly Grow Your Food Business Online Course	59
2020	Mississippi State University Division of Agriculture, Forestry & Veterinary Medicine	Landmarks Magazine: Soil to Shelf Article	8000
2020	Mississippi State University Extension	Women of Ag Conference	55
2019	Mississippi Alabama Tennessee Rural Tourism Conference	Presentation on Creating Local Food Events, Social Media Marketing, and Website Development	100
2019	Mississippi Municipal League	Presentation of Professional Development SARE Resources	14
2019	Mississippi State University Extension	Local Foods Initiative Series	30
2019	Mississippi State University Extension	Growing Mississippi's Local Foods Industry Webinar Series	75
		TOTAL	9,432

Stakeholder Comments at Workshops

“Could have spent more time with Lauren on Instagram and FB on business ads and how to read analytics. I’ll be calling her and going to visit. I need an in-depth usage class.”

“The culinary tourism and food festivals were awesome!”

“Dr. Barnes was right on sharing with us simple websites – that really helped. “

Evaluation Feedback

Session rating 1 poor 5 excellent:

Farm to Table, Food Festivals & Local Flavor – panel of 3

Educational & Outreach Activities

55 Consultations

18 Curricula, factsheets or educational tools

1 Journal articles

19 Online trainings

11 Published press articles, newsletters

20 Webinars / talks / presentations

12 Workshop field days

1 Other educational activities: We launched the Building A Vibrant Community podcast at Mississippi State University. Season One was dedicated to providing educational resources Extension agents could use to assist food businesses in their area. In addition, the educational content could serve as professional development for Extension agents. The intro of each episode states that SARE sponsored Season One.

PARTICIPATION SUMMARY:

55 Extension

4 Agency

3 Farmers/ranchers

1430 Others

Learning Outcomes

9432 Participants gained or increased knowledge, skills and/or attitudes about sustainable agriculture topics, practices, strategies, approaches

25 Ag professionals intend to use knowledge, attitudes, skills and/or awareness learned

Project Outcomes

3 New working collaborations

Project outcomes:

This project has recently begun and in part due to the government shutdown. Preliminary work has been focused on launching phase one of our process of educating Extension agents, mentor farmers, and others. We anticipate reporting impacts in our next report.

Due to COVID-19 and other events limiting this project, we pivoted to create online resources for reaching agents, farmers, providers - all stakeholders. A list of our online resources has been provided in our final report.

Information Products

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture or SARE.



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