



eXtension's Entrepreneurs and their Communities Website

An Emerging Resource for Community and Economic Development Professionals

By Louis Bassano and Charles French

Introduction

Launched in 2007, eXtension is rapidly transforming Cooperative Extension's outreach capabilities. By creating a web-based, interactive, user-friendly learning environment, eXtension is making available reliable, research-based information from the nation's land-grant universities to anyone, anywhere, at any time, using any Internet-capable device.

Networks of subject-matter experts that provide content for specific themes and topics power eXtension. These networks are called "communities of practice" (CoPs). Consisting of faculty, professional staff, county educators, industry leaders, and others, these virtual experts share their knowledge and expertise in specific content areas to create highly effective educational tools, resources and programs.

The entrepreneurs and their CoPs consist of 330 Extension educators and researchers nationwide. The goal of our CoP is to make information available on our website that will help to build strong rural economies through the efforts of individual entrepreneurs or by the adoption of public policies and strategies that create and nurture entrepreneurial communities.

An important aspect of maintaining a vibrant, high-quality website demands that we seek the input and advice of our larger team of CoP members and others who can comment on its quality, value, and relevance. This article provides a brief overview of the entrepreneurs and their Communities website and examines user data collected from stakeholders through the use of website user statistics, online survey questionnaires, and post-program participant feedback. Suggestions for improving the website are offered.

Key Resource Areas

The Entrepreneurs and their Communities website contains key resource areas. Each resource area, described below, utilizes a different format to engage the learner and is designed to be a source of current information on entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial communities.

- Case Studies – Case studies feature stories about real people sharing their challenges and solutions to problems they have faced in their business. Written interviews, visuals and links to other resources are used to bring issues and their resolutions into sharp focus.
- Information Briefs – This resource

area features two-three page reports that expand on key entrepreneurship topics. Twenty-two briefs have been published.

- State and Local Policies – This resource area highlights important policies that contribute to the development and growth of entrepreneur-friendly communities.
- Research References – This resource area is designed to keep readers abreast of the latest research findings in the field of entrepreneurship and community development. Approximately 35 research articles have been published.
- Webinar Series – This resource area features monthly webinars on a variety of topics. Ten webinars have been conducted and each is archived and available for viewing.
- Data and Cool Tools – When it becomes active, this resource area will contain assessment tools and other instruments that can be used by community planners to evaluate a community's readiness to support entrepreneurship.
- Frequently Asked Questions – This resource area contains

over 260 questions and answers pertaining to entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial communities.

- Ask the Expert – This resource area provides website visitors with an opportunity to pose a question to be answered by a member of the CoP with expertise in the subject matter queried.

Selected Survey Results

Part one of a two-part online survey was completed by 69 CoP members. This survey solicited information on user characteristics and website usage patterns. Part two of the survey was completed by 37 CoP members. This survey asked respondents for feedback on five key resource areas: case studies, information briefs, state and local policies, research references, and webinars. In addition, survey participants were asked to road test the search engine by posing a question pertaining to entrepreneurship or entrepreneurial communities. Finally, respondents were asked their overall impressions of the website.

Over 70% of the respondents reported being either an educator or specialist. Almost half indicated that community development was their primary program area. Most respondents indicated they planned to visit the website monthly to obtain information for public presentations, articles and other reports. Over half of the respondents planned to refer clients to the website.

Webinars and information briefs were rated by the survey respondents as being most useful. Eighty-six percent of the respondents rated webinars “useful” or “very useful” and participation trends indicate that webinars are becoming more popular. The majority of respondents rated all of the five resource areas as “useful” or “very useful.”

Fifteen people tested the website search function. Respondents most frequently answered that they were able to locate the information they were seeking by doing a single search that took less than

one minute and that the information they found was “helpful.”

The website was rated highest on the “readability of information” found and “understandability of its content.” Asked to rate the overall website, 56% rated it “useful” or “very useful” and 44% rated the website “somewhat useful.”

Respondents liked the ability to navigate the site, the quality of the articles yielded by the search engine, the ability to locate answers to frequently asked questions and the research references and webinars resource areas.

User Statistics


Google Analytics enables us to track the number of page views on the “Entrepreneurs and their Communities” website and identify those sections most often viewed. From January 15 to February 15 of 2009, 1,766 “Entrepreneurs and their Communities” pages were viewed, with 1,234 of these views being unique (i.e. separate individuals). Most popular was the webinar series. These statistics are nearly identical with the same period last year, suggesting that the number of website users has leveled off.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study focused on identifying user characteristics, usage patterns and overall impressions of the entrepreneurs and their Communities website. The national entrepreneurship team should be pleased with the results of this study. Generally speaking, survey respondents were positive about the content of the website’s key resource areas, the utility of its search engine and its overall usefulness. In addition, respondents indicated that they planned to return to the website regularly in search of the latest information on entrepreneurship and entrepreneurial communities.

Despite Google Analytics reports of a leveling off of website visits, we expect that with eXtension’s continued marketing efforts and the flow of new

information and resources to the site, that the number of users and the frequency of their visits will increase. This will pose a significant challenge for the national entrepreneurship team, which will need to recruit additional contributors to the key resource areas and devote more time to maintaining the website and managing the flow of information to assure the content quality remains high.

Based on the survey results, we recommend changing or modifying the website design so that it is more intuitive. This will enhance the users’ ability to quickly locate information. Second, we urge content contributors and reviewers to eliminate the use of jargon and term of art descriptors and phrases. Finally, we recommend adding interactive, decision-making tools that enhance the value of information that users already have by taking them through a process that helps them make more informed decisions. 

Authors’ Picks for Further Reading

eXtension

 <http://www.extension.org/>

eXtension Entrepreneurs and Their Communities

 <http://www.extension.org/entrepreneurship>

“Main Street Economist,” a newsletter of the Kansas City Federal Reserve that provides great insight into entrepreneurship and rural development.

 www.kansascityfed.org/RegionalAffairs/MainStreet/Mainstmain.htm

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