ABSTRACT

Social media is gaining popularity within Extension. Aligning with the social ecological model, social media can: improve awareness and knowledge about healthy eating at the individual level; promote changes to food environments; inform policymakers; and impact social and cultural norms and values. Virginia Cooperative Extension’s Family Nutrition Program (FNP), the Expanded Foods and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP) and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education (SNAP-Ed) use social media to support programming from individual-level education to environmental-level support for limited resource individuals and families. One example of a specific environmental-level FNP initiative is the creation of an online tool-kit to assist farmers market managers with launching, marketing, managing, and evaluating electronic benefit transfer (EBT) systems for the acceptance of SNAP (formerly called food stamps) benefits at farmers markets. The tool-kit contains several social media tools, including ready-to-use Facebook nutrition messages, online videos on the benefits of farmers markets, and seasonal recipes formatted for social media sharing. Farmers markets are also encouraged to promote the Virginia Buy Local campaign with resources targeted specifically to SNAP-eligible individuals. In addition to increasing access to fresh and healthy food, supporting the growth of EBT programs at farmers markets across the Commonwealth provides additional sites for nutrition education to empower individuals and families in Virginia to make healthy choices while using federal nutrition assistance dollars to support local economies and small farmers. Finally, social media provides an easy way to collect evaluation data to show program impact.

FARMERS MARKET MANAGER EBT TOOLKIT

The objective of this initiative is to create a Farmers Market Manager EBT Toolkit which would assist farmers market managers in launching, managing, marketing and evaluating EBT programs at their markets to increase healthy food access for SNAP-eligible individuals and families. The number of EBT systems at farmers markets allows for the acceptance of SNAP benefits are increasing across the state of Virginia. However, these programs are complex and require an in-depth application process, marketing, financial oversight and evaluation on the part of farmers market managers. The Toolkit was informed by:

1. A statewide Farmers Market Manager survey in collaboration with a market manager from Sponsylvania County Virginia and Wholesome Wave
2. Interviews with funders representative of the organization who may provide funding for SNAP incentive programs
3. Semi-structured interviews with market managers from municipally run, non-profit, and for-profit farmers markets

The Tool-Kit contains a variety of social media content including ready-to-use messages for market managers to use on their market accounts, healthy recipes featuring seasonal produce, links to the FNP blog and other websites with nutrition information, videos on using EBT at farmers markets and other training materials managers can use for vendor training purposes.

The main objectives for social media content are to provide:

1. Market managers with content for their own social media accounts to create a web presence
2. Advertisements directly targeted to SNAP-eligible Virginians to promote the purchase of fresh and healthy foods directly from Virginian farmers
3. Reinforcing nutrition messages for potential and current market shoppers to promote a culture of wellness in Virginia through farmers markets
4. Publicity for FNP and the Food Security Project to broaden reach and program impact.

EAT SMART, MOVE MORE AT FARMERS MARKETS

The FNP Food Security Project incorporates social media as an innovative SNAP-Ed approach to building a healthier Virginia from the macro- to the micro level and to spread our overall message (Eat Smart, Move More) to new sites. One goal of the Food Security Project is to connect SNAP-eligible consumers to farmers markets to increase access to fresh and healthy food while providing a new customer base to support small farmers in Virginia. The Food Security Project supports farmers markets across the Commonwealth in launching, managing, marketing, and evaluating their EBT programs, which allow them to accept SNAP benefits.

SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL FOR FOOD SYSTEMS PROMOTION USING SOCIAL MEDIA

FNP uses the social ecological model as a theoretical framework for promoting food security and supporting environmental-level initiatives. Social media is used as a tool; integrated into other initiatives to support overall project goals and objectives.

TOOL-KIT EVALUATION

The evaluation of programming using social media is a growing practice.

Evaluation of the Market Manager Tool-Kit will include:

1. Monitoring how often content is accessed via the webpage
2. Tracking use and dissemination of social media content
3. Monitoring requests for revisions and additional materials submitted to the online Tool-Kit page
4. Requests for collaborative social media communication plans

Other forms of evaluation, including interviews with a subset of market managers, will also be used.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The need for environmental-level SNAP-Ed approaches to building healthier environments, in which healthy choices are the default choice, is becoming increasingly evident. In order to bring about widespread social change, FNP and other SNAP-Ed programs are employing strategies which integrate approaches aimed at multiple levels of the social-ecological model. The Farmers Market Manager Tool-Kit is one example of a systems level approach currently being employed by Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Next steps include continuing to support Virginia farmers market managers, assisting in the development and growth of a Virginia Farmers Market Manager Coalition, and designing valid and reliable instruments to measure social media use and impact in food security and food systems initiatives.