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Surveys help rural businesses identify customer shopping preferences

Clark Anderson didn't know it, but some of his customers at Buenz Drug in Ogallala were unhappy with the look of the store.

They didn't like the gift display located just inside the door because it partially blocked the view inside. Once Anderson learned what his customers thought, he moved the display. Now his customers can see in better and his employees are better able to see when customers enter.

"Our employees probably weren't speaking or acknowledging customers when they came in. Now they are," Anderson said.

The change was the result of Anderson's participation in the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension's Consumer Preference and Economic Leakage study. The study uses surveys to measure consumer preferences and the factors that affect their shopping decisions.

The goal of the study is to prevent "economic leakage" — which occurs when consumers leave small rural communities to shop in larger cities, said Alan Corr, extension educator in Kearney and Franklin counties and project leader.

"We want to give local communities

the opportunity to provide consumers with what they would like to have so they don't have to leave town," said Corr, who helped develop the study.

Extension collaborates with a local task force to help participating merchants learn how they can better serve their customers. Sixteen studies involving 325 businesses and 3,500 consumers have been conducted in the last four years, with notable successes, Corr said.

A dress shop changed the way it advertised and its profits doubled over the previous year, Corr said. In Gothenburg, where 90 percent of survey respondents said they left town to buy clothes and shoes, community leaders recruited a new clothing and shoe store as a result of information gained through the study.

Customer comments that a Christian gift and bookstore in Holdrege was cluttered prompted owners Gary and Eileen Yost to move to a larger building. Now their Treasures of the Heart is "a much brighter, lighter store," Eileen Yost said.

"People come in and notice the change. It is a positive thing for customers," she said.

Corr has visited Nebraska communities ranging from Cambridge, the smallest, to Fremont, the largest, working with up to 25 businesses in each community. Corr even expanded the survey to Colorado, having met with business owners in Steamboat Springs in June.



Sandy Jacobs

Alan Corr, left, NU Cooperative Extension educator in Kearney and Franklin counties, talks with Patty and John Guy, owners of Guy's Home Haven, in downtown Sidney. The Guys are among 325 business owners to participate in extension's Consumer Preference and Economic Leakage study.

Each community pays \$2,000 for the survey.

About 350 to 400 surveys are mailed to five key consumer groups to determine their shopping preferences and patterns. Eight to 10 members from each of the five consumer groups then meet with Corr to voice their opinions of participating businesses. Those opinions are shared anonymously with the businesses.

"It benefits rural Nebraska by strengthening businesses and rural Nebraska communities," Corr said.

— **Lori McGinnis**

Corr can be contacted at
(308) 832-0645.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- pg. 3 Environmental education
- pg. 4 Grape-growing ventures
- pg. 7 Plant Disease Central

Dean's comments

Language is important.

Language helps us communicate ideas and feelings, and we form impressions based on language nuances.

Take, for example, common words and phrases we with University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension use to describe our work and programming, both inside and outside the office. Our language should reinforce extension's educational mission. Do we say we are "going to a meeting,"

or do we say we are "teaching a group?"

The word "meeting" conjures up images of sitting, maybe even boredom. The word "teach," on the other hand, imparts images of learning, value, excitement. The word "teach" describes exactly what we do in University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension educational programs.

Extension always has been about teaching and education. Originally we were Cooperative Extension Service, with "service" used in the very highest sense of the word. Here at the University of Nebraska, I am very proud of the fact that extension programming adapts to current needs and goes substantially beyond most conceptions of public service; we are involved in engagement, which is well-grounded in the university's scholarly activity. We educate, and we are proud of it.

What we teach, too, has changed from the traditional view many people hold of extension, and contemporary language helps reflect that change. Although traditional programs for

agriculture and the family still are vital to our educational programming, we offer much, much more in these and

other areas. Now, for example, extension educators are key leaders in the technological advancement of their communities. Extension is helping develop an e-government curriculum for county employees to use in providing online services to the public, such as conducting searches, or ordering forms or handbooks. At least two of our educators have been

instrumental in bringing broadband Internet service to their communities, and another has taught city librarians about navigating the Internet.

There are many other exciting examples of how extension constantly changes to meet current needs, as well. One of our extension educators recently was quoted in a modern fitness magazine. Another helps teach seasonal garden center employees horticulture facts so they can better answer customer questions.

There are so many wonderful ways extension benefits Nebraskans statewide. You will find stories on several of those ways in this *Connect* newsletter. So many others are out there. I'd really appreciate hearing from you how extension is making a difference. If it's beneficial to Nebraskans, it's definitely worth telling me about!

Elbert Dickey
Dean and Director
University of Nebraska
Cooperative Extension



Elbert Dickey

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Land-grant universities work with the people they serve. NU's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources does so in priority areas of food, agriculture, agribusiness, natural resources, people and communities. We teach, discover new knowledge through research, and extend that new, unbiased information across the state and beyond through extension.



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Real-world environmental education captures children's outdoor interests

An environmental program trilogy, of which two courses are taught by University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension, helps children better understand and appreciate natural resources, said the state program coordinator.

Brooke Levey, also a 4-H environmental education assistant, said extension's Project Learning Tree (PLT) and Project Water Education for Teachers (WET) emphasize the environment and water, respectively, in providing science-based training to K-12 educators, who use it in outdoor and indoor class settings. The third environmental education program, Project WILD, is administered through the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission.

Levey said real-world examples help students focus on important environmental issues while learning decision-making, critical thinking and the value of differing perspectives.

Questions from Project WET's Irrigation Interpretation lesson, for example, ask students to identify reasons people irrigate, describe different irrigation methods and evaluate the costs and benefits of each. Levey said students may look at an irrigation system, talk about where the water comes from and how it affects nearby groundwater. Or, they may walk to a nearby park to identify how water is used in recreational ways. Children also may build models for some activities.

"Very few of the planned activities involve students sitting at a desk listening to an instructor," Levey said. "For the most part, they're up doing something in every lesson.

"Students not only become more actively involved in their learning process, but take responsibility for it as well," Levey added. "(The activities) bring the students from awareness to action; they're searching for the answers and developing appropriate questions."

Program collaborators include the

Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) and the Nebraska-Kansas area office of the federal Bureau of Reclamation. Gary Hergenrader, NFS state forester, called PLT "a wonderful mechanism to introduce students to natural resources and environmental issues. Beginning in the elementary grades, it teaches students how to think, not what to think about these issues."

About 2,000 elementary teachers statewide have participated in the Project WET and PLT training, Levey said. Among them is Shari Frost, who teaches kindergarten, and first and second grades at Oconto Elementary School.

"I think the children enjoy the hands-on part of it," Frost said. "They talk about it for days afterward."

Roger Lampe, a sixth-grade teacher at Falls City Middle School, uses all three environmental programs in his classroom.

"Anytime you can get the students involved (in learning), that's a benefit. It's a great way to involve kids in outdoor education," Lampe said.

— **Barbara Rixstine**

Levey can be contacted at (402) 472-2805.



Brooke Levey, NU Cooperative Extension environmental education assistant, uses real-world examples for her tree and water workshops that train K-12 educators to help children gain a better understanding of natural resources.

Food, nutrition site earns high marks

If you're interested in finding out how nutrition can help prevent osteoporosis, how to cook once and eat twice, or keep your family's food safe, there's one Web site that has it all:

lancaster.unl.edu/food.

The nationally recognized University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Food Safety and Nutrition Web site was designed by Alice Henneman, extension educator in Lancaster County. The site includes an American Dietetic Association award-winning game on healthy eating using the Food Guide Pyramid, food preservation resources and preparation ideas. Her seasonal topics have included using herbs to enhance food preparation.

Henneman said she has had numerous contacts from other educators.

"They've found information on my site to be useful for classes, handouts and news releases in helping families plan healthier meals," she said.

Tufts University in Medford, Maine, whose scientists work with federal agencies to establish nutritional guidelines and other public policies, gave Henneman's site an "Among the Best" rating for nutrition accuracy, depth and usefulness. One Tufts evaluator said Henneman's Web site provides "useful resources, links and recipe ideas to help readers every time they eat," and that her Cook It Quick column "helps consumers get the most out of their food dollar."

The site received nearly 22,000 hits per month last spring, Henneman said, and institutions such as USDA, Syracuse University, The Ohio State University, the University of Texas, the Nebraska Department of Agriculture and Lincoln City Libraries have links to it.

— **Barbara Rixstine**

Henneman can be contacted at (402) 441-7180.

Barbara Rixstine

Grape-growing a new entrepreneurial venture in Nebraska

Blend winery entrepreneurs, grape growers and expertise from University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Viticulturist Paul Read, and you have a growing winemaking industry.

Read is Nebraska's grape and wine expert who has helped boost the number

of grape acres to 200, up from 10 in 1994. He's also been a key adviser for wineries in Crete, Crawford, Raymond, Denton and Brownville.

Read advised Bob Curtright on all production phases of his new 6,000-grapevine operation — grape and site

selection, planning, planting, fertilizing, pruning and harvest.

"Paul was the catalyst," said Curtright, whose Whiskey Run Creek Vineyard and Winery at Brownville is slated to open by early fall. "He's very knowledgeable. Where we're at is a result of Paul's efforts."

Besides working one-on-one with potential grape growers and winery entrepreneurs, Read hosts field days and workshops, has a Web site and newsletter, and even is planning to coordinate the offering of a beginning winemaking school this fall.

Winemaking requires a lot of grapes, Read said, and while growing Nebraska grapes can be profitable, it's also challenging due to grapevine sensitivities, temperature extremes and intensive labor requirements. In addition, grapevines must grow at least four to five years before they begin to reach their full harvest potential, he said, and it may be seven to eight years before they are profitable.

Still, Read said, "producers who choose to accept the challenge of growing grapes may have a ready market at the growing number of Nebraska wineries."

Jim Ballard, manager and co-owner of James Arthur Vineyards near Raymond, says many people are pleasantly surprised by the quality of Nebraska wine.

"I think people are surprised we can do this," said Ballard, who sells his wines to both Nebraskans and out-of-state travelers.

Read believes Nebraska's new grape and wine industry will boost the state's



Paul Read (right), NU Cooperative Extension viticulturist, prunes grapevines in a western Nebraska test plot this spring. More than 200

Panhandle to host winery cooperative

Panhandle grape growers could have a new outlet for their product if a new winery cooperative comes to fruition.

Jim Schild, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension educator in Scotts Bluff County, is working with area residents and community leaders to increase grape-growing and build a winery cooperative.

Schild established a two-acre vineyard at NU's Panhandle Research and Extension Center in Scottsbluff with the help of NU Viticulturist Paul Read. The vineyard gives area growers an opportunity for hands-on experience, as well as to evaluate the regional success of 26 grape varieties.

Schild says he began providing grape-growing information and workshops in 1998 when some area producers expressed interest in grapes as an alternative crop for small farms.

Now, he said, about 15 area growers have nearly 20 acres of vineyards that could produce 5,000-7,000



Jim Schild (foreground), NU Cooperative Extension educator in Scotts Bluff County, and Paul Read, NU viticulturist, prune grapevines in a western Nebraska test plot. Schild is working to help develop a winery cooperative in the area.

gallons of wine a year.

Like Read, Schild believes a winery cooperative could benefit area residents by providing additional opportunities for jobs, markets for other regional products and increased business traffic.

Schild is working with the cooperative's six-member steering committee, putting together a feasibility study for the winery and looking for just the right community to host it. He's gotten advice from NU's Food Process-

ing Center and Center for Applied Rural Innovation.

"We hope to have the winery up and running by sometime in 2004," Schild said. "There's a lot of excitement and enthusiasm when we visit with the local community officials. It's been a fun process because everybody is so excited about getting a venture of this sort started."

— Barbara Rixstine

Schild can be contacted at (308) 632-1480.



Barbara Rixstine

Cooperative Extension viticulturist, and Bob Curttright, vineyard and Winery at Brownville, inspect grapevines 100 acres of grapes now are grown in Nebraska.

Keeping food safe is farm-to-table goal

Food safety education is being taught to producers, processors, food handlers and consumers through several University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension farm-to-table educational programs.

Understanding how food-borne illness can occur at each stage in the farm-to-table process can help program participants prevent food-borne illness and even death, said Amy Peterson, extension educator in Polk County and a farm-to-table team leader.

Food-borne illness “can be almost totally preventable,” Peterson said, citing proper hand washing by food handlers and consumers as one way to prevent it.

Gary Zoubek, extension educator in York County and another team leader, teaches quality assurance to livestock producers and pesticide applicator training to crop producers. Properly administering products that keep livestock and crops healthy helps avoid any product residues in meat and grains, which when eaten could adversely affect some people’s health, Zoubek said.

“The consumer has a right to know things were done safely,” Zoubek said.

When food handlers and consumers

better understand food production, they visualize how contamination can occur, and understand what they can do to prevent it, Peterson added.

While these team members began collaborating on their efforts in 2001, extension has long provided food safety education and training, Zoubek said. In southeast Nebraska, he added, about 60 extension educators have taught food safety to more than 37,000 residents, including more than 1,300 swine and cattle producers, 350 food service managers and 14,300 consumers. Extension also teaches food safety programs statewide.

Safe food also makes economic sense. Consumers lacking confidence in certain foods won’t buy them, Zoubek said, adding 21 southeast Nebraska counties comprise about one-fourth of the state’s \$9.8 billion agricultural economy. On the other hand, unsafe food is costly. Peterson noted USDA estimates nationally the cost relating to five major food-borne pathogens is nearly \$7 billion annually.

– Cheryl Alberts

Peterson can be contacted at (402) 747-2321; Zoubek at (402) 362-5508.

economy by providing jobs and products, additional tourist dollars and support sales of other Nebraska food products.

James Arthur, for example, is among the wineries that sells locally produced cheese, sausage, salmon, bread and jelly.

“People see a winery as a destination,” Read said. “It expands an area’s recreation choices. People come to the winery and then stop in the town’s antique store, get film at the drugstore, buy a few groceries, maybe eat at a local restaurant. The winery adds local jobs and increases the tax base to the community.”

– Barbara Rixstine

Read can be contacted at (402) 472-5136.

Would you like to treat a friend?

Do you know someone who would like to receive *NU Cooperative Extension Connect* who hasn’t? Please send their name(s) and address(es) to: Editor, *NU Cooperative Extension Connect*, P.O. Box 830918, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Lincoln, NE 68583-0918. We’ll do the rest. Thanks.

Name: _____

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Norfolk teachers use Navigator technology

A pilot training program in the Norfolk Public School District is expected to better help teachers put technology to work, said a University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension educator.

Dewey Teel, extension educator in Antelope County, said extension's Master Navigator program will expand information access for teachers and students.

"There's going to be increased knowledge in technology and how to use it," Teel said. "In turn they will be able to access information that they'll use in the classroom."

Master Navigator participants agree to teach others the technology skills they learn. Norfolk's pilot program began in 2001 with nine selected teachers taking the training. Then they taught what they learned to 67 other teachers.

Tom McConnell, the school district's technology coordinator, said teachers are finding that information from the Web allows them to broaden their range of teaching.

"It gives us an opportunity to reach places we otherwise couldn't reach," he said. "It widens the world."

Vicky Jones, extended education coordinator for NU's Lifelong Learning Center in Norfolk, originally proposed the project. She said the Master Navigator training will help the district move toward its goal of having 60 percent of all Norfolk Public School teachers integrate technology in the classroom within five years.

Teel expects similar programs to start in schools across Nebraska.

"We've got materials ready to go for other schools that want to participate," he said. "We're ready to market it to other schools."

— **Lori McGinnis**

Teel can be contacted at (402) 887-5414; Jones at (402) 370-4003.

Insects provide clues for unsolved crimes

Learning about insects has changed how some law enforcement officers investigate unsolved deaths, said Fred Baxendale, University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension entomologist.

By learning the biological cycles and habitats of certain insects through Baxendale's forensic entomology training, officers can analyze and interpret information at a crime scene to determine such factors as time and place of death.

Lincoln Police Department Sgt. Larry Barksdale said the information also assists officers in corroborating witness or suspect stories, and identifying victims whose dental records cannot be matched.

"DNA testing can be done on insects

found with a body to discover more about the victim," Barksdale said. "Non-native insects found with a victim can indicate if the body was moved after death. Forensic entomology helps give us a baseline to start from."

Fifteen LPD officers who completed the basic forensic entomology workshop all had positive comments about it, Barksdale said.

Baxendale and Leon Higley, another NU entomology professor, are planning a fall forensic entomology workshop covering specimen collection, photography, searching for insect evidence not found with the body, and more.

Baxendale and Higley also provide training for the Lancaster County Sheriff's office and would like to eventually offer workshops for the Nebraska State Patrol, medical examiners and funeral home directors, Baxendale said.

— **Barbara Rixstine**

Baxendale can be contacted at (402) 472-2123.



NU Cooperative Extension Entomologist Fred Baxendale (right), and Lincoln Police Department Sgt. Larry Barksdale examine insect specimens while discussing forensic entomology, which helps law enforcement identify and interpret crime scene information.

Plant Disease Central empowers users in fighting pathogens

Diagnosing plant diseases in Nebraska's field crops can be tricky, said Jim Stack, University of Nebraska plant pathologist. Often by the time symptoms appear, treatment is ineffective or too costly. Other times, symptoms are so similar it's difficult to even identify the pathogen.

Enter Plant Disease Central, an NU Cooperative Extension Web site Stack developed to help producers, crop consultants and other agricultural professionals diagnose and manage major crop diseases.

Last fall Mark Hinze, Juniata, a certified agronomist with Precision Management and Consulting, sought out the site at pdc.unl.edu to identify certain corn stalk rots.

Hinze said he was very impressed with the Web site's organization, color pictures and detail.

"It provided more information than I needed. There's an array of networking information," Hinze said.

Stack conceived the idea for the site after epidemics of gray leaf spot and anthracnose infested Nebraska cornfields in 1997-1999, and he found himself repeatedly answering the same questions and describing the same situations to callers.

"All my time was consumed by this," said Stack, who realized a Web site could reach more people with more information than he could individually.

Almost 75 percent of Stack's callers can access the Web, and once he gets them started at Plant Disease Central they usually find ample information, he said.

Although some disease is a natural part of crop production, Stack said when conditions are right, plant pathogens quickly can take over and greatly reduce yields.

"You're putting out food — something is going to step to the table to consume it," he said.

The Web site catalogues Nebraska's major crops, pathogens affecting them, weather conditions that could spread disease, and management steps. It offers color photographs of disease symptoms and enlargements of microscopic organisms.

Weather and plant conditions for the Web site are monitored weekly by seven extension educators in central and western Nebraska. Andy Christiansen, extension educator in Hamilton County, checks for leaf-killing gray leaf spot at his corn plot and weather station five miles south of Aurora. He downloads data on leaf wetness, rainfall, temperature and humidity, evaluates disease progress, and e-mails the information to Stack's office to be posted to the Web.

Christiansen said information from the site can help producers decide to treat their crops in a more timely manner, or forego unnecessary treatments.

Hinze said he believes learning as much as possible about plant diseases is important.

"Knowledge is power in terms of management," Hinze said. "If you positively identify what the disease is, you know what to look for in the following years" and work to suppress or prevent it.

Stack has received positive comments about his Web site at agronomy meetings



Jim Stack

Adam Sparks, plant pathology technician at NU's South Central Research and Extension Center, downloads data into his laptop computer from a weather station located in a cornfield in mid-June. Electronic sensors in the weather station measure air temperature, leaf wetness and other factors, which Sparks then posts to the Plant Disease Central Web site.

in other states and even from the Middle East. He said the site, which is continually updated, won't replace his individual and group contacts.

"It will never be done — that's not an objective," said Stack, who expects future site additions to include disease information for Nebraska crops such as chicory, grapes and apples.

— Cheryl Alberts

Stack can be contacted at (402) 762-4435; Christiansen at (402) 694-6174.

Robot-building excites children into successfully solving problems

A new, science-based robot program from University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension has helped bolster the gifted student curriculum at Gretna and Louisville.

Robotix: Roving on Mars, a 4-H school enrichment program, made its debut in spring 2002. It is coordinated by Mark Simmons, 4-H extension associate for Douglas/Sarpy counties.

Students in fifth through eighth grades spent 45 minutes a week for five weeks assembling battery-operated robots from small interlocking plastic pieces and wheels, Simmons said.

During the first class, students use blueprints to build robots that move forward, backward, left and right. In subsequent classes, students program robots to pick up ping-pong balls, spin and climb stairs, all without blueprints. At the end of each class students disassemble the robots and start from scratch the next week.

Although teachers assist students, Simmons is the main instructor.

"My goal is for the kids to get some experience with robots, but more important is learning life skills" such as creativity and thinking through problems, Simmons said. "When something clicks, they're pretty excited with their successes. They've had a lot of fun with it."

Rhonda Sparks, who teaches gifted students at Gretna Middle School, said she used Robotix to teach creative problem-solving. She said her fifth- and sixth-graders continually wanted to improve their robots, even if it meant coming in after school to do it. She also appreciated how Simmons worked with her own philosophies and curriculum to achieve her goals.

"I highly recommend Robotix to other teachers," Sparks said.

Linda Behrns, gifted program coordinator at Louisville Public Schools, brought the class to her seventh- and eighth-graders.

"The kids have been really chal-

lenged and frustrated," she said. "But it's been very enriching and really helps them to problem-solve."

Two of Behrns' former eighth-graders said the program helped them learn how widely robots are used in daily life.

"It was cool learning how robots are a part of everything," Jacqui Gist said. Building robots helped her think about how things work, she added.

Brandy Schram agreed, and described Robotix as "awesome."

"It made you realize what you use robots for. They're more important than I thought they were," Schram said.

Because student and teacher enthusiasm is so high, Simmons plans to contact more southeast Nebraska schools about using extension's robot program.



Lori McGinnis

Mark Simmons, 4-H Cooperative Extension associate for Douglas/Sarpy counties, teaches a science-based robotics course that challenges fifth- through eighth-graders to develop life skills such as creative problem-solving.

"Students don't even realize they also are developing life skills," Simmons said. "They've practiced cooperation, problem-solving, and planning and organization, but in their minds they've just enjoyed building these robots."

— **Lori McGinnis**

Simmons can be contacted at (402) 444-7951.

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