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Using Blogs to Disseminate Information in the Turfgrass Industry

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Abstract: The ability to provide regional information to turfgrass professionals in a timely format can help them avoid potential problems. While traditional, hard-copy based Extension materials can provide a wealth of information, the ability to communicate brief yet current updates can be invaluable. Two Web-based blogs were developed to provide information to turfgrass managers on a local (iaTURF) and international level (Turf Diseases). Data indicated that the blogs reached an average of 34.9 to 148.4 people per day. The use of blogs is an effective means to deliver timely information to a geographically diverse and large number of turfgrass managers.

Introduction

Disseminating information is a key component of Extension. Turfgrass Extension programs have traditionally disseminated information through site visits, newsletters, Extension bulletins, meetings, seminars, and field days. In addition, Extension offices located in each county or region provide a local presence and emphasize direct contact, networking, and interaction with the people seeking information.

However, shifting organizational structure within Extension along with the abundance of information available on the Internet is changing the way information is disseminated as well as the way people seek information.

Many Extension programs are using Internet sites and computer-based technologies to disseminate information (Mayfield, Wingenbach, & Chamlers, 2006; High & Jacobson, 2005; Rost & VanDerZanden, 2002; Harrison, Kanade, & Toney, 2004; LaBorde, 2003; Kraft, 2004). The hope in using these technologies is to extend Extension programs to new audiences who tend to glean much of their information from online sources. Meanwhile, the people seeking information still value conversation, networking, and interaction. This human element of getting to know the person behind the information is often critical in determining where people seek information (Coates, 2002). Weblogs, more commonly referred to as "blogs," have the potential to effectively disseminate information to large audiences while still providing many of the traditional benefits of personalized Extension contacts.

Advantages of Using Blogs

A blog is a type of website that displays regular updates or commentary listed in chronological order. Many sites offer free hosting services, such as Blogger, WordPress, and others. Content is mainly textual, but images and video are often incorporated along with additional interactive features such as chat, polls, and links to other websites and blogs. Blogs have the potential to change the way Extension agents communicate and offer many advantages as a vehicle for information dissemination.

- **Blogs provide timely, relevant information.** The information required by professionals in the turfgrass industry changes frequently. Because blogs are easily updated, they can be used to filter information to match what is relevant at the time. After all, information is only useful if people can find what they need when they need it.
- **Blogs promote conversation.** Blogs offer the capability to leave comments. Readers can respond with questions and additional information and offer feedback on a particular topic.
- **The impact of the content can be tracked.** Tracking impact is vital to assessing the effectiveness of disseminated information. The impact of information delivered via blogs can be tracked with Web analytics programs, which record numerous metrics (Patton and Kaminski, 2010).
- **Blogs create relationships.** Most blogs allow the reader the opportunity to learn about the people contributing content and provide information not only about what a person knows, but what he or she values.
- **Blogs are easily integrated with other technologies.** Blogs support images, movies, and presentations, and can be paired with popular social networking media such as Facebook™, Twitter™, Feedburner, RSS (really simple syndication), and others. This integration allows the individual reader to obtain the information in a format that is best suited for them.

Challenges of Using Blogs

While blogs offer many advantages, there are obstacles that must be addressed.

- **Frequent updates require dedication.** Blogs are often perceived as fluid and constantly changing. This attribute is beneficial to the reader but can be a challenge to the people contributing information, especially given the seasonal nature of the turfgrass industry in some parts of the country. How frequently the information is updated depends on many factors, but the content will need to stay current in order to keep readers interested and coming back.
- **Availability and speed of Internet access.** Blogs are hosted on the Internet and require access to the Internet to view the information. In addition, blogs may be cumbersome to navigate depending on the Internet connection speed and the amount of pictures, videos, and presentations incorporated on the blog.
- **Preference for traditional methods.** Despite the popularity of new technology, there will always be a segment that prefers traditional methods of information dissemination. This market, however, continues to decrease with new technology and within younger generations.

Examples of Blogs for the Turfgrass Industry

Two turfgrass blogs were created in 2009 in order to disseminate information to the turfgrass industry. Below are a brief description and the intended scope of each blog.

iaTURF: A Glimpse of All Things Green <www.iaurf.blogspot.com>. This blog is managed by individuals from Iowa State University. The goal of iaTURF is to provide turfgrass professionals in Iowa and the Midwest with a convenient way to communicate and collaborate with peers, industry professionals, and educators. The blog has multiple contributors, including university professors, industry representatives and vendors, golf course superintendents, and students. The iaTURF blog posts topics on a wide range of subjects related to managing turfgrass and other industry-related issues. Content is posted as information becomes available and in order to keep turfgrass managers informed on current topics. The length of each post is governed, keeping with the idea that obtaining information from the iaTURF blog is quick and convenient.

Turf Diseases: Golf Course Disease Updates by University Professors <www.turfdiseases.blogspot.com>. The Turf Diseases blog was established to provide golf course superintendents in the United States (U.S.) timely updates about current problems within five geographic regions. Weekly updates are provided by one of five turfgrass pathologists representing the following regions of the U.S.: Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, West, and South Central. While each region is assigned an update on a specific day of the week, weekend posts were initiated in 2010 to provide updates for a growing international audience. Updates include short snippets of information about current disease problems, control recommendations, weather trends, and similar relevant information for professional turfgrass managers. Information is presented in an easyâ™ to-read and simplified format that includes images, videos, and limited text to make the experience enjoyable, but informational for the reader.

Impact and Findings

Each blog uses Google™ Analytics in order to track various metrics (Table 1). During the periods tracked for each blog, the average time spent on iaTURF and Turf Diseases was 68 and 133 seconds, respectively. In addition, a total of 17,903 visits were recorded for iaTURF, and 38,878 visits were recorded for Turf Diseases. Although not reported in the metrics, a greater portion of visits occurs between the spring and fall months, when turfgrass management is at its peak. Typical of what is expected for an online community, only 1.7 to 2.9% of the visitors used dial-up Internet connections to visit the site. Surprisingly, a similar number of people accessed iaTURF (2.4%) and Turf Diseases (5.5%) via mobile devices compared with dial-up Internet connections.

Table 1.
Impact of Two Blogs as Measured by Google™ Analytics

	iaTURF ¹	Turf Disease Updates ²
Site Usage		
Average time on site (in seconds)	68	133
Visits	17,903	38,878
Page views	26,929	76,951
Visitor Information		
New visitors	38.1%	41.9%
Returning visitors	61.9%	58.1%
Average pages per visit	1.5	1.98
Internet Connection Speed		
High speed	74.6%	79.1%
Dial-up	2.9%	1.7%
Other/unknown	22.5%	19.2%
Mobile ³	2.4%	5.5%
Traffic Sources		
Direct traffic	46.1%	27.1%
Referring sites	35.4%	31.2%
Search engines	18.5%	27.3%
Other	0.02%	14.4%
¹ Data was obtained between 24 June 2009 and 19 Sept 2010. ² Data was obtained between 1 Jan and 19 Sept 2010. ³ Visits to each blog via mobile devices are included within "Other/Unknown" Internet connect speed data.		

The ability to extend content to new users in an effort to reach a larger audience can be a challenging task for a newly developed blog. In the case of iaTURF and Turf Diseases, 46.1 and 27.1% of the users visited the website as direct traffic, respectively. The remainder of the visitors to each blog were directed by their referring sites (31.2 to 35.4%), via search engines such as Google and Bing (18.5 to 27.3%), or by other unknown methods (0.02 to 14.4%).

Visitors to the Turf Diseases blog represented 49 of 50 states within the U.S. as well as the District of Columbia. States with the largest number of visitors included Pennsylvania (3731), New York (2352), North Carolina (2352), and California (1997). It is likely that the promotion of the site by individual blog authors and/or at regional state meetings influenced the traffic from individual states. While a majority of visitors to the Turf Diseases blog were from the U.S. (33,039), nearly 6,000 visitors were from 117 other countries or territories (Figure 1).

The vast majority of visitors to the iaTURF blog originated from Iowa and the Upper Midwest Region of the U.S. (Figure 2). The state of Iowa and its six neighboring states comprised 52.2 and 23.9% of the visits, respectively. The remainder of the U.S. accounted for 23.9% of the traffic to the iaTURF site. The desire of the authors to manage the content of the iaTURF site to a Midwest audience is reflected by the concentration of traffic in that region.

Figure 1.

Geographic Distribution of Visitors to the Turf Disease Updates Blog Between 1 January and 19 September 2010. A Total of 38,878 Visits from 118 Countries/Territories Were Recorded During This Period.

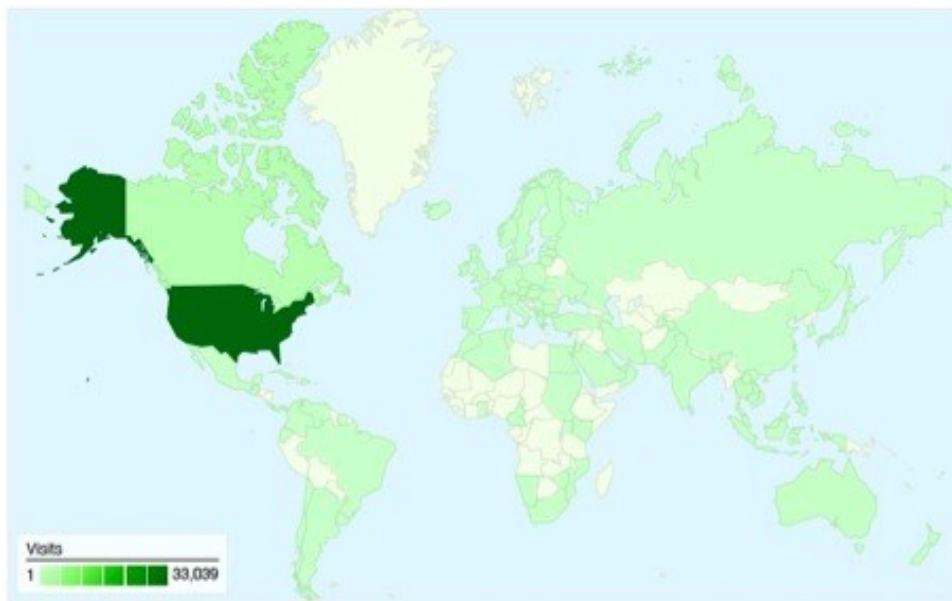
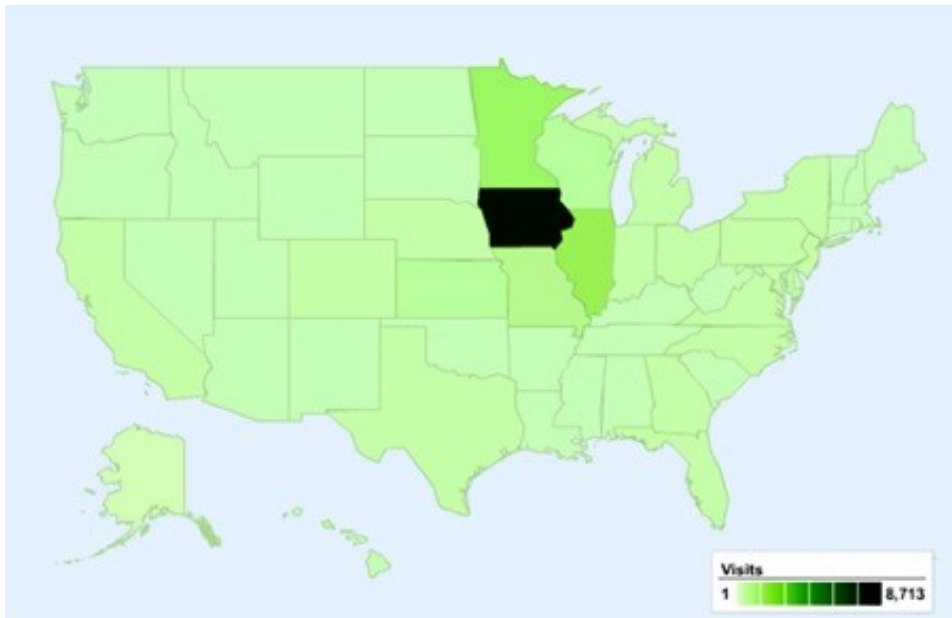


Figure 2.

Geographic Distribution of Visitors to the iaTURF Blog Between 24 June 2009 and 19 Sept 2010. A Total of 16,695 Visits from 50 States and the District of Columbia Were Recorded During This Period.



Discussion and Conclusion

Traditional hard-copy based Extension updates have been the standard for delivering relevant information to the end user; however, the use of Web-based media continues to increase. While the development of new Extension materials can be a difficult task, the use of blogs to provide brief but timely information can make it easier for both the author and the reader. A benefit of this format is the ability to deliver quick, relevant information to end users in a variety of formats. Blogs do present challenges, including the cyclical nature of visits by season and the preference by some for traditional Extension based methods.

Analytics from two blogs designed for the turfgrass industry indicate that between 34.9 and 148.4 people visited the sites per day. The continual source of visits may reflect the timely, fluid nature of the content. This is in contrast with traditional Extension-based materials, which tend to be more static. While on the site, readers spent an average of 1 to 2 minutes reading content. The time readers spend on each site may partially be due to the authors intentionally limiting the amount of content to cater to turfgrass professionals' busy schedules. These results indicate a need to continue to provide brief but relevant information in a timely manner.

Another benefit of developing blog content is the potential to reach a larger number of individuals. For instance, the introduction of international updates to the Turf Diseases site was initiated in response to traffic from countries other than the United States. Blog developers must also pay attention to the factors driving traffic to their respective sites. While many visitors to the iaTURF and Turf Diseases blogs reached the sites directly, 53.9 and 62.9% of the visitors found the blogs by some other means. Both iaTURF and Turf Diseases utilize Facebook as a vehicle to reach additional readers. Since pairing the blogs, Facebook has accounted for 15.6 and 9.4% of the referrals for iaTURF and Turf Diseases, respectively. This data indicates the power of integrating these blogs with social media sites as well as the importance of gaining referrals from other subject-related websites.

The ability to integrate blog content with other social media outlets gives the end user the ability to select which format or delivery method best suits his or her social media use habits. The use of blogs makes it

easier to share relevant content in a timely fashion and increases the ability of Extension to reach a larger audience. While the development of a blog can be an effective resource, the dissemination of the blog content to a variety of social media sites will be an important consideration to increase awareness and deliver content in a format appropriate for a wide range of end users.

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