Expanding the audience of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Cindy Sickbert Blobaum
Kiwanis Riverview Nature Island

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Abstract
The Southwest Iowa Educational Delivery Team set out to increase awareness of sustainable agriculture principles and of the Leopold Center.

Keywords
Human systems, demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
Agricultural Education

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Expanding the audience of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Background
The Southwest Iowa Educational Delivery Team set out to increase awareness of sustainable agriculture principles and of the Leopold Center. They tried two different strategies; one was the distribution of educational placemats and the other was public service announcements (PSAs) for broadcast media. The team’s objective was to provide urban and rural citizens with information about their connection to agricultural practices and the need to practice and support sustainable agriculture methods such as those researched and promoted by the Leopold Center.

Results and discussion
Placemat project. In late 1994 and early 1995, the Southwest Iowa Educational Delivery Team designed, produced, and distributed educational placemats featuring information on sustainable agriculture appropriate for adults and children. A total of 160,000 placemats were printed; 130,000 were given out in the initial effort, and 30,000 copies remained with team members to distribute on request to replenish supplies or use for promotional activities in 1995. The placemats were provided to 42 different food service operations (including restaurants, caterers, schools, and banquettes) in five southwest Iowa counties between November 1994 and January 1995.

After distribution, the restaurant owners/operators received a survey with questions about their opinion of the placemat, their clientele, and how to best produce and distribute future placemats. Twenty of the 42 food service vendors (48 percent) responded to the survey. Eleven used placemats and eight used them at every meal setting. Asked to choose words to describe the placemats, the most frequent choices were educational (14), attractive (11), fun (11), and interesting (10). The size of the placemats (8 1/2 by 11 inches) was deemed "just right" by 70 percent of the group, with just a few users wishing for a larger-sized placemat.

The bulk of the restaurants owners responding to the survey said that their operation was located in their town’s business district rather than close to an Interstate highway. The largest categories of patrons were farmers, senior citizens, and local business people. All 20 respondents said that they would like to use the placemats again, and would prefer to have a new design appear every two to three months. Most of the restaurants indicating that they would like to continue the placemat project were located in rural areas. Team members noted that it was more difficult to deliver the placemats to urban locations, and that those owners were less likely to return the survey form.

Asked if they were previously aware of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 18 of 20 respondents said no. When queried about the initial impressions of the Leopold Center following use of the placemats, 11 of those answering said their impressions were positive and four were somewhat positive.

One restaurant using the placemats allowed the team to send surveys to its customers. One hundred surveys were mailed and 20 were returned. Seventeen of those responding were not aware of the Leopold Center before seeing the placement, and the majority of those did not form a concrete impression of the Center from being exposed to the placemat. The respondents were mainly rural residents directly involved in agriculture.
cated that the placemat helped start conversations about farms and food production. Asked if they keep current on agricultural issues, seven said that they pay some attention to news reports while five avidly seek out information. As a means of information distribution, the respondents found any/all placemats to be interesting (11), educational (10), fun (9), and a good way to reach new audiences (7). When asked whether they or their children learned anything by reading the placemats, 13 said yes. Fewer attitudes were altered though, as 11 answered no when asked if any of their perspectives about farmers or agriculture were changed.

A placemat responder survey for those persons who requested more information was developed to help evaluate the project. Unfortunately the return response for the coupon printed on the placemats was not good. Only four of the coupons were returned. Three were from schoolchildren, and one was from the chairperson of a Farm Bureau Homemakers Club who was quite enthusiastic about the project.

**PSA project.** Six public service announcements (PSAs) were written, recorded, and distributed to area radio stations in October 1994. In a survey of the stations, it was found that the PSAs were rarely played and generated no known responses.

**Conclusions**

Based on feedback from restaurant owners, the response to the educational placemats about sustainable agriculture was positive. The Educational Delivery Team members generated enough additional ideas to design a second placemat. Production and distribution methods are in place so that further use of placemats as an educational tool would be efficient and relatively trouble-free. With survey results in hand showing that rural restaurants are most interested in continuing to use the placemats, and information on the demographics of their clientele, it will be easier to target the information and appearance to appeal to the most likely audiences.

(Despite the interest in continuing the placemat project by developing new placemat designs, the project was concluded because project leader Cindy Sickbert Blobaum relocated to central Iowa.)

For more information contact Cindy Blobaum, 1210 37th Street, Des Moines, Iowa 50311-2707.

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