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Consumer-Centered Extension Education Website Increases Usage

Abstract

Concern about young families' ability to cope with rising food prices resulted in creating Spend Smart. Eat Smart (SSES), a website focused on budgetfriendly nutrition information for limited resource audiences (LRA). SSES was redesigned using LRAs needs and preferences to increase use by LRAs. SSES usage increased after it was revised to incorporate interactivity and more consumerfriendly design elements.

Disciplines

Community-Based Learning | Family, Life Course, and Society | Food Science | Growth and Development | Human and Clinical Nutrition

Comments

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Abstract: *Concern about young families' ability to cope with rising food prices resulted in creating Spend Smart. Eat Smart (SSES), a website focused on budget-friendly nutrition information for limited resource audiences (LRA). SSES was redesigned using LRAs needs and preferences to increase use by LRAs. SSES usage increased after it was revised to incorporate interactivity and more consumer-friendly design elements.*

Introduction

Spend Smart, Eat Smart (SSES) <<http://www.extension.iastate.edu/foodsavings/>>, a unique website providing budget-friendly nutrition information for limited resource audiences (LRA), was developed for LRAs ages 18-40 years. When 6-month usage data indicated most SSES viewers were not this demographic, website revision was undertaken. Social marketing theory (SMT) principals guided the revision process by addressing the identified needs and preference assessments of LRAs ages 25-40 years (Francis, Martin, & Taylor, 2011)

SMT is used to direct health program development because the target audience is involved throughout the process (Lefebvre & Rochlin, 1997). SMT is a cyclic process made up of six steps: 1) planning and strategy, 2) selecting channels and materials, 3) developing materials and pretesting, 4) implementation, 5) assessing effectiveness, and 6) using feedback to revise the program (1). Each step is needed in producing effective client-centered curriculum. The data presented here address SMT Step 5 (assessing effectiveness).

Methods

Effectiveness of the website revisions was assessed through online lesson participation, polling responses, and usage data tracked by WebTrends, a tool that does not allow the collection of sociodemographic information. This project was IRB exempt.

Description of SSES Revisions

SSES originally consisted of primarily print-style education materials accessible through an online format with less prominent search tabs placed at top (Figures 1a-1d). SSES was redesigned targeting LRAs age 25-40 and incorporating interactivity and more consumer-friendly design elements. Basic changes included a creative use of color and graphics, including a new logo. Additionally, the homepage was redesigned to encourage viewer participation in SSES social media endeavors like the SSES blog (previous blog posts appear on the homepage), Facebook, Twitter, and Ask an Expert. Each of these social media outlets conveys similar messages promoting eating well on a budget.

Figure 1a.

Original SSES Homepage



Figure 1b.
Revised SSES Homepage



Figure 1c.
Original SSES Content Page

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
University Extension

Home Plan Shop Prepare Blog search

**Spend Smart.
Eat Smart.**

PRINT PAGE
EMAIL PAGE
ADD TO DELICIOUS
TWITTER

planning to shop

- figure your food dollar
- meal planning
- make a list
- when to shop
- where to buy

shopping the store

- smart shopping
- convenience foods
- reading labels
- unit pricing
- aisle by aisle
 - ▶ bread
 - ▶ dairy
 - ▶ meat
 - ▶ fruit
 - ▶ vegetables

preparing meals

- fast food for families
- food at home
- eating out
- recipes & snacks
- after shopping
- leftovers & food waste

Planning to Shop

When the money gets tight, it is important to know what resources your family has and be creative using them. Resources include assets such as: time, money, energy, knowledge and skills.

When *money is plentiful* people don't pay much attention to what they put in their grocery carts and it is easier to eat healthy.

When *money is tight*, spending less at the store often means taking the time and effort to plan menus, review grocery ads for specials and cook more at home.

Everyone wants to save money when they shop. The best way to save money is to plan ahead. When you plan before you shop you can save money and get the foods your family needs for good health.

Before you shop:

- Think about some of the meals you will make.
- Look at what you have on hand.
- Write a list of what you need to buy.

According to the University of New Hampshire, the four rules of effective food shopping can save 15% at the grocery store:

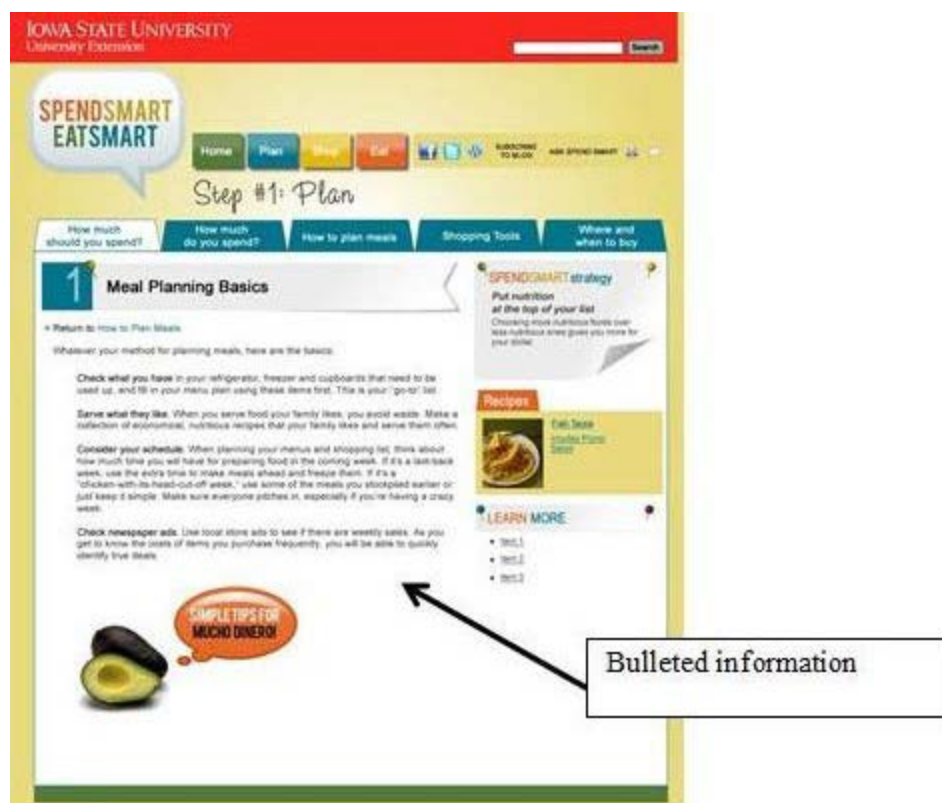
- using grocery store ads when planning to shop
- completing a [menu plan](#)
- writing a [grocery list](#)
- using [unit pricing](#) to select the best buys.

If your family usually spends **\$500 a month** on groceries that would mean you could save **\$75 a month**. Saving that much would require that someone in your household puts more time and skill into planning and comparing prices.

SMART PLANNING
Are you spending a reasonable amount of money on food?
FIND OUT →

Figure 1d.

Revised SSES Content Page



Ease of navigation, an identified need and preference, was addressed by using:

- More bulleted information
- Concise search tabs across the top and the right-hand side
- Embedded flash video on the homepage emphasizing the three search tabs: plan, shop, eat.

These words (plan, shop, eat) convey the identified learning needs of LRAs, including how to: save money, make healthy food choices, and prepare food. "Plan" includes budgeting, menu planning, and other shopping tools. "Shop" provides information such as aisle-by-aisle tips, unit cost, and label reading. Finally, "Eat" offers information for organizing the kitchen, healthy cooking, and recipes.

SSes interaction was promoted through online lessons, polls, and recipes. Two lessons were created using a voice-over format in PowerPoint targeting the two leading identified nutrition topics of interest, label reading and unit cost. Both topics were placed under the heading "Shop." Lesson interaction was measured with the number of viewers as well as the number of viewers who completed at least one quiz question. Polling questions were also added to encourage interaction. The chosen questions were designed to provide the EFNEP/FNP director information regarding

food purchasing, eating practices, and nutrition information of viewers, which were then addressed later in the weekly SSES blog. Polling questions are changed bi-monthly.

Additionally, during the needs and preference assessment LRAs requested recipes with nutrition information and wanted the ability to provide feedback (Francis, Martin, & Taylor, 2011). The original SSES provided recipes that were selected based on cost, nutritional value, and preparation time. The revised SSES includes these original recipe components but made the recipe portion more interactive. Under the "Eat" section, short cooking demonstration videos were added for select recipes. Additionally, WordPress with a recipe plug-in, was chosen as the recipe interface because it allowed viewers an opportunity to comment on the recipes. Each recipe has a nutrition facts label included.

Results

Recruiting

SSES launched in February 2009. Viewing statistics from August 2009 to July 2010 indicated about 74,334 visits and increased to 87,278 after the revised SSES launched (August 2010-July 2011); these numbers do not distinguish between first-time or repeat viewers (Figure 2a). Similarly, as shown in Figure 2b, the number of blog subscribers increased from July 2010 (1,255 subscribers) to July 2011 (1,818 subscribers). Traditional print materials (posters with tear-off recipe cards and/or QR codes and flyers) continue to be used to promote SSES because this was the preferred method reported by LRAs (Francis, Martin, & Taylor, 2011). Since the revision, marketing efforts have better targeted agencies serving LRAs (e.g., Food Assistance and WIC offices, etc.).

Figure 2a.

SSES Website Usage

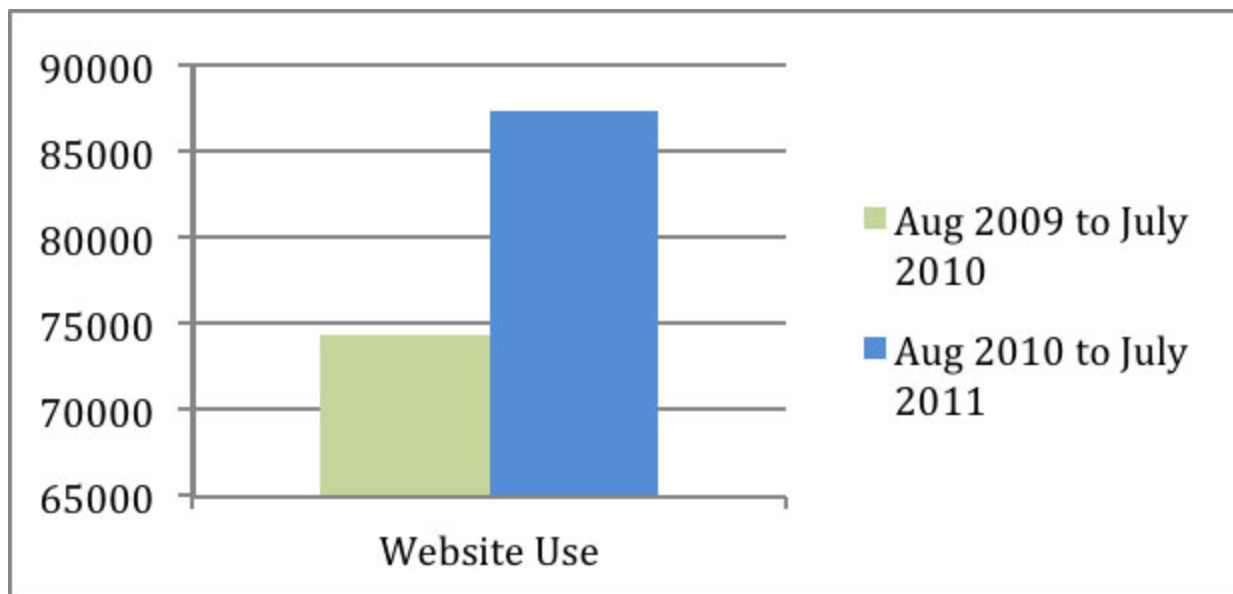


Figure 2b.
SSES Blog Usage



Usage

"Label Reading for Health" was viewed by 748 people, while "Choosing the Best Deal" (unit cost) was viewed by 885; however, only 231 people provided demographic information (Table 1). One hundred forty-eight (19.8%) label-reading viewers answered Question 1 (asked at the end), indicating the lesson was watched for 10 minutes. Two-hundred thirty-nine (27%) unit-cost viewers answered Question 1 (appeared throughout the lesson), indicating the lesson was watched for at least 2 minutes. Viewers correctly answered three out of six questions (50%) on the label-reading quiz and 9 out of 11 (82%) of the unit-cost questions.

Eight poll questions have been posted since August 2010, resulting in 1,247 votes.

Some questions have included: 1. What grocery store do you shop at most often?, 2. What you think saves you the most money?, 3. What price range qualifies as "cheap" when it comes to making a meal for a family of four?

Table 1.

Demographics of Lesson Viewers^a

	Label Reading (N=117)	Unit Cost (N=114)
Gender		
Male	5 (4.3%)	24 (21.1%)
Female	112 (95.7%)	90 (78.9%)
< 40 years old	40 (34.2%)	54 (47.0%)
EFNEP/FNP Eligible	34 (29%)	54 (27%)
^a Total viewers reporting demographic information was 231		

Summary and Implications for Extension

Recruiting and usage data do suggest the revised SSES is being used more frequently than the original SSES. However, the limited number of viewers providing sociodemographic information through the online quizzes makes it difficult to ascertain if SSES is being used by the target audience. This was anticipated because the needs and preference assessment discovered LRAs are not comfortable providing sociodemographic information online.

Additionally, online lesson participation indicates this form of education is well-received, suggesting this as a potential Extension educational strategy. When developing an Extension education website, following the below suggestions may lead to higher participation and better results.

1. Involve the target audience throughout the development process.
2. Create a layout that is searchable and visually appealing.
3. Incorporate interactive features and social media components.

4. Develop online lessons that are relevant and of interest to the target audience and the include quiz questions throughout.

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