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Engagement and Outreach with Amish Audiences

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Abstract

The Amish are a religious subculture who make their living mainly from small diversified livestock farms and small businesses. Water quality problems occur on many Amish farms. With a USDA-CSREES grant, the Ohio State University Extension (OSUE) began teaching and engaging 240 Amish families in three communities to encourage using best management practices (BMPs) to improve water quality. Education techniques included farm visits, newsletters, educational meetings, soil and manure testing, demonstration plots, well testing, and stream monitoring. OSUE professionals also worked to increase Amish awareness of food preservation and food safety issues. Outcomes included a gain in knowledge, changes in attitudes, adoption of certain BMPs (75% to 90%) to improve water quality, and increased awareness of food preservation and food safety issues. This paper outlines the techniques OSUE used to engage this unique audience.

Introduction

Major colleges and universities are seeking to expand their knowledge base and to engage new audiences. Many of these new audiences have their own unique culture that researchers and faculty need to experience and understand before they can effectively interact with them. Lynton *(1995, 11)* says that "internal benefits of outreach by strong faculty engagement in outreach is needed by the university as much as it is by its societal partners." He also stated that "evaluation of an individual's work requires a rich and inclusive documentation that captures the full extent of process and outcomes. Such a documentation is possible by means of a portfolio of pertinent materials combining an explanatory personal statement with illustrative work samples and products. Each part should reinforce and illuminate the other" *(1995, 13)*. The following is a case study of how the Ohio State University Extension (OSUE) learned to engage local Amish communities on water quality and food safety issues.

Working with the Amish can be challenging, rewarding, and frustrating! The Amish, because of their religion and cultural differences, tend to separate themselves from the non-Amish "English" world. Because of this belief in separation from the English world,

they have traditionally resisted cooperating with local governmental agencies and educational institutions *(Hoorman 2000a)*. The Amish have many problems in common with their English counterparts, but they also have many unique problems related to their culture and lifestyle. There are many opportunities for professionals to engage this group for the mutual benefit of both Amish and English communities.

The Amish are considered an underserved audience of the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) because of their religion, unique subculture, and a very low level of participation in federal and state government programs. OSUE applied for water quality grant money from the USDA-Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (USDA-CSREES) to engage the Amish. The major objectives of three funded water quality grants were:

1. To educate Amish on use of Best Management Practices (BMPs) to improve water quality.
2. To conduct soil and manure testing to document nutrient management problems and develop nutrient management plans for individual Amish farms to improve water quality.
3. To use demonstration plots utilizing poultry manure produced from two large local layer and pullet operations to promote optimum crop production on Amish farms without harming the environment.
4. To collect and analyze well water samples from Amish homes and farms to document drinking water contamination. Recommend remedial action to improve drinking water quality.
5. To conduct biological and chemical monitoring on major streams in the Amish communities to measure improvement in water quality with changes in Amish farming practices *(Hoorman 2000b)*.

The Family Nutrition Program (FNP) teaches basic nutrition, food safety, and food resource management to food stamp participants and to eligible nonparticipants in the food stamp program. The Amish are considered eligible nonparticipants because they are a low-income audience with large families. The goal is for participants to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes, and changed behavior necessary for maximizing resources to achieve nutritionally sound diets. A major objective is for the Amish to use recommended food and kitchen safety and sanitation practices for handling, preparing, and storing food for a safer food supply.

Understand Your Audience: Amish Background and Culture

The first step in working with a new audience is to understand its background and culture. Hostetler *(1993)* reports that approximately 70 percent of the Amish live in three states: Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. The Holmes/Wayne County, Ohio, Amish settlement is the largest in the world, followed by Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Elkhart/LaGrange County, Indiana *(Kraybill 2001)*. There are numerous smaller Amish communities scattered throughout the Midwest. The current Amish population is estimated at 192,000. The larger Anabaptist population (Amish, Brethren, Hutterite, and Mennonite) is estimated to number over 850,000 *(Kraybill 2001)*. Each decade the Amish population has increased by 30 to 48 percent *(Hostetler 1993)*, so this audience is growing quite rapidly.

> *"The Amish have . . . many unique problems related to their culture and lifestyle."*

There are at least sixty-five and perhaps as many as seventy-five affiliations and subgroups of Amish culture *(Kraybill and Olshan 1994)*. Over 90 percent of the Amish are affiliated with one of four major groups: Swartzentruber, Andy Weaver, Old Order, and New Order *(Donnermeyer 1997)*. The four groups range from extremely conservative (Swartzentruber) to progressive (New Order). All four groups share a common Amish religious background but differ in their distinctive local practices (Ordnung). The Amish faith is based on a literal interpretation of the Bible. In their own words the Amish say: "The Bible, or word, is divinely-inspired, infallible, the ultimate revelation of God, and the only and final authority for all mankind"*(Truth in Word 1983, 6–7)*. Although not in fellowship with each other, the four groups share similar Amish beliefs such as separation from the world, emphasis on humility and simplicity, excommunication, and selective use of technology. However, the Amish are a diverse and dynamic society *(Kreps, Donnermeyer, and Kreps 1997)*.

OSUE has been working with 240 families in three distinct Amish communities in northwest central Ohio since 1997. This includes two communities of Old Order and one community of New Order Amish. Each community had distinct religious and cultural barriers to overcome in order to solve water quality problems and food issues in their communities. When working with the Amish,

it is important to understand the differences and the limitations their culture places on them. The Old Order Amish are the more conservative and farming is their primary income. Farm size is typically 80 to 120 acres with corn, small grains, and forages raised as crops. Dairy and swine production are the major livestock enterprises. New Order Amish are more progressive and use milking machines, telephones, stationary tractors, and a limited amount of modern technology. Farming is a primary source of income for about 90 percent of the Old Order Amish while only one-third of the New Order Amish support their families primarily from farming. Other major nonfarm enterprises include sawmills, carpentry, cabinet and furniture shops, harness shops, baked goods, and quilting enterprises.

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These differences became important when new concepts and best management practices (BMPs) were introduced to reduce water quality problems in their community. For example, the New Order Amish readily adopted new grazing techniques to exclude livestock from local streams because they permit use of solar-operated batteries that can power temporary fencing. The Old Order Amish were slower to adopt this new technology because they do not permit any electricity and thus had to erect permanent fencing to keep livestock out of streams. Knowing the local history, background, and culture of any group is an important first step before working with these or any other unique culture.

Interacting with the Amish Community

Because they do not have telephones, televisions, radios, and cars, making contact with the Amish can be difficult. OSUE professionals learned to adapt educational materials and methods to accommodate their culture. To successfully engage the Amish, the educational program needs to be taken directly to them, at homes, farms, and businesses. This will require spending time visiting, socializing, and getting to know them. It is very important to develop trust within the Amish community. One of the best ways to understand their culture and their problems is to work side by side with them. OSUE professionals spent several days at local Amish community events such as barn raising, hay making, making ensilage,

corn husking, local auctions, and quilting bees. Participating in such events is the best way to learn more about Amish culture and problems they face, and to get to know important people in the their community. Since 1998, OSUE professionals in Hardin and Logan counties, Ohio, have made over 1,500 farm visits to more than 200 Amish homes. Since transportation may be a problem for them, one-on-one instruction works best for initial contact. Meeting with several Amish in small groups allows more time for individual questions and personalized attention to their concerns.

A key mistake that new professionals often make when dealing with the Amish for the first time is the assumption that if they put together an educational meeting, the Amish will automatically participate. Most Amish will not attend a meeting unless they first know something about the person conducting the program. Don't be discouraged if only one or two key Amish leaders attend an initial program. Typically, these respected leaders will report back to the Amish leadership about the program. If an educational program is scheduled, do it around their work schedule. One very successful educational meeting that OSUE conducted was held late at night in the summer after farm work was finished. More than fifty Amish farmers attended this meeting held in a small schoolhouse. Providing snacks is helpful in encouraging attendance. Rescheduling of meetings may be necessary if the weather or other events occur that limit Amish participation.

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Validators and Key Innovative Leaders

It is important to have local people who can validate your honesty, integrity, and goodwill. Expect the Amish to be extremely suspicious of your intentions initially. Most Amish people have local English friends who they interact with on a regular basis. Many of these English neighbors may buy Amish goods, and some provide transportation and telephone service for the Amish. These people can help validate your program and allay any initial suspicions about an educational program being initiated. Use local validators to introduce your program to key Amish innovators and Amish leaders in the community. Many of these English validators will

also have insights on local Amish problems. They can be asked to serve on local educational advisory committees for Amish programming if local Amish are not willing to serve.

Next, identify key innovators and respected leaders in each Amish community. These are people of good standing in the Amish community, and should be your first contact before attempting outreach and engagement with the Amish people. They should be a part of the educational process by helping to shape and define your educational program. If they can see the benefit of your program, you are much closer to conducting a successful program. If they have doubts, then you need to revise the program.

The conventional wisdom when dealing with the Amish has always been to discuss it with the local bishop. However, the bishop is usually selected from very conservative Amish leaders. If the conservative bishop does not understand your educational program or know you very well, he may find it easy to say no, which can be an impediment to the success of the program. It is important to have key innovative leaders in the Amish community who can talk to the bishop about your educational program. Bishops do not live in isolation and usually do not make decisions without first consulting with their people. It is helpful to have several key leaders who can speak positively about the purpose and validity of the educational program being conducted for the Amish people. It is important to select leaders who are respected, have good standing in the church, and are willing to speak up.

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Identify Problems in the Amish Community

To effectively engage in outreach with the local Amish community, it is important to identify local problems. Talk with your key leaders and validators. Some problems are easy to observe, but many may not be so easy to document. For example, for OSUE it was easy to see livestock standing in the streams, but it was harder to document soil fertility, nutrient management, and contaminated wells. Many of our preconceived ideas were found to be false. After numerous farm visits, discussions, and observations,

many water quality problems were observed, but the extent of the problem could not be verified without further testing. It is advisable to have an experienced professional collect the samples. A total of 920 soil and manure tests from eighty-nine Amish farms were collected by OSUE professionals from 1998 to 2001. Although this was time consuming, it allowed the professional to observe and document many more water quality problems and maintain better quality control than if the samples had been collected by the Amish farmers. It also gave the professionals more time for interaction with the Amish.

Early Success Stories

Start slow and grow the program. Begin with some early success stories. The word will spread quickly if you are successful, knowledgeable, and can help the Amish people. It is important to attempt to help them with whatever their problems might be, including those not related to the educational program you are trying to conduct, such as water quality. OSUE professionals spent many hours helping the Amish with growing fruits and vegetables, crop and livestock production, food safety and preservation, small business concerns, and farm safety. Because of the attention given to helping with other problems, the participation in water quality educational programs was high. It is important to cooperate with and help the Amish holistically. In return they will listen, participate, and adopt BMPs or practices that are being promoted.

OSUE's first success with the New Order Amish involved a key innovative leader. He was having trouble with insect pests in his hay crop. OSUE started a scouting program to identify major insect pests and made pesticide recommendations that saved him over $10 per acre and decreased several unnecessary chemical applications. He spread the word to his Amish neighbors who also began asking OSUE for help. OSUE was able to provide a valuable service that later opened the door to more positive educational programming.

Keep it Simple and Repeat the Message Often

With only an eighth-grade education, most Amish men and women have only a vague understanding of science. They use folklore and home remedies for many problems they do not understand. For example, of 191 Amish wells tested over a four-year period, 75 (39.3%) were found to be contaminated with total coliform bacteria and 17 (8.9%) were found to be contaminated with *E. coli (Hoorman 2001b)*. A common Amish remedy for cleaning a contaminated well is to treat the well with a cup of hydrogen

peroxide or a can of Vitamin C, neither of which is effective. Shock chlorination of wells with chlorine bleach is an effective way to clean a contaminated well. To be effective, these simple solutions need to be explained and repeated often. Rumors and home remedies need to be proven ineffective. Several wells have been tested and retested repeatedly for skeptical Amish homeowners. Many old Amish traditions and misguided beliefs need to be challenged with scientific proof. New information takes time to be accepted and utilized by the Amish before it will become a part of their culture and way of life.

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Without television and radio for entertainment, the Amish enjoy reading. A simple way to continuously reinforce the educational message has been to develop a monthly newsletter specifically designed for Amish audiences. The OSUE Amish newsletter covers many topics, including agricultural best management practices for Amish farms, crop and livestock production, and general farm management. For the women, the newsletter covers food preservation, food safety, recipes, and gardening. A coloring page appeals to young children, word puzzles with an educational theme are used for older children, and a special Question of the Week discusses indepth specific problems found on Amish farms. The Question of the Week also educates the Amish on simple science concepts such as understanding microorganisms (bacteria, fungi) and basic chemistry. Another section uses a humorous story line to identify problems and solutions to water quality problems commonly observed on Amish farms. The story shows how two neighbors (Old Uncle Joe and Young Tom) work together to solve water quality problems on their farms. This approach has been successful because it follows the traditions of Amish storytelling: it shows respect for elders, it emphasizes cooperation with neighbors and the community, and it's fun to read. The newsletter continually helps to reinforce the educational message and is designed for the entire family.

A key element of the newsletter is to educate children and young adults. The young people are the key to future change in the Amish culture because they are more open to change and are actively

seeking information. It will take several years for positive changes to occur in the water quality problems found in these communities. Young adult women are being taught to use proper sanitation procedures. The Amish understand the benefits to the health and well-being of their children from these programs. Participation in the well-testing program designed to clean contaminated wells has been high because of the concern for young children's welfare since they (especially babies) are the most susceptible to disease organisms found in contaminated drinking water. Many positive changes have been observed in only a few years as these children and young adults mature and start families of their own.

Look for Economic Incentives

Most Amish families are trying to make a living for their large families and survive on small livestock farms. To be successful, water quality programs need to be economical for the Amish to adopt, and also benefit both the Amish and the environment. An example of a common problem on many Amish farms was overgrazed permanent pastures that had high rates of soil erosion and were not productive. OSUE introduced the concept of rotational grazing, which allowed the grass to recover, doubled pasture yields, and also decreased soil erosion. Rotational grazing was also used to exclude livestock from streams, with over ten thousand feet of temporary fencing installed. Feed savings of up to $7,500 per farm have been documented on many hundred-acre dairy farms with twenty-five to forty dairy cows *(Hoorman 2001a)*. There was an economic benefit to the Amish community, so rotational grazing practices were quickly adopted. In fact, seventeen out of eighteen Amish farmers adopted this practice within two years in one Amish community, a rate of 94 percent. This change also helped the environment.

A free soil and manure testing program has been beneficial for Amish farmers and for OSUE researchers. Over 920 soil samples from 89 farms representing over 6,600 acres have been analyzed. Surprisingly, over 40 percent of the fields were found to be low in soil fertility, about 40 percent were in a good range, and almost 20 percent of the fields were found to be high in soil fertility due to excess application of manure nutrients. These high-fertility fields had a greater potential for surface runoff of manure nutrients. This information has been used to target educational programs to solve potential water quality problems on the farm and develop individual nutrient management plans to allocate manure nutrients

evenly over each Amish farm. This program saves the Amish money on fertilizer and shows them where manure nutrients should be applied to increase crop yields. It also helps keep the environment clean.

With several large English poultry layer operations located near the Amish communities, a large amount of poultry manure was available for fertilizer. Amish farmers utilize small amounts of commercial fertilizer and pesticides and prefer natural fertilizers and pest control methods. OSUE demonstration plots showed how poultry manure, a natural fertilizer, could be used on Amish farms to increase crop yields on low-fertility fields and still protect the environment. Approximately five to ten thousand acres of Amish farmland have been identified as low in soil fertility. This program benefits the English community because drinking water quality downstream is preserved and the Amish community benefits from higher yielding crops.

"The Amish will quickly communicate the program's benefits by word of mouth if it is well received."

Be Prepared and Let the Program Sell Itself

Once a program is implemented, expect to spend considerable time conducting a program for every Amish person who asks for help. Also, be prepared for setbacks and misunderstandings. Outside professional people will always be viewed suspiciously by some Amish, and they will react to anything that is initiated. Be prepared for rumors and react to them quickly. Be honest and explain your position, and let them decide for themselves what they will believe.

Once an educational program has been started, relax and let it flow. If the program is accepted, the Amish will participate. OSUE has documented success rates on adoption of certain BMPs from 75 to 90 percent. The Amish will quickly communicate the program's benefits by word of mouth.

Summary

Water quality and food safety problems occur on many Amish farms in Ohio. The Amish have a strong religious culture but a limited knowledge base. Professional educators need to be creative

and flexible in helping Amish audiences improve their knowledge and engage them in how to adapt their cultural practices to improve water quality and food safety problems. With targeted educational programs, OSUE is reaching out to the Amish community and engaging them in solving some of these problems. Working with Amish clientele is rewarding because they appreciate the improvements in their daily lives that come about through change. This case study shows how professionals can engage and reach out to culturally diverse audiences.

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