The Evolution of the Small Grains Website

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Repeated requests of small grain producers in Minnesota to provide better access to production information led to the idea to develop a library of information for the producers on the World Wide Web. This idea led to the development of the Small Grains website (http://www.smallgrains.org). The website’s goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of information pertaining to small grain production in Minnesota and surrounding states.

In 1995, at the start of the project, the World Wide Web was a new phenomenon and its usefulness and future were actively being debated. At the time, the University of Minnesota Extension Service opted to initially continue to use the gopher protocol rather than the World Wide Web. Furthermore, less than 5% of the target audience had access to the Internet. As participants of the Red River Trade Corridor’s ‘Agri-Industries Telecommunications Technology Demonstration Project’, supported by the USDA-CREES funding, the Minnesota Association of Wheat Growers and the state’s extension specialist jointly developed a website dedicated to wheat and barley production.

From the onset, the concept was to develop an all-inclusive site in which information from different services and sources, including markets and weather, were tied together. Using this approach the authors function as editors and content managers and provide the user with a ‘silver platter’ of information that otherwise would be scattered across different sites. This concept has since been referred to as a ‘portal’ and functions as the entry-point for users to the World Wide Web. The site has continued to evolve and grow since its inception and is currently in its fourth reincarnation. User statistics indicate that it not only serves its initial target audience but that the site has a much broader appeal and reach than the producers in the State of Minnesota.

Since 1995, the percentage of growers that have access to the Internet has grown to over 80% in Minnesota and more organizations, including the University of Minnesota Extension Service and other farmer groups have moved onto the Internet. In a relatively short time, the world has adapted a new form of communication and has created new standards by which extension educators are asked to provide service.

The author will share his experiences when publishing on the World Wide Web and building a presence of the Internet. The author’s experiences range from adapting existing publications, to creating new ways to disseminate information, as well as managing the computer infrastructure and dealing with organizational inertia to accept and adopt a new form of mass media. The author will attempt to put the development of the Internet in a perspective and how its development relates to doing the job as a state extension specialist and signal trends has he has observed and experienced them. Furthermore, the author will explain the benefits of working with a grower group, like the Minnesota Association of Wheat Growers, in the development of website dedicated to a single or few commodities.