



Green Beer and Witches Brew: Themed Pesticide Training

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Annually, pesticide license holders seek Continued Educational Units (CEUs) to maintain their state certification. Traditional educational methods used by County Extension offices occur in routine classroom settings. Many of the licensees are technology oriented and are choosing online training to acquire their CEUs. There is a need to attract licensee holders to return to the classroom setting. Objectives were: 1) to attract audiences to attend pesticide training; 2) increase knowledge by 20% from audiences attending themed trainings; and 3) build attendance in classroom settings by 25%. Two pesticide training classes were offered in Volusia County having Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” themes. Marketing efforts including Facebook, websites, email list serves, and print media. Holiday décor and descriptive food terms including “witches brew” and “green beer” were used to capture audiences. County agents and staff dressed in costume themed attire. Audience levels grew from the popularity of the themed programs with a 54.7% gain in attendance. Post-survey results revealed knowledge level gains of 22.4% and 21.2% after attending the Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” training, respectively. Overall, 76% (n=35) and 94% (n=64) of the Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” attendees, indicated they would attend a theme-style training again. Attendees also admitted that 69.7% and 76.9% felt confident to pass the certification test. Using theme-styled educational programming is an effective way to draw audiences that may not attend traditional classroom settings. Audiences responded positively to these creative learning programs. Volusia County themed pesticide trainings are becoming preferred options to obtain CEUs.

Volusia County has many licensed landscape pesticide applicators. Each year, licensed holders seek Continued Educational Units (CEUs) to increase industry knowledge and maintain their state certification. Many traditional education programs used by County Extension offices are often conventional and routine, resulting in declining classroom attendance or landscape professionals obtaining CEUs online. Therefore, increasing classroom participation and stimulating learning requires engaging classroom educational methods and enhanced marketing efforts. The objectives of this unique style of programming were to attract audiences to attend pesticide training, increase pesticide knowledge by 20% by attending themed trainings, build attendance in program settings by 25% and elevate the confidence level of attendees to pass the certification test.

Materials and Methods

The target audience was commercial, private and limited pesticide applicators, and lawn maintenance professionals, primarily in Volusia County, FL, with potential clients in the Central Florida area. In 2013, two six-hour pesticide training classes were offered in Volusia County having “Fangtastic” Halloween-training (31 Oct.) and “St. Paddy’s Day” training (St. Patrick’s

Day, 17 Mar.) themes. Marketing efforts included commercial horticulture email list serves, websites, news articles, word of mouth and social media outlets (Facebook). Program fliers and agendas were written in Gaelic or ghoulish descriptions. County agents were active participants instructing in costumed attire (witches, vampire, ghouls, and cultural attire) for Halloween and green derbies with green colored shirts for “St. Paddy’s Day.” The Halloween program atmosphere was decorated with holiday décor (Halloween colors with pesticide treat bags) complete with “witches brew,” which consisted of cream soda in a witch’s cauldron with whip cream froth. “St. Paddy’s Day” decorations included Irish-themed door prizes (green pesticide gloves, potato peelers, green snakes, etc...), pot-of-gold chocolate coins, Irish pub music, and food/lunch along with “green beer” of green colored cream soda and sudsy whipped cream. Post-surveys were handed out at the end of classes. To encourage a high return of completed surveys, each recipient received CEUs for the educational program and holiday gift bags. The number of surveys from the Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” returned was 100% response rate (n=35) and 85% response rate (n=74) respectively. The survey included 14 questions related to pest management resources, pesticide practices, learning gains and themed-style training and demographic information. A three-month follow-up survey was emailed to the Halloween participants to follow pesticide usage and subject matter retention of themed versus non-themed style pesticide training.

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Results and Discussion

In Spring 2012, traditional limited pesticide classroom trainings at Volusia County averaged 19 attendees. By Fall 2013, the “Fangtastic” Halloween program saw a significant increase in attendance by 84% (n=35) and by March 2014 (“St. Paddy’s Day”), attendance was at an all time high of 111% (n=74). Experienced (10+ years) as well as novice pesticide applicators were evenly divided in both themed programs (within 1.9%). The results from the end of class surveys indicated that pesticide knowledge gains occurred at 22.4%, and 21.2% after attending the Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” classes, respectively. Overall, 76% (n=35) and 94% (n=64) of the Halloween and “St. Paddy’s Day” attendees, indicated they would attend a theme-style train-

ing again. Participants also admitted that 69.7% and 76.9% felt confident to pass the certification test for a pesticide license. A three-month follow-up survey of participants in the Halloween say training that responded indicated that 87% (n=13) felt that the theme-styled presentations helped them learn the subject matter better than non-themed presentations. More important, they saw a reduction in overall pesticide usage by 11%. Theme-styled educational programming has shown to be an effective way to draw audiences that tire of traditional classroom settings. It has shown to increase student confidence needed to pass the certification test, increase knowledge gains in pesticide application and provide fun, festive alternatives to pesticide trainings. Future themed pesticide trainings in Volusia County are being developed and are becoming preferred options to obtain CEUs for all ages.