

Understanding the effects of a marketing campaign to agricultural audiences

A collaboration between evaluation and marketing/communications specialists

BACKGROUND

In 2015-16, the [University of Wisconsin Environmental Resources Center \(ERC\)](#) planned, executed and evaluated a successful marketing campaign for a new suite of online decision support tools for Midwestern agricultural audiences called Useful to Usable (U2U). The U2U online tool suite is the result of a six-year collaborative research and Extension project funded by the USDA to increase the resilience of Midwestern farmers to climate variability and change by improving the usability and uptake of climate information. The project was a collaboration of Extension and research institutions throughout the Midwest. ERC staff were initially involved in the usability evaluation and later offered their expertise to execute and evaluate a \$50,000 marketing campaign to promote the tools. This campaign was a valuable opportunity to test a marketing approach in the context of university-led outreach.

CAMPAIGN EXECUTION AND EVALUATION

Campaign Execution:

ERC conducted a four-round print and digital media campaign between April 2015 and November 2016 directed at U2U's intended users—Midwestern corn farmers and agricultural advisors. The marketing campaign's goal was to increase awareness of U2U's online tool suite and drive potential users to the [U2U website](#). The campaign included direct mail and emailed marketing materials containing a "call-to-action" to visit the U2U website and learn about its decision support tools. In addition to using no-cost contact lists of farmers and advisors, ERC purchased contact lists.

ERC targeted a total of 35,000 members of the project's core audiences in the campaign—agricultural Extension employees, Certified Crop Advisors (CCAs), subscribers to the *Progressive Farmer* and *AgProfessional* magazines, current and past members of the Soil and Water Conservation Society (SWCS), local conservation district employees, Technical Service Providers (TSPs) and members of the U2U project contact list. As part of ERC's methodical approach to marketing, staff piloted draft campaign messaging with target audiences and made changes based on feedback before deployment.



Four-round print campaign

Evaluation:

In addition to testing and refining with our target audience, ERC measured audiences response to the campaign using statistical methods.


ERC staff evaluated the digital portion of the campaign by monitoring the percent of contacts who opened the emailed marketing material and clicked on the call-to-action within it. These numbers were assessed both in aggregate, by individual target audiences, and by the four different rounds of the campaign. Using Google Analytics, ERC staff monitored traffic to the U2U tool suite website in the periods around the marketing campaign rounds, tracking overall site traffic and its origin. Finally, ERC used surveys to gather additional data about the campaign: a postcard survey with the final round of the campaign to gather campaign perceptions from recipients, and included a question on where they heard of U2U on a large end-of-project online survey sent to thousands of agricultural advisors across the region.

Central to the U2U marketing strategy, ERC staff monitored and evaluated the results of each round of the campaign and made adjustments based on those evaluations in the subsequent rounds to improve the campaign's reach and effect and to maximize the impact of each dollar. ERC used statistical methods to gauge effect of receiving different modes of the campaign (direct mail plus digital delivery versus only digital delivery of marketing materials) and effect of intensity of contact (receiving multiple rounds of the campaign versus only one, for example).

Example of emailed marketing material

CAMPAIGN SUCCESS HIGHLIGHTS

Overall, open and click rates of the digital portion of the campaign were much higher than industry averages, **suggesting that the campaign was successful in reaching its target audiences.**

48% 
of those on the campaign email list
opened at least one campaign email

11% 
clicked on a link to
explore project tools

These results suggest that a marketing approach is a valuable complement to more traditional extension outreach methods.

(Agriculture and Food Services campaigns usually achieve 25% of recipients opening and 3% clicking.¹)

¹ <https://mailchimp.com/resources/research/email-marketing-benchmarks/>



The campaign saw more than 16,000 opens and 1,500 clicks throughout the four rounds.

- The number of U2U website users (tracked by Google Analytics) around the marketing campaign dates was positively correlated with the number of people the media campaign attempted to contact.
- Generally, web traffic during campaign periods was **2-3 times greater** than during non-campaign periods.
- Direct mail recipients were statistically more likely to subsequently open the digital campaign email, demonstrating that **ERC's multimedia approach was worth the resources**. In addition, nearly 40% of recipients who responded to the survey sent with the final campaign did not continue to explore the website and find other tools when they looked at the advertised tool online, supporting the decision to market each tool separately rather than assuming one campaign would introduce audiences to all the tools.
- ERC evaluated response data to modify target audience lists and the timing of print and digital campaigns over time to maximize impact and responsibly utilize resources.
- The campaign created a similar level of awareness as the in-person outreach events/conferences (n=123 compared to n=118, reported via the large end-of-project survey to agricultural advisors across the region) and was the second most popular way the project created awareness (after 'learning about U2U from peers/colleagues,' n=166)



Campaign recipients reported liking the campaign because:

It *"caught my attention as it relates directly to my work"* and because of the *"partners involved and consistent message."*

The main reasons why the campaign made the recipients interested in learning more were that the tools seemed relevant to their work, were free of charge and came from a trusted source.

