Executive Summary

Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) Equine Area of Expertise (AoE) Team recognizes that adult Michigan horse enthusiasts have evolved in their quest for knowledge. Six focus groups and surveys of 53 horse enthusiast participants were conducted during spring of 2005 to better design and deliver new opportunities and educational experiences. It is hoped that the results will enable the development of more effective educational programs for horse enthusiasts at both a state and national level.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Through focus group and survey responses, participants’ educational needs, learning preferences and perception of MSU’s reputation were analyzed. Through the use of qualitative and quantitative analysis it was found that:

…… generalized, comprehensive beginner information such as horse care, training and equine law is desired

…… instructors with proof of credentials and experience are preferred as opposed to Internet or reference based learning

…… most have access to and are comfortable with computers and the Internet

…… though many have not participated in non-traditional learning opportunities (i.e., CD-rom) most are comfortable with them

…… though most have not heard of specific MSU equine programs, they indicated that MSU provides current and quality information

…… time constraints make it difficult for them to attend courses in classroom setting
Institute for Horse Management
Consumer Profile and Educational Needs Assessment

Introduction

The Michigan State University Extension (MSUE) Equine Area of Expertise (AoE) Team recognizes that adult Michigan horse enthusiasts have evolved in their quest for knowledge. The need for current and relevant subject matter is imperative for a successful equine educational program. In addition, as technology and web based communication become more mainstream, there are new opportunities to design and deliver educational experiences that can be accessed by more clientele.

The MSUE Equine AoE Team and MSU Global are collaborating to obtain data to better define adult Michigan horse enthusiasts’ educational needs. The objective of this study is to define the consumer profile of horse enthusiasts and identify subject matter that horse enthusiasts are most interested in learning about. County educators utilized a short survey and a series of focus groups to generate information useful in developing educational programs based on clientele needs.

Six focus group interviews were conducted during March-April 2005. Extension educators wanted to know what types of horse management problems or interests participants had, and how MSU Equine Extension Programs could help meet these needs. From these answers, the Equine AoE Team hopes to design educational programs and activities to assist horse owners, professionals and volunteer leaders. They also hope to assess prevailing perceptions of educational needs and preferences for delivering information on horse management and youth leadership/instructor training. In addition, findings of this study will be utilized to develop a national survey to determine the needs of the industry. It is hoped that the results will enable the development of more effective educational programs for horse enthusiasts at both a state and national level.

Methodology

The Equine AoE team asked MSU Extension county educators to identify 12 adult (18+) horse enthusiasts (owner, industry professional or anyone who participates actively or passively in horse activities) in each Michigan region (including two in central Michigan because of the MSU campus location) using a statewide mailing list. This list was separated by county and comprised of people who attended an MSU Extension program or requested to be put on the MSU Equine Newsletter mailing list. Subjects were first contacted by phone and then by letter to describe and confirm their willingness to participate in focus groups. Focus groups were held during the evening at a local community building, such as a county extension office, for two hours.

Data collection protocols include a short survey and focus group interviews. The survey questionnaire was administered to all focus group participants. Focus group script, written survey and participation agreement were
approved by the Michigan State University Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects. Participants were read a moderator introduction explaining the purposes of their meeting. Discussion protocol and project overview were then reviewed. Participants had the opportunity to go around the circle and give their name, where they were from and briefly discuss their horse interests. After this introductory period, a discussion outline was followed beginning with questions about education and training needs, and ending with MSU’s reputation. Focus group participants received a mug and will also receive a discount on upcoming horse extension programs for their participation.

Focus group discussion was audio recorded and transcribed by MSU Global who is working with MSUE to develop event centered, on-line supported learning experiences for horse enthusiasts. From these transcriptions, six focus group summaries were developed. The six focus group summaries were consolidated into one document and it is included in Appendix A of this report. Key themes, educational needs and interests were determined through qualitative analysis. Survey results, located in Appendix C, were analyzed using SPSS 12.0 for Windows. This information was further refined by staff at the CARRS Center for Evaluative Studies.

Focus Group Findings

Consumer Profile

Focus group participants were diverse. Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo, Mason, Midland, Novi and West Branch were represented with groups ranging from five to 11 people, with a total of 53 participants. While introducing themselves, each horse enthusiast briefly described their equine background. A majority (33 participants) said they have backgrounds in trail riding followed closely by preferences for western riding. Sixteen of the horse enthusiast focus group participants were riding instructors. Both owning/managing boarding stables and volunteer youth horse leaders tied with 14 participants. A variety of other horse related occupations, not originally given by focus group leaders, were also identified such as therapeutic riders, trainers and breeders.

Educational Needs

The qualitative data from the focus groups provided insight into the consumer profiles of horse enthusiasts such as their educational needs, interest in training modes, learning preferences and perceptions of MSU. These findings are based on county educator’s notes. The answers recorded from each focus group all agree there is a need for education or training in horse management related topics. Whether answering for themselves or those they know, most participants thought basic information was needed. This was stated in a number of different ways, from “generalized beginner information” to “basic horse care needs”. Other needs included training methods and equine law.

To help horse enthusiasts across Michigan enjoy their experience, county educators asked what kinds of educational information they would like. Most answers were for feeding such as nutrition and hay selection. Legal information
such as liability, insurance, zoning and the MI Right to Farm Act was also requested. One participant suggested that Extension could provide a book for beginners.

Some participants have not taken advantage of learning opportunities in the past because of cost, distrust of the internet, and lack of instructor interaction. Some Novi participants said they desired information from one source and unification in the horse industry. Throughout the focus group meeting this was mentioned. Also, getting information to new horse enthusiasts or lack of general awareness of opportunities was another theme.

Factors impacting interest in training programs such as key characteristics and hot button issues received a wide variety of answers. Participants in some focus groups answered with learning style preferences such as human vs. interned based instruction and hands-on basic horsemanship training. Other focus group discussion surrounded hot button issues such as small business and herd management. The Novi focus group suggested that MSU should serve as a source of research-based information for Michigan.

A dot activity was conducted to further investigate hot button issues. This was interpreted in a variety of ways. Each participant was given an unlimited number of dots to place next to a list of issues to help start the conversation. Each focus group assessed willingness to attend a training for one day. For $50 per day, three people in the Grand Rapids focus group were unwilling to attend. In Mason, five participants were willing to attend a training for $50 per day. In Kalamazoo, two people were willing to attend a specialized day class for $100-$150 per day. Overall, most groups said cost was dependent on other factors such as instructor expertise, duration and certification.

Delivery format was another hot button issue. Grand Rapids participants preferred instructor interaction and winter evenings during the week for education/training opportunities, whereas Kalamazoo participants wanted an easily accessible, central location. Mason and Novi participants did not want internet courses. However, some would be willing to receive print information offline. One participant from West Branch asked if MSU did a class or set up a website, would it be free. Midland gave this hot button issue a two.

The next issue, already mentioned in Grand Rapids, was schedule. A common theme through the responses was a preference for training during winter months. Grand Rapids and Novi participants preferred weekends while participants in Mason preferred school year or evening trainings and no weekends.

County educators moved next to the issue of provider, their qualifications/credentials and what made an instructor desirable. Participants from Kalamazoo and West Branch both preferred a qualified instructor. Kalamazoo participants went further, while four agreed experience mattered, one said proof of expertise was needed.

The following issue was content, its comprehensiveness, training topics and what participants expected from MSU. Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Mason all wanted targeted topics. Participants in Mason also noted beginners may need more comprehensive topics. In West Branch, individual topics were
listed such a natural horsemanship and genetics. There participants discussed a class for beginners to determine their readiness to become owners.

Learning Preferences
After asking a series of questions surrounding what they hoped to accomplish or gain such as certification, knowledge or relationships; most participants said certification was not important. Knowledge gained was of more value than a certificate. However, in West Branch, one participant said they needed proof of continuing education for another certification they had already earned. Participants in Grand Rapids indicated that they wanted research presented in understandable terms and made available to the public.

Educators next asked questions about instructor access. Two general themes emerged from these discussions. One was the importance of face-to-face instructor contact. The other was about instructor’s access to participants dependent on training content. Participants in Kalamazoo said instructor interaction was not necessary. All groups, except Midland, agreed classmate/peer interaction was important. They indicated that “opportunity to learn from other participants” is very important.

Discussion then turned to assignments. Grand Rapids did not want homework assignments, nor did Novi participants. Some did not have time and others did not see any reason for them. However, in Kalamazoo and Mason it was felt that assignments should be dependent on the nature of the class, for example, if certification was desired. Responses to participants’ feelings about exams and quizzes were similar. Testing to demonstrate knowledge for certification or without a grade was acceptable in Kalamazoo. In Mason it was not felt to be necessary and Novi was divided between testing as unacceptable and testing with no grade being acceptable. Midland did not respond.

The next topic covered was delivery methods of education and training. Participants were first read a short summary of three potential scenarios. The first was “Real-Time”, a delivery method with a set schedule where all participants must meet at a certain time on-line. An instructor would also be on-line at the arranged time for participants to ask questions. Homework assignments such as reading would be required. The second scenario was “Any-Time”. This was an on-line course available any time within a specified time period. Participants were not required to be on-line at the arranged time for participants to ask questions. Homework assignments such as reading would be required. The third scenario was “Resource Subscription”. This allowed participants to access resources on-line any time for a specified time period. Participants could access resources such as a web page or DVD to address problems or areas of interest. Instructors would be available to answer questions through e-mail.

Grand Rapids participants preferred the “Real-Time” scenario because they liked to have question and answer time on-line with other students. Participants in Kalamazoo and Midland preferred the “Resource Subscription” scenario but saw a need for “Real-Time” and “Any-Time” for beginners. Mason participants preferred “Any-Time” and saw “Real-Time” and “Resource
Subscription” as a combined method. Novi participants also preferred “Any-Time” because they felt “Resource Subscription” was too structured and participants would lose important instructor/peer interaction.

**MSU Reputation**

In the last section of the questionnaire, MSU’s reputation in the Michigan horse industry was addressed. County educators asked if participants had heard about MSU’s equine programs and their quality or educational level. Of the participants who responded, the majority did not know. In Novi and Midland, MSU’s marketing was addressed. One participant from Midland said the MSUE webpage was difficult to navigate.

Questions then moved to what participants had heard about MSU equine programs’ quality or educational level. Researchers wanted to know about brand value and positioning relative to other potential offerings. Four out of six focus groups had heard that MSU has high quality equine programs. Midland participants talked about MSU equine experts saying they were arrogant and their information should not be believed.

The last question for focus group participants dealt with their hopes and expectations of MSU. They were also asked what MSU’s involvement meant. A common expectation throughout all focus group participant answers was for MSU to provide more current information and in more locations. Quality and commitment were also mentioned. In Novi, participants asked for MSU to take more leadership in keeping horses from disappearing from Michigan.

**Survey Findings**

Altogether 53 focus group participants completed and returned the short survey on “Consumer Profile Survey for Horse Enthusiasts”. The data were entered into SPSS and descriptive statistics were run to analyze the data. Findings indicated that:

- About three out of five (58%) consider themselves horse professionals (Table 2).
- Types of horse professionals ranged widely. Instructor and trainer were the most frequently mentioned with five responses. Veterinarian and raising horses were the next most frequently mentioned with three responses (Table 3).
- About half the participants indicated owning horses. One-third of these (30.8%) indicated owning three horses (Table 4).
- About four out of five participants (71.7%) keep horses on their own land (Table 5).
- About three out of five (67.3%) do not have children under the age of 18 in their household (Table 6).
- About one-third (34%) spend more than 40 hours a week on horse related activities (Table 7).
• Horses were listed most frequently as the top hobby by one-third of participants (34%). Reading was most frequently mentioned as the second top hobby by one-sixth (15.1%) of participants. Some type of physical activity such as fitness or canoeing was listed as the third top hobby by one-third (30.2%) of the participants (Tables 8, 9 and 10).

• Three-fifths (60.4%) do not come from horse families (Table 11).

• One-fifth (20.8%) of participants were equally likely to have 15-19 or 30-39 years of involvement with horses. A quarter (24.5%) had more than 40 years involvement with horses (Table 12).

• About half the participants (54.2%) were female (Table 13).

• Two-fifths (40.9%) spent 1-4 hours on the web per week (Table 14).

• At home, four out of five (84.2%) have both computer and Internet access (Table 15).

• At work, three out of four (75%) have access to computer and Internet (Table 16).

• Over two-thirds (70.6%) of participants have home dial-up Internet connections (Table 17).

• Three out of five (62.5%) have dial-up Internet connections at work (Table 18).

• The great majority (95.9%) have participated in face-to-face classroom learning opportunities (Table 19).

• Almost all (97.9%) were comfortable with face-to-face classroom learning opportunities (Table 20).

• Four out of five respondents (83.7%) have participated in Internet based instructor/facilitator learning opportunities (Table 21).

• About three-quarters (72.2%) were comfortable with Internet based instructor/facilitator learning opportunities (Table 22).

• About six out of seven (85.4%) have not participated in Internet based, self paced, no instructor learning opportunities (Table 23).

• Three out of four (73.7%) were comfortable with Internet based, self paced, no instructor learning opportunities (Table 24).

• Two-thirds have not participated in a Cd-rom or DVD learning opportunity (Table 25).

• Four out of five (82.1%) are comfortable with a Cd-rom or DVD learning opportunity (Table 26).

• Four out of five (83.3%) have not participated in video conferencing learning opportunities (Table 27).

• Over two-thirds (69.7%) are comfortable with video conferencing learning opportunities (Table 28).

• Three out of four (74.5%) have not participated in teleconferencing learning opportunities (Table 29).

• About two-thirds (65.6%) of participants were comfortable with teleconferencing learning opportunities (Table 30).
• About six out of seven (86.7%) have not participated in telecourse learning opportunities (Table 31).
• Slightly more than half (53.3%) are not comfortable with participating in telecourse learning opportunities (Table 32).
• About five-sevenths (71.1%) have participated in an independent study of references learning opportunity (Table 33).
• Four out of five (83.7%) are comfortable with an independent study of references learning opportunity (Table 34).
• About four-fifths (82.1%) are very interested in nutrition (Table 35).
• Three out of five (59.3%) are mildly interested in reproduction (Table 36).
• Three out of five (57.7%) are mildly interested in breeds and selection (Table 37).
• Eight out of nine (88.9%) are very interested in health (Table 38).
• About three-quarters (74.1%) are very interested in pasture management (Table 39).
• Two-thirds (66.7%) are very interested in facility design (Table 40).
• Two-thirds (66.7%) are very interested in behavior welfare (Table 41).
• Responses to business development were equally distributed with two-fifths (18.9%) of participants mildly and very interested (Table 42).
• More than half (57.7%) were very interested in exercise physiology (Table 43).
• Three-fifths (57.7%) indicated mild interest in tack selection and care (Table 44).
• Participants were equally mildly or very (48.1%) interested in manure management/zoning (Table 45).
• Half the participants (50%) were very interested in the horse industry, national and international overviews and about 46 percent were mildly interested (Table 46).
• Two out of five (39.6%) were not interested in show management (Table 47).
• Two out of five (35.3%) were very interested in judging (Table 48).
• Five-eighths (65.3%) were very interested in youth development (Table 49).
• About half (52%) were very interested in safe trail riding (Table 50).
• Three out of seven (45.1%) were mildly interested in therapeutic riding (Table 51).
• The majority (92.5%) use peers/experts as resources (Table 52).
• Three out of five (60.4%) use Internet searches as resources (Table 53).
• Two out of three (67.9%) use books as resources (Table 54).
• About one out of five (20.8%) are members of 4-H. About one-sixth (17%) are members of AQHA. About one-eighth (13.2%) are members of APHA (Table 57).
Average or mean score based on a 5-point scale (with 1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree) is shown in Table 55. Findings indicate that:

- The minimum number of horses owned was one and the maximum seven. Four horses was the most common response.
- On average, 62 acres are owned with a range of two to 1,200.
- Participants agreed (1.98) the ability to study from home or office without having to travel to another location is important.
- Participants agreed (2.17) that time constraints make it difficult for them to attend classroom setting courses.
- Participants neither agreed nor disagreed (3.29) that they don’t have time to take any courses.
- Participants agreed (2.04) that opportunities to learn from peers are important.
- Participants neither agreed nor disagreed (2.78) that they have limited time to learn.
- Participants agreed (1.83) that they are comfortable using computers.
- Participants agreed (1.85) that they are comfortable using e-mail.

Respondents indicated various affiliations with the horse industry and support organizations. Description of the horse affiliations are presented in Table 56. In summary,

- About three out of five participants are trail (64.2%) and western (62.3%) riders.
- Slightly more than half (54.7%) are English riders.
- Two-fifths (43.4%) compete in horse shows.
- About one-third (30.2%) are riding instructors.
- One quarter compete in horse shows (24.5%) or own/manage a boarding stable (26.4%).