

MISSION

The College of Agriculture Marketing & Communications Department is responsible for the internal and external marketing and communication functions of the college's Extension and research departments and provides limited support to the college's academic departments, mostly in the form of website updates.

STAFF

Full Time (3 now/will be 4): Michelle Olgers, Director; Erica Shambley, Digital Marketing Manager; Kelly Kane, IT Specialist; Writer/Content Manager (Open and in process of being filled)

Part Time (4 now/will be 3): Graphic Designer; Admin. Assist.; Photographer/Videographer (In process of being filled); Writer/Content Manager (contractor hired only until full-time employee is in place)

DEPARTMENT'S PRIMARY SERVICES

Marketing Planning & Strategy
Editorial Services
Web Services
Media Relations
Photography & Videography

Social Media
Graphic Design
Customer Relationship Management
Internal IT and Audio Visual Support
Banners and Displays

OVERVIEW OF THE YEAR

It has been a little more than four years since VSU launched its first College of Agriculture/Cooperative Extension communications department. During that time, the newly hired department staff assessed needs, developed procedures, built infrastructure and purchased tools necessary to reach their mission. It was not until this summer that the department finally had what it needs to effectively do its job (with the exception of a few staffing holes that are in the process of being filled). This has put the department in an unprecedented position...refinement. We are in the beginning stages of looking back at four years of work, mostly executed in triage fashion, and analyzing, "Is this the best we can do?" "How can we do this more effectively or efficiently?" Department staff unanimously agree, this is an excellent position to be in.

SUCSESSES

1. TOOLS: Now Using Cvent and Constant Contact

Our department's day-to-day operations are event driven. The primary ways we communicate with our audiences are through email and social media. A primary goal of our work is to increase attendance at public programs. Until this year we did not have the right tools for the job (with the exception of social media). Google Forms was the only digital means we had to collect online registrations. This tool did not allow us to: properly secure personal identifiable information, adhere to university IT guidelines, easily add registrant names to email lists for future communications or count how many registrants a program area had over time. Additionally, we could not accept online payments for events with registration fees. About two months ago we finally obtained a Cvent event management software license, which has started to allow us to solve the problems Google Forms presented. Using Cvent has significantly reduced the amount of time staff spend on event promotion, registration management and email address harvesting. This year we also switched from the free version of MailChimp to a paid subscription to Constant Contact, which has greatly improved our email marketing capabilities. Cvent and Constant Content are the final tools in our original long list the department needed to effectively execute its mission.

2. HUMAN RESOURCES: Graphic Design Manpower Has Doubled

In four years, the number of events the department has to market has more than doubled, as has the number of publications (including two different magazines) it is required to generate. Yet until now, the department had to rely on one adept part-time designer (about 25 hours a week) to execute all of the department's design needs. We were about at the breaking point of sustainability when an opportunity recently arose. The program area with significantly more events than any other, and accordingly significantly more design needs, was able to fund the current graphic designer (still on a part-time basis), which freed up my department's budget to hire an additional graphic designer to replace the one now dedicated to the one program area. Since the new designer will not be tasked with what has historically been the bulk of the work, s/he can devote more time to publications, event promotion in other program areas and the refinement of existing graphics. (Note: the designer leaving my department will still work closely with my department on all processes and procedures and will most likely, due to her history and strong skill set, remain the senior designer and creative director on larger projects.)

3. UNEXPECTED BONUS: Small Farm Resource Center Grant

It is the primary role of my department to deliver the content that Virginia's small farmers need to help them be profitable and sustainable. Our colleagues (Extension Specialists and Agents) create the content, but it's our job to find the people who need it and put it in their hands. So when we repeatedly hear from small farmers things like, "I wish I had known that" or "I don't know where to look for..." or "It's all just so confusing and I don't have time to figure it all out," I know we're falling short of the mark. Last year the Marketing & Communications Dept. Director and the Director of VSU's Small Farm Outreach Program jointly applied for and received a \$90,000 grant to create a one-stop-shop for small and beginning farmers to find all the information they need. It will aggregate existing information and news on the state and federal level onto one website to minimize the amount of time these entrepreneurs spend tracking it down (similar to the newfarmers.usda.gov website, but specific to VA). It will include additional (many yet-to-be-determined) functionalities, as well. Lastly, it will have a dedicated phone line and staff for those farmers who can't or don't want to rely on a website to get the information they need.

MOST SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES FOR THE DEPARTMENT IN THE NEXT 12 MONTHS

1. POTENTIAL REBRANDING

There is the possibility the department will have to undergo a rebranding initiative. If so, potentially all digital and printed materials will be affected, including social media landing pages, business cards, website, emails, digital and print publications, video intros/exits, news release templates, etc.

2. REFINEMENT OF WORK

As stated above, in the coming months the department will be reviewing just about everything it does to ensure its outputs and processes are optimized, including: project management, email marketing, social media, working with the media, results measurement, digital and printed publications, etc.

3. INTERNAL PR ISSUES

Some internal clients the department serves remain reluctant to follow our processes and guidelines, preferring to operate independently. Efforts have already been taken to remedy this, including a focus group last fall. Continued efforts will be made this year to identify root causes and solve for them.

AWARDS (ACE)

- Gold for print ad (full page representing both VA 1890 and 1862 institutions)
- Silver for info technology/technology education
- Silver for diversity/publications for diverse audiences
- Silver for diversity/electronic media and audio for targeted audiences