How to Succeed at Success Stories

You have just completed a successful and innovative program effort. You have reached at least the short-term outcomes of your logic model, filed the evaluations, reported your contacts and written thank-you notes to sponsors. Job completed, right? Wrong. You need to write and submit a success story documenting the program and its impacts.

A success story provides written documentation of how effective Extension programming is meeting the needs of the local clientele. Effective success stories illustrate program impacts to lay audiences who may not be familiar with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System or Extension in general.

Below are tips to help you succeed in writing success stories.

- Know your audience: local, state, and federal lawmakers, community leaders, potential funders or funding agencies, the media.
- Include several critical elements:
  - The problem or issue to which your program is targeted
  - Program response to the issue
  - Number of program participants and who they are (farmers, at-risk youth, consumers, etc.)
  - Impact program had on participants
  - Cooperating partners
  - Outside funding
- Limit your success stories to about 250 words each.
- Describe adequately each critical element, but remember that conciseness is important.
- Describe each element, but do not get bogged down with details.
- Keep story easy to read.
- Avoid jargon that your target audience may not understand. Remember that while we may not consider jargon, it may be inexplicable to your readers.
- Keep success stories positive and focused on impacts.
- Be sure that impacts, both qualitative and quantitative, illustrate actual program effectiveness—not just an “enjoyed it” attitude of participants.
  - Qualitative impacts can be gleaned from the comments section of your program evaluations and from answers to your logic model.
  - Quantitative impacts are “numbers” impacts. For example, the percentage of area farmers who are changing some production practice as a result of your program.
  - The best success stories go beyond the impact on the immediate audience. How does the community as a whole benefit? With a good follow-up plan, you can even go back in a year or two and write an even more powerful story. That’s when your program may be accomplishing some of the mid-term and even long-term outcomes.
- Use powerful quotes from participants.
- Include significant statistics.
- Write first draft and put it aside for several hours or days.
- Reread draft and look for ways to improve overall story.
- Proofread story for errors in fact, grammar, or punctuation.
- Have a colleague proofread for errors that you might have missed.
- Remember that an effectively written success story says more in 200 words than a poorly composed one manages in 1,000. Brevity is your ally.