

Outreach and Engagement in a Retail Environment: The University Meets Home Improvement

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Abstract

Even at land-grant institutions, faculty seldom work with commercial retailers on community programs. Retailers can help with outreach and engagement programs because they provide the “natural habitat” for consumers the programs seek to address. Allied health, family science, and interior design faculty at the Ohio State University worked with Lowe’s Home Improvement Stores to bring information to the public on home modifications and universal design, a concept that advocates for environments for people of all ages and abilities. Lowe’s has collaborated in offering in-store workshops, products, and displays for consumers interested in making home modifications, as well as a universally designed model kitchen and bathroom. Because of differences in academic community and retail cultures, working together calls for flexibility; however, such collaboration can yield benefits to both partners. Retail store environments are not always ideal for teaching, but utilizing them can help academic outreach programs reach consumers.

Introduction

Increasingly, university faculty and students are encouraged to develop outreach and engagement programs in the community. In response, research has focused on the structure of the university and gaining internal permanent support for such programming (*Maurrasse 2001; Kecskes 2006*). Equally important, however, are the ongoing efforts to identify community groups with whom faculty can partner. Without community contacts, outreach efforts may fail because faculty cannot reach their audience.

Background

Ohio State University faculty from Allied Health, Family Science, and Interior Design have been teaching about universal design for the past decade. Universal design is an international movement based on the concept that products and environments should be accessible to all people regardless of age or ability (*Center*

for *Universal Design 2006*). Rather than segmenting the population into abled and disabled and designing different environments for each, designers are urged to seek one design solution that all individuals can use (*Null 1996*). Professionals in health care often modify home environments for patients who are returning home from the hospital and rehabilitation. Traditionally the focus is on meeting the needs of the recovering patient as opposed to making the home environment easier for persons of all ages and abilities. By designing the home environment to meet the needs of everyone, future problems can be avoided and everyone can remain living in the home regardless of mobility limitations. Public awareness about the Americans with Disabilities Act is widespread; however, recognition of the importance of designing home environments that accommodate all individuals is less common.

Outreach Program: The Universal Design Project

In 2001, in an effort to educate the public more broadly about the concept and value of universal design, the faculty began meeting with educators from Ohio State University Extension to explore what more could be done. The Ohio Department of Aging also joined the interdisciplinary effort in order to provide expertise regarding housing resources and educational material. The model that was chosen to guide the project was a community-based asset model (*Kretzmann and McKnight 1993*) that builds on the resources and strengths of a wide variety of partners. Following this initial contact, the project staff applied for and received a grant from the Ohio State University's Office of University Outreach and Engagement. This funding resulted in an educational program that involved training extension educators across the state about universal design so they could educate the general public. Extension educators, staff from the Ohio Department of Aging, and OSU faculty developed educational materials including train-the-trainer modules, educational readings, and Power Point presentations, all available on CD-ROM, that educators could use in their communities. Extension educators were also given materials to be used in news releases and newsletters. The process of designing and implementing this educational program is outlined in Price, Zavotka, and Teaford (*2004*).

During the course of the originally funded project, the faculty applied for and received a grant from the University's Service-Learning Initiative to develop a new practicum course on universal design to be taught by both the School of Allied Medical Professions

and the Department of Consumer Sciences. This class was limited to twenty students, ten from interior design and ten from occupational therapy. The students helped faculty and extension educators present the community workshops and conduct home assessments for interested residents during each spring quarter.

Project development: One early challenge was to find prospective audiences and get them interested in attending workshops and learning more about universal design. This was somewhat difficult because universal design was not a familiar term, and the concept calls upon the public to think

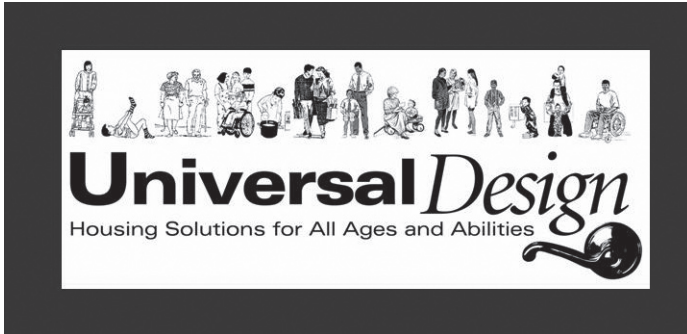
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in a different way about their home environments and how they use them. Using contacts through the Ohio Department of Aging, early workshops attracted older persons, their caregivers, and contractors associated with home modification programs run by local aging programs. This audience needed to understand the current deficiencies

in their homes and how their homes could be modified and yet be attractive. The long-term objective, however, was to expand the audience to a younger and more able-bodied population. After the first year, community organizations and professional groups were targeted as well.

A related concern was the need for the audience to visualize and experience the types of proposed solutions that universal design might provide. They needed, for example, to see photos of homes that had universal design features as well as the products that could be easily installed to make their homes more functional. For example, what kinds of attractive grab bars are available and how easy are they to mount in a shower? What types of door handles are on the market? Are there lever faucets that can be used by both children and older adults and how expensive are they? Without this information, consumers would not likely follow up on the recommendations from the workshops.

Faculty approached the regional manager for Lowe’s Home Improvement Stores about using a store as a site for a workshop. He suggested a recently opened store as a site and, as it happened, the manager of that store had recently needed home modifications for an aging parent. It was agreed that the store could be

Figure 1. Universal Design Logo

the site for a display on universal design. The store manager and staff collaborated with OSU partners to identify products that had universal design features. Signage and endcaps with the universal design logo were designed (figure 1). September was designated “Universal Design Month,” and project staff visited the store several times to provide information to customers and led two pilot workshops at the store for customers and employees.

Experience in the retail environment: From this experience, a working relationship with Lowe’s stores in the central Ohio area was developed. These stores became sites for the practicum course and community workshops on universal design. The stores provided the meeting space, publicized the in-store workshops, and installed displays highlighting universally designed products such as handheld showerheads, lever door handles, and grab bars. One of the advantages of conducting the workshops in the stores is that the products are close at hand. The consumer can find and, with the assistance of store personnel, try out a product. Further, information about price and installation are available in the store. This makes it likely that the product will be purchased and installed at home. Evaluations from participants who attended these in-store workshops indicated that 90 percent had a “better understanding of the Universal Design philosophy” than they did prior to the workshop. Additionally, 86 percent of participants “intended to include Universal Design features or products into a new or existing home environment.” (Zavotka, Teaford, and Fulkerson 2006, 85).

Another resource that Lowe’s brought to the project was its trained sales professionals. Consumers who are considering a home modification or even installing a new product will often turn to the sales personnel in a retail environment for information and

assistance. In order to ensure employees were informed about universal design, OSU faculty offered short training sessions for the Lowe's sales personnel at eight locations where the in-store community workshops were taking place. These sessions addressed the concept of universal design and its application to the home environment as well as focusing on specific products and questions that consumers may have while shopping. These training sessions were well received by store personnel because they provided a broader view of home modifications and their use in the home in addition to specific information to use in helping the consumer to decide

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on a purchase. As a result, the sales staff felt they could better serve the consumer with detailed information. As of this writing, 110 Lowe's employees and store managers have been involved in the training program.

The Universal Design Project also benefited from the employee training sessions. Faculty and extension educators learned from the Lowe's employees what products were in the stores, how products could be ordered, and how

customers might respond to the universal design concept. This information was used to revise the educational materials and also facilitated the development of product information handouts that were distributed during community workshops and store tours.

Educational display: In 2005, the partnership between the Ohio State University and Lowe's took a further step. With assistance from Lowe's, OSU developed a permanent educational exhibit on Universal Design as part of the Molly Caren Agricultural Center, home of the Farm Science Review, a three-day agricultural exhibition held each September. The site is located about twenty miles from campus in a rural area on the edge of the metropolitan city. In addition to learning more about the latest tractors and cultivation methods, visitors can learn about universal design and have a chance to experience it firsthand. Lowe's worked together with Dave Fox Remodeling, a local remodeler, and used universally designed products to build a model kitchen and a model bathroom as part of the exhibit. Consumers have the opportunity to walk through each of the rooms, examine the products, and get information

Figure 2. Model kitchen photo from *Creative Ideas Magazine*

about price and installation from project staff. In the first year this exhibit was open (2005), nearly three thousand people visited the site over a three-day period.

The Molly Caren Agricultural Center is now used for community workshops on universal design during the spring quarter. In 2006, eight workshops were held at the site. Students and faculty gathered data on consumer interests and concerns. Again, this information comes from persons who are actually experiencing the setting rather than just hearing about it or seeing slides. This has expanded the use of the workshops and made them more successful.

Media exposure: In addition to local television, radio, and newspaper coverage of the exhibit at the Farm Science Review, Lowe's has also featured the model kitchen and bathroom in cover stories in their *Creative Ideas Magazine* (SPC Custom Publishing 2006, 2007) (see figure 2). In the two articles, consumers have had a chance to "visit" the site and learn about the concept and products that can make life easier for them. Seeing and reading about the models helps to introduce the concept of universal design to the general public, especially those who might be considering making changes to their homes. The articles present everyday life using the universal design features of the exhibit: for example, photos featured families gathered in the kitchen as they prepared a meal and a mother brushing her daughter's hair at the bathroom sink.

Both stories show how convenient and attractive universal design can be and how its features can be used by individuals across the lifespan: children, middle-aged and older adults, and even those using a wheelchair. With the help of Lowe's, the project staff has been able to bring universal design out of the classroom and into the homes of consumers.

Making the Retail-University Partnership Work

Taking an educational outreach project off campus to a non-traditional setting such as a retail store requires that educators who are not in the retail field “do business” differently. Specifically, educators must communicate across fields and disciplines, learn to educate in nonclassroom environments, and recognize the needs of multiple partners; however, there are few models from which they can draw.

Environment: Workshops held in retail stores offer advantages: for example, consumers who are especially interested in making changes to their homes will be in these stores. Further, the products associated with universal design and the expertise of the store employees are available. However, retail locations often do not provide an appropriate educational setting for teaching or training. For example, locations in a retail store may be noisy, with frequent announcements being broadcast for customers. Often workshops must take place in a meeting room or break room at the back of the store that may be hard for the participants to find. Alternatively, a workshop held out in the store may not have proper boundaries to keep customers from wandering through. Both types of locations frequently have poor lighting and few electrical outlets, and are less conducive to learning.

Work style: Methods for accomplishing educational objectives in academic and retail environments can differ significantly. Academicians need to outline goals, define learning objectives, and schedule project events. In contrast, store managers are concerned with retail profits and employee turnover in a quickly changing retail environment with new advertising campaigns and products arriving daily. Planning times have to be flexible to accommodate that environment, but can be frustrating to the instructor who finds that store personnel suddenly need to leave a workshop to answer a customer question or locate a shipment for the store manager. Further, space that was promised for a community workshop may

need to be used at the last minute for a regional staff meeting on a new directive. On the positive side, faculty have learned from these experiences to be more flexible and to capture opportunities that suddenly present themselves, and store employees have learned to recognize the need to honor meetings and deadlines as best they can. In this project, the retail staff overall were enthusiastic, energetic, and great at selling the ideas to the consumer.

Timing: Coordinating academic and retail calendars was another challenge. For example, the academic calendar poses limitations; faculty and students think in ten-week blocks of time. Students are available only for that time period, and they need to be informed about universal design and educated before they can help conduct workshops; the workshops therefore have to be scheduled in a roughly six-week period. The retail store has its own seasonal calendar that determines when store employees are busy and do not have additional time to help with workshops. While these time constraints were sometimes challenging, they also presented opportunities for students to use their weekends or evenings rather than the busy work week for course-related activities. Students' interest often expanded beyond the quarter as they volunteered to help with future workshops.

Audience: Another challenge for the faculty is teaching adult learners, an area in which extension educators have more experience. In the classroom, faculty have a good idea of their audience and the needs of their students. Information is delivered in forty-eight-minute lectures with supplementary readings and homework. But the general public has a variety of needs and learning styles that are not always well served in a traditional classroom setting. Adult learners are more interested in information that they can apply to a problem at hand and are not likely to sign up for a "class" to get the information they desire. What is the best way to reach the consumer who comes to Lowe's with a home improvement project in mind and only limited time to complete it? He or she is looking for quick specific information to help (for example) replace the downstairs toilet. Product information is needed; this is not the time for an hour-long workshop on universal design. Working with adult learners helped faculty sharpen their presentation materials to be concise and relevant. Based on questions from the audience, faculty and students learned how to respond and revise information to fit specific situations.

Outcomes Associated with the Project

This outreach project has contributed to faculty scholarship in several ways. For example, the experience resulted in the creation of a new practicum course, providing direct input into course materials and classroom instruction. OSU faculty were recognized for their use of service-learning methodology to develop innovative educational experiences. The project has generated research data from the home assessments and workshop evaluations on the use of universal design, consumer preferences, and aging in place. Numerous conference presentations, dissertations, and theses have been produced as a result of this project; a research journal article has been published (*Price, Zavotka, and Teaford 2004*), and others are under way. Finally, in 2004 faculty received the Extension Housing Outreach Award: national-level peer recognition of their expertise in universal design.

Students have benefited from this outreach project in numerous ways. They have improved their communication and leadership skills by participating in teaching workshops and conducting home assessments. Their knowledge of universal design and their workshop experiences have made students more employable after graduation; once working, they are actually teaching their fellow employees about universal design. Student evaluations of their own skills at the end of the course indicated that 85 percent felt “very sure” that they had a good understanding of the principles of universal design, could analyze issues of older adults and their homes, develop specific solutions to design problems, and evaluate a community education program related to universal design. Further, 100 percent felt that they could apply their knowledge of universal design to home assessments and workshops. (*Zavotka, Teaford, and Fulkerson 2006*) Lowe’s has increased national awareness of universal design as a result of this project. Through the in-store community workshops, the universal design exhibits at the Molly Caren Agricultural Center, and articles in its nationally distributed magazine, Lowe’s is now identified with the universal design concept. Ongoing community partnerships have also developed from this project. Lowe’s community service coordinator and the vice president of Dave Fox Remodeling are permanent members of the Universal Design Project team. Through their participation, the universal design concept has been presented to a wide variety of professional and community organizations, including the National Kitchen and Bath Association, National Association of Home Remodelers, Columbus Fire Department Safety Division, and Columbus Mayor’s Office.

Future Plans

The partnership between the Ohio State University and Lowe's has greatly expanded the Universal Design Project. It has provided access to consumers who are interested in making changes to their homes and to resources and materials that have enhanced our outreach efforts. Below are a number of ideas for further development of this endeavor.

- Lowe's has agreed to fund an educational video on the universal design exhibit. The purpose is to take the exhibit at the Molly Caren Agricultural Center to consumers outside central Ohio. This virtual tour of the exhibit may also be made available on the Internet so consumers can see and "experience" universal design, thereby further expanding the audience. Such a tour would give consumers more information and a better sense of how to use the products than a photo or slide show. They would be able to point and click on the specific features that interest them.
- There are also discussions about taking portable parts of the universal design exhibit as well as video clips to other locations where consumers who are interested in home modifications would gather: for example, home and garden shows and organizational meetings and conferences.
- The exhibit has been used for other classes in and outside the faculty's departments. It could also be used for other programs such as engineering, construction science, disability studies, and architecture and city planning.
- In addition to helping to gather data on consumer interest in and knowledge about universal design, the exhibit can provide a laboratory in which researchers can study how consumers actually use universally designed products such as appliances and bathroom fixtures. In the future this may be of interest to manufacturers of such products.

Conclusion

This project has from the beginning focused on a community-based assets model in which each partner has provided resources. This collaborative continues to bring together the university and Lowe's Home Improvement Stores, and the results have been greater than the sum of the parts. In the early stages of this project, faculty, students, Lowe's personnel, and extension educators all contributed and shared their knowledge about universal design.

This allowed them to develop the programs and training outreach outlined in this article. Today the Universal Design Project has gone from a developing program to a sustainable project, but it also seeks to expand its impact. The original partners are now looking toward new audiences such as interior designers, occupational therapists and other health care providers, real estate agents, builders, and remodelers. These new partners are providing not only feedback but further information to the original partners. For example, the remodelers are giving feedback about consumer preferences and the state of the housing market. Likewise, information about new products and consumer needs comes from Lowe's employees. This means that the partnership can continue to enhance the academic community as well as the retail marketplace.

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