



Figure 1. Marketing and promotion team preparing event mailing lists, flyers, and signs.

Using Poinsettia Cultivar Trials to Fulfill the University's Teaching Mission: Experiential Student Learning Through an Open House Project

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Figure 2. Sample promotional tri-fold flyer for mailing and campus distribution.

Introduction

The United States floriculture industry's value exceeds \$5.4 billion. Illinois, with revenues exceeding \$118.6 million, is ranked 10th in floriculture production (USDA, 2006). While most recent University of Illinois (UIUC) graduates have obtained horticulture related employment, an informal skill gaps analysis of Illinois horticulture leaders indicated that many graduates lacked diagnostic, analytical, and effective communication skills. Industry leaders also stated that graduates needed business and personnel management skills. The development of higher level thinking in students is directly related to the mission of land grant universities in that we are charged with molding students into successful leaders in their respective fields. Most academic settings however do not provide students with sufficient managerial skills.

The UIUC floriculture courses strive to enhance higher level thinking in business management and crop production through direct contact of students with greenhouse managers, greenhouse systems, crops, and the general public. The delivery of this knowledge is achieved through a combination of lectures, group projects, fieldtrips, and web assisted instruction. A recent addition to the classes is community service projects.

Community service events connect students with the local community and agribusinesses while building team and managerial skills. A "Poinsettia Open House" module was prepared and implemented in the UIUC Greenhouse Management and Production Class with the following objectives:

- 1) provide interaction with the public,
- 2) reinforce production techniques presented in class,
- 3) provide a scenario in which management, communication, and assessment skills are practiced, and
- 4) introduce students to basic research techniques.

The objective of this presentation is to provide an overview of the "Poinsettia Open House" module used during 2006 and to promote discussion on the use of community service events in undergraduate classrooms.

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Materials and Methods

During the first week of the semester, students were introduced to the "Poinsettia Open House" module and assigned to one of four teams; Marketing and promotion, Crop production, Packaging and shipping, or Event coordination and design. Teams were provided a list of responsibilities which when combined and implemented would result in a successful event. The faculty instructor maintained the position of event general manager and set the timing of event tasks and facilitated discussion sessions. Weekly discussion sessions were scheduled during class to provide each team an opportunity to highlight accomplishments, communicate needs, develop consensus for ideas, and focus energy towards specific tasks. Meetings were conducted as informal roundtable sessions.

Team 1: Marketing and Promotion



Team 2: Crop Production



Team 3: Packaging and Shipping



Team 4: Event Coordination and Design



Team 1 Responsibilities

- 1) Create marketing and promotional mailers, flyers, signs, and advertisements
- 2) Coordinate event promotion with local media outlets
- 3) Develop and conduct consumer preference survey
- 4) "Behind-the-Scenes" tour for industry collaborators
- 5) Obtain event images
- 6) Ensure that quality and health is maintained during the event

Team 2 Responsibilities

- 1) Meet crop market date
- 2) Weekly graphical tracks and physiological development
- 3) Monitoring the greenhouse environment
- 4) Ensure that crop meets industry standards
- 5) Coordinate equipment usage and crop delivery
- 6) Ensure that quality and health is maintained during the open house
- 7) Assess poinsettia crop quality before and after the event

Team 3 Responsibilities

- 1) Identify and acquire transportation and staging equipment
- 2) Package and decorate plants with value added products
- 3) Deliver plants to event
- 4) Remove the value added items and return plants to original greenhouse location after event
- 5) Assist teams with displays and signage during staging of event
- 6) Ensure that quality and health is maintained during the event

Team 4 Responsibilities

- 1) Identify and acquire event space
- 2) Coordinate space and staging equipment so that poinsettia cultivars are highlighted
- 3) Coordinate staging, staffing, and breakdown of the event
- 4) Provide a "Go-To" person during the open house
- 5) Maintain event site so the public has a meaningful experience
- 6) Ensure that quality and health is maintained during the event



Event Impacts



Consumer Preference Survey for Color, Price, and Value Added Products



Cultivar Evaluation for Commercial Companies



Educational Displays



Student Satisfaction

Results and Discussion

Student teams produced poinsettia plants, promoted the open house, coordinated the event's daily activities, and evaluated the event's success. The tasks and decisions associated with crop production and the open house challenged the students, promoted team building, and enhanced communication, analytical, and problem solving skills.

Based on surveys, the "Poinsettia Open House" module proved to effectively promote teambuilding, diagnostic, problem solving, and communication skills in student learners. Student uncertainty about the project's value and logistical challenges were evidenced during the first few weekly business meetings. Students desired more details about the project's scope, logistics, and expectations. Designed to be student driven, these concerns were addressed during weekly team meetings. Student ownership of the project occurred near the middle of the semester. Students experienced less apprehension as the project progressed until one week before the open house.

The week before the open house challenged students' patience, communication skills, and team dynamics. As these challenges were expected, the faculty facilitator guided the students so that the event was a meaningful growth experience.

Extensive media coverage by local television, radio, and newspapers resulted in the highest attendance ever (more than 250) for this event including a delegation of international colleagues from the United States Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program. Students excelled at engaging the public during the event and willingly shared their expertise and class experiences. The public engagement enlightened students about public opinions on horticulture and provided for a meaningful and memorable learning opportunity for the students.

Students were evaluated based on event execution, team participation, weighted peer/faculty assessments, and formal presentations. University and industry collaborators received valuable plant growth and consumer preference data. Students indicated that "the discovery experience was critical for this class" and the instructor's ability to "challenge students and yet treat them as colleagues was appreciated". Students expressed a high level of satisfaction for this module.

Conclusions

- Open house events can be valuable in the classroom to develop teambuilding, communication, and problem solving skills in student learners.
- Faculty members must plan, be flexible, be facilitators, and be a knowledge resource during active learning.