

Introduction

Cooperative Extension systems play a vital role in disseminating knowledge from universities to diverse audiences across the United States. Understanding the needs of stakeholders is crucial for effective communication about programming and services (Abrams et al., 2010). Previous literature emphasizes the necessity of needs assessments to ensure that Extension programs are tailored to meet the requirements of target audiences (Benge & Warner, 2019). The mission of Extension is to translate research into educational programs and learning activities, reaching homes, businesses, farms, and commissions (USDA NIFA, 2019). Needs assessments contribute to the relevance and effectiveness of Extension by ensuring that Extension programs are designed and developed with the target audience in mind (Benge et al., 2019). Additionally, needs assessments may offer an opportunity to co-create the Extension brand through the needs and experiences of the stakeholders of a state.

Rural and Urban Extension Needs

Cooperative Extension, rooted in the land-grant system through the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, originated for universities to disseminate research-based knowledge to the public. The aim was to bring education to the people by bridging the knowledge gap and, as a result, improving farm, home, and community practices (True, 1929). Historically, Extension programs focused on addressing the needs of rural populations, where agriculture, conservation, and land use were central (NIFA, n.d.). However, as decades passed, historical moments and gradual trends led to a shift in Extension priorities, such as the technological advances of the World War II era (Birkhaeuser et al., 1991), rural population migrations to urban areas (Henning et al., 2014; Webster & Ingram, 2007), and urban expansion (Campbell & Edwards, 2024). The shift of populations from rural to urban areas has been occurring even before the inception of Cooperative Extension (Tiffany, 2017), but is more pronounced in today's current state, with 80% of people in the United States living in urban areas (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). However, this trend has not been the case for the most recent decade, which has seen a .01% influx of population to rural areas since 2020 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Because Extension's mission is to serve individuals, families, and communities (NIFA, n.d.), regardless of geographical marker, it has adapted over time to address the needs of increasingly urban populations, resulting in a gradual shift and additions to its programming (Birkhaeuser et al., 1991; Campbell & Edwards, 2024; Henning et al., 2014; Tiffany, 2017; Webster & Ingram, 2007).

Literature Review

Extension is uniquely positioned to solve the problems of both rural and urban counterparts because of its ability to deliver tailored, research-based information and education from the experts and resources of land-grant universities (Peters, 2014). Urban Extension programming has been a growing priority area since the Ford Foundation reported the need for further efforts and offered grants for programming to address the needs in 1966 (Ford Foundation, 1966). Since then, a broad expansion of programming occurred with foci on gardening and nutrition education (Steele, 1981); urban agriculture (Campbell et al., 2023; Diekmann et al., 2017; Reynolds, 2011) and urban food systems (Dobbins et al., 2021); fostering positive development of urban youth (Bothell et al, 2017; Warner et al, 2017); strengthening

urban community resources; building healthy lives in urban settings; achieving socioeconomic success (Warner et al., 2017); providing and protecting urban water systems (Obropta, 2017; Warner et al., 2017); and conserving energy and natural resources (Warner et al., 2017).

In a study done with urban farmers residing in a rural state, the priorities identified as needs from Extension were market pricing and strategies, creation of co-ops, access to appropriate equipment for small-scale farms, and maintenance and/or retention of an operational workforce (Sanders et al., 2021). Sanders et al. (2021) noted that these findings are individualized and operation-specific rather than generalizable about all farmers, which highlights an important consideration that urban needs may differ based on the degree of rurality of the given state. Research on rural communities has outlined challenges for Extension to address, including rural food systems and rural grocery initiatives (Miller-Klugesherz et al., 2024); culturally sustaining approaches in Extension education and engagement (Robinson et al., 2024; Zagonel et al., 2022); rural adaptability and remote work readiness (Hill et al., 2020); aging-related community needs (Yelland et al., 2019); opioid misuse (Steen et al., 2021); and health and obesity (Brown et al., 2020). Priority areas are not always necessarily different between urban and rural communities. Ruemenapp (2017, p. 17) states simply, "The complexities of issues found in cities do not stop at the city boundary or the rural county line." However, the literature shows that the process of facilitating programming, and the overall structure of the system can look different (Hains et al., 2021). Additionally, each audience may prefer to receive information in different ways regardless of residency (Clement et al., 1995; Ruemenapp, 2017; Zagonel et al., 2022).

A common thread among Extension programming is related to the marketing of Extension (McLeod-Morin et al., 2023; Probyn et al., 2005; Sanders et al., 2021; Zagonel et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023). In urban populations, this gap may be more prominent among new users of Extension (Probyn et al., 2005; Sanders et al., 2021). Previous literature also suggests internal barriers may exist for Extension to meet the needs of urban audiences, and it should familiarize itself with the complexities of the specific urban environment (Ruemenapp, 2017). As Extension and audience needs continue to evolve, emerging trends such as the integration of technology, increased collaboration across sectors, and innovative funding models will be key to meeting these distinct needs (Baker et al., 2025; Zagonel et al., 2022). By embracing these trends, Extension can continue its long history of playing a pivotal role in addressing the complex challenges of communities in rural and urban areas in the years to come.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by a conceptual framework that included branding, organizational identity, and tone. The concept of branding in Extension, although recent in the literature, has garnered attention (Abrams et al., 2010; Baker et al., 2011; Settle et al., 2014; Settle et al., 2018; Zagonel et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023) as a fundamental strategy suitable for recognition and trust in Extension programs. Branding, as a theory and practice, aims to identify products, create awareness, and influence meaning (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Effective brand management is strategic and holistic, encompassing market positioning, audience outreach, and brand preservation (Takalkar, 2014; Wood, 2000). Within the context of Extension, branding efforts raise awareness for the university's teaching, research, and Extension activities, fostering positive attitudes among stakeholders (Abrams et al., 2010). It is essential to recognize that branding in Extension is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that evolves over time to maintain

stakeholders' connection to the brand (Kornberger, 2010; Zagonel et al., 2019). Both internal (employees) and external (clients or end-users) audiences contribute to marketing the brand and ensuring excellence in programming and services provided by Cooperative Extension services. A positive brand image is essential for garnering stakeholder support and fostering brand loyalty (Merrilees & Fry, 2002; Settle et al., 2019). The perception of a brand by stakeholders is influenced by a range of factors, including their experiences, interactions, and the brand promise communicated to them (Burmam et al., 2009; Keller, 1993). Stakeholders' satisfaction and experiences with all brand touchpoints determine whether the brand fulfills its promise (De Chernatony & Harris, 2000). Brand communications play a crucial role in shaping stakeholders' perceptions and experiences (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010).

Corporate Branding and Organizational Identity

Corporate branding presents an opportunity for organizations to leverage vision, culture, and image to promote services (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Service-based organizations like Cooperative Extension systems can benefit from corporate branding strategies, which facilitate consistent messaging, stakeholder trust, and brand recognition (Brady et al., 2005; Krishnan & Hartline, 2001). It is important to recognize that branding not only influences interaction between the organization and the public but also interactions within the organization, particularly between employees and the organization itself, underscoring the importance of employee engagement in successful brand management (De Chernatony, 2001; Kornberger, 2010).

Effective branding serves as a promise to the public, signaling a commitment to a certain level of performance, which necessitates collective efforts within the organization to fulfill this promise (Tybout & Calkins, 2005). The mission of land-grant universities, including providing education, research, and public outreach, underscores the pivotal role of Cooperative Extension services in transferring research information and technology to citizens (Baker et al., 2011). Branding in Cooperative Extension systems is essential for fostering stakeholder engagement, ensuring effective communication, and maintaining organizational viability. By conducting needs assessments and implementing strategic branding initiatives, Extension systems can effectively communicate their value proposition and address the evolving needs of stakeholders. Building a strong corporate brand is essential for enhancing visibility, trust, and support, which are critical for the sustainability and success of Extension programs.

Tone

Tone in organizational communication and branding points to the way a message or information is transmitted to the receiver. Specifically, the choice of words, style, and emotional undertone (Barcelos et al., 2018). Tone in Extension communication can be crucial for establishing a connection with the audience in delivering university knowledge. The tone of communication is an integral component of organizational identity development. There are several types of tones organizations can take in their communication efforts. Often these tones are characterized as conversational or human and corporate or formal. A first-person voice and personal narratives increase perceptions of social presence and interactivity in online communication (Park & Cameron, 2014). By using a friendly and personal tone in communication Park and Cameron (2014) suggest organizations can make people feel more connected and engaged. By adopting this approach, organizations can strengthen their brand

identity and foster a more relatable and trustworthy organizational image. Kelleher (2018) defined a conversational human voice as a style of communication that is engaging and natural. This style is recognized by the public through interactions between the organization's members and the public. Taking a human tone can be beneficial in contexts where the audience may be seeking enjoyment. Whenever people are seeking information to make an important decision, a corporate tone may be more beneficial (Barcelos et al., 2018). Organizational reputation is crucial as it sets the organization apart from its competitors and encourages ongoing support from stakeholders (Fombrun & van Riel, 2003). Brands can adopt a human voice and tone to better create a sense of closeness and reliability, which can enhance consumer brand perception (Kelleher, 2009; Park & Cameron, 2014). Taking this approach can be useful in mitigating negative brand reputation (Shamari & Schaefers, 2015).

Brand Co-Creation

Historically, corporate branding literature has focused on internal brand creation; however, recent literature has challenged this idea and has incorporated the audience in the co-creation of a brand (Kristal et al., 2020; Taylor, 2016). The concept of co-brand creation builds on the idea that audiences are an integral part of building the organization's or business's brand through feedback loops. Essentially, through the active exchange of ideas, a brand can establish its identity, and the audience takes that identity and shapes it into their own perception of the brand. As the audience shares feedback on the brand through social sharing, word of mouth, direct reputation feedback, and the tone they use when discussing the brand, they co-create the new brand in a collaborative process. Co-creation of a brand explicitly frames the brand as something that is built collaboratively between the organization and its stakeholders, including customers, employees, and partners (Sarasvuo et al., 2016).

Two theories that highlight the role of audiences in co-creating a brand are Customer-Based Brand Equity and Active Audience Theory. Together, these theories explain how an organization's brand is shaped by audience experience and feedback. Customer-Based Brand Equity emphasizes the importance of customer perception in building brand value, while Active Audience Theory posits that audiences actively interpret and respond to brand messages, making their experiences and communications crucial to shaping the brand's meaning and strength through dialogue, rather than simply being passive recipients of a pre-defined brand identity.

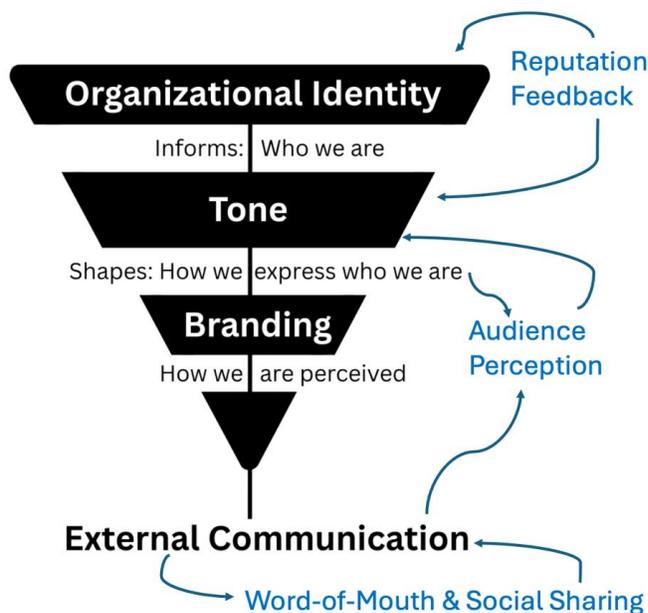
Audience feedback can lead to the co-creation of a brand through feedback loops, collective meaning-making, social construct of a brand, and authenticity and trust (Taylor, 2016). Feedback loops from audiences (both positive, negative, and neutral) create a feedback loop that allows organizations to understand their impact and adjust their strategies. From this collective meaning-making can emerge. Through social media and other platforms, audiences can engage in a public dialogue that shapes the collective meaning of a brand, often in ways the organization did not initially intend. In this sense, the brand can be seen as a social construct. The audience's interpretation and use of the brand in their daily lives contribute to its meaning, making the brand a social construct that evolves over time through constant interaction (Sarasvuo et al., 2022). Once an audience is intimately involved in the co-creation of a brand, authenticity and trust are formed. When an organization acknowledges and incorporates audience feedback into its brand narrative, it can build greater trust and authenticity, further strengthening the brand.

We built the conceptual framework for this qualitative study using branding, organizational identity, tone, and brand co-creation to guide our research questions, data

collection, and analysis. Each component contributes in unique and interrelated ways. In the framework, branding serves as the interface between the organization and its environment, shaping how identity and tone are communicated and perceived. Organizational identity is the foundation that informs branding and tone. It's the "who we are" that drives "how we present ourselves. Tone acts as the bridge between identity and branding. It operationalizes identity into communicative acts that shape brand perception. The feedback loops in the conceptual framework build the co-creation component of the brand strategy. The organization presents the organizational identity through tone and branding elements within its external communication, then the audience engages in feedback loops related to the brand reputation, perceptions of tone and brand elements, and ultimately create their own version of the brand through sharing about the brand in their own way with their own tone and perceptions. We have visualized this framework in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework Connecting How Organizational Identity, Tone, and Co-Branding Shape Communication of an Organization



Purpose and Research Questions

This study's purpose was to manage the University of Maine Extension system's brand through a deeper understanding of the perceptions of internal and external audiences. We sought to understand how different audience groups, like rural and urban residents, perceived the brand and their needs related to the brand's identity. It was of additional interest to understand the organizational identity through a co-creation process of the brand, meaning it was important to hear from participants in their own words using their own tone to see the brand identification from stakeholder groups. The purpose of this study was fulfilled through the following research questions:

RQ1a: What are audiences' perceptions of University of Maine Extension system brand?

RQ1b: What tone is used when audiences engage in discourse about the University of Maine Extension system brand?

RQ2: What are the differences in rural and non-rural perspectives of the University of Maine Extension brand?

Methods

An online portal was set up to collect qualitative data from a purposive sample of individuals who could not meet with the team in an individual or group setting. The portal was housed on a website separate from the University of Maine Extension website and was shared in multiple ways to reach as many internal and external audience members as possible. The link to the portal and request for participation were shared across internal listservs and shared with external groups like commodity organizations and state agencies. External groups were selected based on their connection to Extension through the agricultural and community issues they worked on or the state agencies that worked with Extension as external partners. Additionally, the link was sent to volunteers and past participants in Extension programs. A link to the portal was also provided on the University of Maine Extension website. Groups were intentionally selected in this purposive sampling method based on their experience with the University of Maine Extension. The online portal was open for respondents to submit information during the following specific dates in the Fall of 2023: August 10 to September 18, October 4 to 14, and November 9 to 19.

This research is part of a larger study that began with in-depth interviews and focus groups. In the initial phase of the study, the questioning route consisted of 8 questions asked of people in the in-person focus groups and interviews. For the current study, which sought to get more in-depth data from a more diverse group of people across the state, we refined the questions to two essential open-ended questions and demographic questions. The reason for this was two-fold, the questioning route was too long for the hour allotted time for the previous focus groups and interviews, thus shortening the number of questions made sense. Additionally, in the initial analysis of the previous data, researchers realized that the deepest responses related to the organizational needs and brand perceptions came from participants' responses to two key questions focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the Extension system. The concept of asking fewer questions in qualitative research aligns with thought leaders in marketing research who argue that less may be more when asking questions in qualitative work (Relihan, 2024). The two open-ended questions asked about respondents' perceptions of the advantages and challenges of University of Maine Extension, followed by basic demographic information, which included gender, race, and place of residence (rural on a farm, rural but not on a farm, suburban, urban). In the data analysis, we collapsed categories of residence to form two groups of rural and non-rural. One hundred and fifty individuals responded to "What is great about the University of Maine Extension," and 145 individuals responded to "What are challenges facing the University of Maine Extension?" One hundred and fifty individuals answered the demographic questions.

Data were analyzed in NVivo software using open coding with two human coders to identify major themes or commonalities within the data using the constant comparative method (Fram, 2013; Glaser, 1965). After reading through the data, research team members identified key themes and concepts within the data by creating codes and continuously comparing these with each other. Then those codes were applied to relevant text segments. Simultaneously, the NVivo sentiment analysis feature was utilized to capture the text's emotional tone. Initially

NVivo codes for sentiment on a scale of very negative, moderately negative, neutral, moderately positive, very positive. Sentiment analysis relies on natural language processing technology to code textual responses efficiently (Mao et al., 2024). The combined analysis allowed the researchers to examine the main themes that emerged from the open coding process as well as how respondents expressed their opinions or feelings about those themes based on the sentiment analysis. Researchers in this study collapsed the auto-code scale down to positive, negative, or neutral codes before beginning human coding checks. Two researchers reviewed the quotes placed in positive, negative, and neutral categories and made adjustments to categories where the auto-coding system had taken the words out of context. One example where this occurred is in a code where the participant mentioned how devastating PFAS had been to their operation but were expressing how they appreciated how the Extension system had handled this crisis situation. The adjustments to the auto sentiment were done in multiple waves. One set of adjustments were made in the first data analysis phase prior to presentation of data at the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Human Sciences Conference in 2025. Then, researchers reviewed the data again and made adjustments to sentiment based on reviewer feedback. The researchers manually reviewed all prior codes for sentiment and made adjustments using the established coding procedure, which defines “Positive” as text that expresses satisfaction, approval, happiness, or a favorable view of the topic. “Neutral” is text that is objective, factual, or expresses no strong feelings. It may also be a mixed comment with both positive and negative elements. “Negative” is text that expresses dissatisfaction, frustration, disappointment, or an unfavorable view (Lumivero, 2025). During the initial human coding process, ten changes were made to the auto-coding sentiment, and in the second round, eight changes were made when recoding sentiment.

In qualitative research, past experiences and knowledge of the study team could bias how the research is conducted and analyzed (Darwin Holmes, 2020). Research subjectivity statements seek to provide awareness of potential biases and allow the reader to critically evaluate the findings of the study (Preissle, 2008). The researcher who led this study is a faculty member with experience in Extension communication research and who is currently employed by a different state Extension than the one under investigation. The entire study team was also currently employed by an Extension system. The study was funded by the University of Maine Extension. The researchers were transparent about their association with another state Extension system and strived to provide a balanced interpretation of the data that was considerate of all viewpoints.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study centers on the lack of generalizability of the findings due to the qualitative nature of data collection and analysis. The sample for this study only included individuals of one Extension system and therefore are not generalizable to all Extension systems. However, transferability of the findings to a similar Extension system may be possible. Assumptions were made that respondents were open and honest with their responses and had a basic knowledge of Extension. The use of sentiment analysis had limitations as opinions are subjective and could be seen as irrational. Also, context of opinions matter and when machine coding is conducted intent of opinion might be misinterpreted. The addition of open coding by human coders helped to lessen the impact of this limitation (Dilmegani & Alp, 2025).

Results

Emergent themes and tone are discussed simultaneously in the results to offer a deep understanding of participants’ responses. Eight emergent themes were identified related to what’s “great about the University of Maine Extension” and nine emergent themes related to what “challenges exist for the University of Maine Extension”. Within the themes, positive, negative, and neutral examples are noted.

Perceptions and Tone Used by Internal & External Audiences of University of Maine Extension System

The overall tone of participant responses was more positive when discussing what’s “great about the University of Maine Extension than what “challenges exist for the University of Maine Extension”. When discussing challenges, the largest number of responses were neutral in tone (Table 1), rather than negative, as may have been expected when asked specifically about challenges.

Table 1
Sentiment Analysis of Online Portal Open Responses

	■ Positive	■ Neutral	■ Negative	Total
Great about the University of Maine Extension	76	72	2	150
Challenges for the University of Maine Extension	15	113	22	150

Note. Positive is text that expresses satisfaction, approval, happiness, or a favorable view of the topic. Neutral is text that is objective, factual, or expresses no strong feelings. It may also be a mixed comment with both positive and negative elements. Negative is text that expresses dissatisfaction, frustration, disappointment, or an unfavorable view (Lumivero, 2025).

The analysis of stakeholder responses revealed several themes highlighting the strengths and challenges of the University of Maine Extension. A description of the themes, highlighting both the strengths and challenges, for the University of Maine Extension program and connection to organizational branding is presented in Table 2. Tables 3 and 4 include examples of quotes to illustrate these themes.

Table 2
Description of Themes that Emerged from the Data

Theme	Description	Great or Challenge
Resources	Tangible and educational assets such as classes, workshops, and research-based materials that empower individuals and families. Positions Extension as an accessible, science-driven organization.	Both
Information	Reliable, research-based knowledge on topics like gardening, health, and food safety.	Both

Theme	Description	Great or Challenge
	Reinforces Extension's credibility as a trusted source for accurate solutions.	
Relationships	Community connections among participants, volunteers, and staff that foster trust and collaboration. Highlights Extension as people-centered and partnership-driven.	Both
Human Resources	Expertise and professionalism of staff and volunteers integrated into local communities. Builds Extension's reputation for quality service and responsiveness.	Both
Volunteer	Opportunities for civic engagement and personal growth through programs. Strengthens Extension's image as a platform for leadership and community service.	Great
Brand	Identity rooted in tradition, trust, and adaptability. Reflects Extension's long-standing presence and alignment with programs like 4-H.	Great
Flexibility/ Convenience	Accommodation of participants' schedules and commitments. Positions Extension as inclusive and convenient. Ease of accessing programs and resources online or in person. Enhances Extension's appeal as user-friendly and responsive.	Great
Organizational Culture/Dynamic	Internal structure, policies, and operational practices that shape Extension's identity. Includes decision-making, flexibility of roles, and responsiveness to local needs. Positions Extension as adaptive and community-focused.	Challenge
Funding	Financial resources necessary to sustain programs and staff. Highlights Extension's commitment to long-term viability and innovation, branding it as forward-thinking and solution-oriented.	Challenge
Marketing	Outreach strategies to engage diverse audiences and promote programs effectively. Strengthens Extension's brand as visible, approachable, and relevant in a competitive information landscape.	Challenge

Theme	Description	Great or Challenge
External	Partnerships and collaborations with organizations, agencies, and stakeholders. Expands Extension's reach and credibility, branding it as a connector and leader in community development.	Challenge
Convenience/Access	Ease of participation and service availability, including physical presence and office hours. Positions Extension as user-friendly and committed to reducing barriers for inclusivity.	Challenge

Table 3

Online Portal Responses to "What is Great about the University of Maine Extension?" (n = 150)

Theme	n	Examples
Resources	103	<p>☒ "The Cooperative Extension provides a wealth of resources to farms, farmers, backyard gardeners, and the public on farming, agriculture, business planning, child and family development, and a wide variety of topic areas."</p> <p>☒ "I have been very involved in the [name removed] project and volunteer at a [name removed] garden. I spent several years helping [name removed] train new [Master Gardeners]. The hands-on class was the highlight of the program, and it educated many new students."</p> <p>☒ "I have taken many classes through Extension, as well as contacted them with any questions I have about trees, plants, and gardening. I attended their [Master Gardener] program in 2020. I have sent soil to be analyzed. I refer many friends/neighbors to the Extension if they have questions/concerns about gardening, trees, etc..."</p> <p>☒ "Extension has been a part of my life my whole life. Have attended way too many programs but can say that I have taken something away from every program that I have attended. Fruit tree pruning, backyard chickens, preserving, feeding a crowd, sewing, soil testing, just to name a few."</p>
Information	37	<p>☒ "Prior to becoming a board member I had used the Extension service for soil sampling for my own gardens. I was able to use the resulting information to improve the overall health of garden soil and gain more knowledge about soil structure, necessary soil components, how, why, and when to add amendments, and have information as to use organic as well as conventional amendments."</p> <p>☒ "The children enjoy 4H. I have not attended any programs, I access these via computer the information pertaining to local pests, agriculture, and food stuffs."</p> <p>☒ Excellent source for good quality up to date information. I have reached out to extension for help with my small farm - watched videos</p>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
		on pruning berries and fruit trees, used extension soil sampling on my property, taken in person classes.
Relationship	9	<p>☒ "The relationships built with our participants is at the core of what makes University of Maine Extension great. The longevity of relationships with families (i.e., being involved with youth from ages 5 until they age out at 19 is a gift)."</p> <p>☒ "I have learned many new and sustainable gardening practices, have become more aware of the growing problem of food insecurity in my state and county, and have had the great opportunity to meet gardeners from all over the state."</p> <p>☒ I think that University of Maine Extension should partner with additional organizations with similar missions such as the Grange (agricultural legislation), Maine Farmland Trust or even Maine chef or restaurant-focused events (food system end to end).</p>
Human Resources	41	<p>☒ "I enjoy my work in Extension and working with my clients and most Extension and [name removed] colleagues. I feel that Extension overall has a great reputation in the state, and we have some strong partnering organizations with the Maine Dept of Ag and [name removed] and CDC that I enjoy working with."</p> <p>☒ "Maine Cooperative Extension faculty and staff are well integrated into the communities/industries they serve and have the interest of their stakeholders first and foremost in their research/programing."</p> <p>☒ "The knowledge and expertise of the instructors and guest lecturers."</p>
Volunteer	17	<p>☒ "I love all the gardening programs that I have attended and also the focus on volunteering."</p> <p>☒ "I am a Maine Master Gardener Volunteer. Through their classes and the volunteer opportunities, I became aware of Food Insecurity and the University of Maine [name removed] program. I've been part of a community garden where harvested food was donated to local food pantries. This is a vital program for Maine's citizens. Also. I am more aware of the need for planting Maine native plants to support our pollinators. No pollinators? No food!"</p> <p>☒ Extension is great in that the organization is designed and structured to help the community and allow for volunteers to engage. I love that folks call and inquire Extension about all sorts of needs, big and small, and that we are often the 'first stop'. Extension is also a great community partner to have.</p>
Brand	6	<p>☒ "Free/mostly free resources. Strong brand identity in the community particularly with 4-H as a place for youth to build necessary life skills. Participation in 4-H as a young adult contributed greatly to who I am today and how I interact with and affect change in others."</p> <p>☒ "Local support of community gardeners with great educational programs."</p> <p>☒ " Extension has been a resource to agriculture as far back as I can remember- five generations in my family."</p>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
Flexibility/ Convenience	4	<p>☒ "Flexibility in regard to paid time off. Connection with colleagues and health benefits."</p> <p>☒ "Opportunities for after hour activities for kids are great!"</p> <p>☒ "I really appreciated that the master gardening classes were available online."</p>

Note. Other comments that did not fit a theme and were removed from this table for space reasons.

In terms of resources, stakeholders consistently praised the variety of educational materials and programs offered by the Cooperative Extension, catering to a wide range of audiences. This sentiment was echoed in statements such as "I have taken many classes through Extension" and "Extension has been a part of my whole life," emphasizing the longstanding impact of Extension initiatives on individuals and communities. Additionally, stakeholders emphasized the importance of relationship-building within University of Maine Extension, citing the core role of established connections with participants in fostering a sense of community and trust. The longevity of these relationships, spanning from childhood through adulthood, was highlighted as a significant asset of University of Maine Extension. Furthermore, stakeholders recognized the value of human resources within University of Maine Extension, commending the professionalism, expertise, and dedication exhibited by faculty and staff. The integrated nature of Extension personnel within the communities they serve was noted as a key strength, reflecting a commitment to prioritizing stakeholder interests in research and programming endeavors. This sentiment was echoed in statements like "University of Maine Cooperative Extension faculty and staff are well integrated into the communities/industries they serve and have the interest of their stakeholders first and foremost in their research/programming." Overall, stakeholders identified brand identity as a cornerstone of University of Maine Extension's success.

Conversely, stakeholders also highlighted challenges confronting University of Maine Extension, spanning themes such as resources, organizational culture, marketing, information access, relationship-building, human resources, funding, and convenience (Table 4).

Table 4

Online Portal Open-Ended Responses to Challenges for University of Maine Extension (n = 150)

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
Human Resources	43	<p>☒ "Pay scale needs to keep up with current trends or University of Maine Extension will continue to lose valuable staff. I would return in a heartbeat if I knew the pay was equitable across all staff, experience was valued when determining pay, and if there was continued opportunity for career growth. Currently that does not exist, and change is not occurring fast enough to keep pace with inflation and other career opportunities. There need to be more opportunities for staff to have the time to collaborate with outside agencies doing similar work and more focus on programmatic responsibilities by program staff."</p> <p>☒ "More staff to cover the county."</p>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
		<p>☒ "The [name removed] County office does not seem to have the clerical support needed to offer the Master Gardner program to as many people that would like to participate, recently cutting the class to only 25. Lack of staffing also affected what help they could provide at the most recent plant sale. I don't know the reason for the high support staff turnover but feel it's something that needs to be addressed if [name removed] County is to continue to meet the needs of the various volunteers. Being fully staffed seems to be what is needed to provide the support needed."</p> <p>☒ "The Extension Service needs to attract more employees. At least in [name removed] County, the current employees are totally overworked."</p>
Resources	42	<p>☒ "I would love to see the new [name removed] lab open to different research areas. I would like to see a state-wide unified Beekeeping program offered and implemented by the University of Maine Extension rather than having others use the University of Maine Extension facilities for that purpose."</p> <p>☒ "The biggest challenge at the moment is the suspension of training programs out of the [name removed] City office ... where can we get direct answers as to this inequity?? How is this a service to our community? In the future... the importance of gardening for one's own needs will be ever more important. Will Extension be there for the public? The service is a basic need."</p> <p>☒ "A challenge could be serving the wide range of farms (sizes) in Maine - from the large-acreage commercial farms to the lifestyle or intensely farmed smaller acreages."</p> <p>☒ "There are not enough resources to fill all the requests. For instance, I am a Master Gardener. In the county where I lived before, there was the Garden [name removed] program to help the elderly or sick with their gardens. That is not available in the present county where I live. I tried to get Extension to come see what I could do to improve my agriculture land. No one is available to come do a site visit to educate me in improving my land."</p>
Marketing	18	<p>☒ "I think a lot of people don't know what Extension does. We need to share /publicize so we can reach people better in the communities."</p> <p>☒ "Outreach could be increased to reach new audiences. It seems as though many people access Extension services for the first time because of referrals or wide-spread public notification."</p> <p>☒ "More outreach is needed to let people know what resources are available. Very few people who aren't passionate about gardening know that the program exists or what it has to offer."</p>
Organizational Culture / Dynamic	12	<p>☒ "The Extension is fractured. It uses geography to address local needs but doesn't try to make the things that work consistent throughout the state. Everyone has to learn the hard lessons anew each time it happens unless it has happened there before. The University of Maine is tone-deaf to the advances in client service the Extension excels at. They are so</p>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
		<p>student-focused they pay no attention to the things going on remotely. Even the people based in [off campus] are like guests in [main campus]. It never ceases to amaze me how amazed University of Maine Marketing is when Extension makes the news or is able to handle a situation that is overwhelming to the University. The breadth of ages of clients addressed by Extension has skill sets and lessons to be learned from. Lastly, the Extension does not build a pipeline for staff. Each time someone leaves they start from scratch. There is no staff development to move upward or even laterally from job to job. Job descriptions for the same position are customized to create one-of-a-kind positions so there is no consistent job expectations from county to county. It is no secret that there is a "middle position" squeeze going on. Hourly positions have had significant wage increases to be competitive jobs in other industries. Faculty is paid similarly to faculty at other institutions, again for competitive reasons. The Professional class has been used to replace retiring/leaving faculty and the responsibilities/expectations of them have not changed from what the faculty in that position had yet they do not get compensated. The carrot of a faculty position is there but first you must do the job and then hope someone fights to make that position faculty otherwise there is no way to get the wages increased."</p> <hr/> <p>❏ "I am sorry to see the Master Gardener program gutted and staff drastically reduced. One person to support volunteers in our 2 most populated counties is very disappointing and not sustainable. Our volunteer manager is a wonderful person and doing the best a person in her role could do by herself. I have cut back my volunteerism and leadership as a Mater Gardener because I am losing interest as are others. In addition, the training for Master Gardener – I think there is benefit to some online combined training, however, in person components are by far more impactful and rewarding to the local community. The University gets a lot of free labor and PR through volunteers, and it is a shame to see the direction the university leadership is taking, the lack of support and priority."</p> <p>❏ " University of Maine needs to show more support of the Equine Industry. We fail miserably in that area. We do not allow what other states allow in our 4-H shows and we hold kids back so that they go to open shows and can ride and show from 3 and up yet 4-H in Maine does not allow kids to show until age 9. Look at the economic impact of the horse industry. I am a member of the American Youth Horse Council because of 4-H. We need to align more with these organizations. We also need to get back the agricultural fairs with our youth shows we are losing them. No 4-H event should conflict with the Fairs. ESE Try-out always conflicted with [name removed] Fair, ESE Horse Show Conflicts with [name removed] Fair. Why? Stipends are being lost for 4-H Horse events at these fairs, how does that effect 4-H? No one wins including our youth who want to show."</p> <hr/>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
Relationship	10	<p>☒ "I think the Extension group needs to be more involved with producers. Providing support to the farming community of Maine is a vital lifeline to agriculture sustainability in the state. I also believe more effort to connect the youth to the aging agricultural community is an important education element that is missing."</p>
		<p>☒ "Need to support more ag activities to keep farming in the state." ☒ "They need to recognize the need to appreciate, thank, and respect the volunteers that work with them...not asking for unnecessary sensitive information that they do not safeguard...background check system for 4-H has major issues they refuse to address and remedy. They are not focusing on community interaction and building bridges unless it results in large contact numbers...relationships take time to build. They do not fully support the organic community."</p>
Convenience access	10	<p>☒ "It would be great for you to have a presence in Southern Maine. We should discuss the possibility of locating scheduled "office hours" in our facility to service our 90 member businesses and others in Southern Maine."</p>
		<p>☒ "Only complaint would be more in-person clubs available to town of [name removed]. My children would love to join a farming club, but they're either full or not open to our town." ☒ "It can be frustrating when the office is not covered or closes early unexpectedly. You drive in town and find the office closed when you arrive, and it is supposed to be open for another two hours."</p>
Information	9	<p>☒ "Access is sometimes difficult with lengthy delays, better advertising for classes and information sessions which are open to the public, more information and advocacy, workshops, etc. for promoting native plants, pollinators."</p>
		<p>☒ "The Christmas tree producers in Maine are currently addressing a series of challenges related to the management of invasive and endemic insect pests, diseases, and weedy plant species. Members of the Maine Christmas Tree Association have voiced a need for the development of a series of publications covering Integrated Pest Management in Christmas tree production specific to Maine. These publications should include information on preventative measures useful in the management of weeds, insects, and diseases plaguing Christmas tree producers, as well as include economic thresholds for pesticide use, and a list of recommended chemistries approved for use on Christmas tree plantations in Maine. Such publications should reduce the barriers that a lack of easily accessible information poses to the active management of these issues. Investments should target improvements in the quantity and quality of Christmas trees being produced in the state and help address the risks such pest issues pose to maintaining a continual supply of Christmas trees for local and regional markets."</p>

Theme	<i>n</i>	Examples
		<p>☒ "When I send in a question about a pest or disease for help, it takes too long to get a response. When I call the office, I cannot figure out how to navigate the maize of options to reach the person I need."</p>
Funding	11	<p>☒ "I can see funding for programs and staff being an issue in the future. The Extension provides a contact point between professionals (scientists, professors, biologists etc...) and the local community. Maintaining these contacts will be essential. The 4-H program continues to diversify their approach through community outreach at our local library, community events, and nontraditional clubs like SPIN clubs over Zoom. I would like to see this continued or expanded in the future. I would also like to see more acknowledgment and cooperation with the indigenous peoples of Maine in outreach and education both to their communities and to the public about their importance in our natural history. I would also like to see more information/outreach about climate change and how we can lower our impact on the environment provided. Natural issues such as brown tail moths, rise of Lyme disease/ticks etc... and education on these issues will also be an ongoing need."</p> <p>☒ "Funding seems to be the most significant challenge to Extension in the last 10 years. The cuts in staff in the County office ... have drastically diminished the effectiveness of the outreach and cohesiveness of Extension to the public community. As many key employees at this particular Extension office have retired, they have not been replaced."</p>
External	9	<p>☒ "We need more resources and advocacy to keep farms viable. Above the challenges we all accept (the weather) there is a growing list of new challenges. Exploding electricity costs, misplaced support of solar that impacts land should be guided toward rooftop application for farms to save farmland and provide sustainable income for farmers. While we have many local supporters, we cherish I wonder how much the general public, or our legislature really understand or care what we do. In a changing world Maine will be in a better place with more local and sustainable agriculture. It will be an extremely hard sled to make this happen in the current political and economic environment."</p> <p>☒ "Keeping up with the challenges of climate change. Teaching courses at adult ed. Continue research on local invasive problems like Browntail, Emerald Ash borer, ticks, etc."</p> <p>☒ "Whatever way you can engage people in the climate crisis would be appreciated."</p>

Note. Other comments that did not fit a theme were removed from this table for space reasons.

Resource constraints emerged as a significant obstacle, with stakeholders expressing concerns over the suspension of training programs and staff cuts, which have led to the elimination of Extension educator positions and the cancellation of classes. The perceived inadequacy of resources to meet community needs was noted, particularly in areas such as horticulture and environmental awareness, where Extension plays a vital role in knowledge dissemination. Issues within the organizational culture of University of Maine Extension were

also noted, with stakeholders observing a perceived disconnect with evolving trends in Extension education, leading to fragmentation and a lack of responsiveness to stakeholder needs. Marketing deficiencies were highlighted as a major challenge, with stakeholders expressing a need for improved outreach efforts to reach new audiences and enhance stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, concerns were raised regarding information accessibility, with stakeholders noting delays and difficulties in accessing support services and educational materials. Relationship-building efforts were deemed insufficient, particularly in engaging agricultural producers and youth, highlighting the importance of enhancing outreach strategies to bridge these gaps. Human resource challenges, including inadequate pay scales, staffing shortages, and limited opportunities for career growth, were identified as significant concerns affecting University of Maine Extension's ability to attract and retain talent. Funding limitations emerged as a central issue, with stakeholders citing budget cuts and staffing reductions as key factors undermining Extension's effectiveness and outreach efforts. Additionally, stakeholders highlighted convenience issues, such as geographical accessibility and office hours, which impact community engagement and participation in Extension activities. Overall, the challenges identified emphasize the need for strategic interventions and resource allocation to address systemic issues and enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of University of Maine Extension in meeting the diverse needs of its stakeholders.

Rural & Urban Differences

To further understand this data, we broke it down by rural and urban locations. For "What Makes the University of Maine Extension Great", the themes were nearly identical for the two groups, but the percentages were lower for resources and human resources in the rural group compared to the non-rural (Table 5).

Table 5
Portal Data Themes of "What Makes the University of Maine Extension Great" Broken Down by Residency

	Rural (<i>n</i> = 95)		Non-rural (<i>n</i> = 55)	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Resources	63	66%	38	69%
Information	23	24%	14	26%
Relationship	7	7%	2	4%
Human Resources	27	28%	12	22%
Volunteer	10	11%	7	13%
Brand	3	3%	2	4%
Flexibility in working time	1	1%	0	0%
Convenience access	1	1%	1	2%
Others	4	4%	2	4%

For the challenges for the University of Maine Extension, the themes were again similar, but rural groups had a higher percentage of human resource challenges than non-rural, and the non-rural had more external challenges than the rural group (Table 6). This may indicate the rural

groups struggle to get employees and benefits while the non-rural struggle with other competing community challenges more than the rural group.

Table 6

Portal Data Themes of Challenges for the University of Maine Extension Broken Down by Residency

	Rural (n = 95)		Non-rural (n = 55)	
	f	%	f	%
Resources	27	28%	14	26%
Information	8	8%	3	6%
Relationship	8	8%	3	6%
Human Resources	29	31%	13	24%
Organizational Culture / Dynamic	8	8%	4	7%
Funding	10	11%	3	6%
Marketing	11	12%	6	11%
External	5	5%	7	13%
Convenience access	6	6%	4	7%
Others	10	11%	10	18%

When looking at sentiment by Residency, the results were again very similar between groups. The challenges in the rural group had slightly more negative sentiment than the non-rural groups (Table 7; Table 8), which aligns with many of the comments noted in Table 4 that are focused on a lack of support and staff in counties further from the main campus.

Table 7

Sentiment Analysis by Residency for “What Makes the University of Maine Extension Great”

	Rural (n = 95)		Non-rural (n = 55)	
	f	%	f	%
Positive	48	51%	28	51%
Neutral	46	48%	26	47%
Negative	1	1%	1	2%

Table 8

Sentiment Analysis by Residency for “Challenges for the University of Maine Extension”

	Rural (n = 95)		Non-rural (n = 55)	
	f	%	f	%
Positive	10	11%	9	9%
Neutral	69	73%	44	80%
Negative	16	17%	6	11%

Conclusions, Discussion, & Recommendations

The findings from this study are aligned with existing literature on the application of branding Extension services (Abrams et al., 2010; Zagonel et al., 2019; Zagonel et al., 2023), highlighting the critical need for ongoing branding, marketing, and needs assessments within Extension for effective program planning and increased public awareness of services. Additionally, this work offers new insight into co-brand development possibilities for state Extension systems. Stakeholder feedback revealed concerns regarding Extension brand awareness and outreach, consistent with prior studies indicating a lack of investment and perceived value in Extension services (Abrams et al., 2010; Maddy & Kealy, 1998; Telg et al., 2007). Consistency in themes and tone across rural and non-rural participants aligns with a subsection of previous work (Peters, 2014; Ruemenapp, 2017; Sanders et al., 2021) and speaks to the importance of the Extension brand connecting with audiences using value-based communication rather than location-based.

Referring back to the conceptual framework for this study (Figure 1), data demonstrate that organizational identity is clear in the minds of audiences, with many participants expressing a lifelong commitment to who the organization is and the people it serves. Some participants expressed challenges with a shift in organizational identity in terms of no longer investing in past programs and not supporting staff and volunteers in specific instances. It is essential for the University of Maine Extension leadership to address these concerns and communicate effectively so that these issues do not harm the organizational identity and overall brand. The tone with which participants shared their experiences with the University of Maine Extension was overall positive; even when asked about challenges, the highest percentage of comments were neutrally focused rather than negative. This may indicate the brand of University of Maine Extension expresses who it is in a positive way throughout the state. Areas where tone was the most negative focused on issues related to rural challenges with perceived fewer services and human resource support. In non-rural areas with more negative-toned comments, the focus was on competing community challenges. These instances are an opportunity for University of Maine Extension to communicate directly with communities about changes in particular programs and long-term goals for addressing challenges. To maintain a strong brand voice and organizational identity, the University of Maine Extension leadership should regularly seek feedback and align all external and internal communications with stakeholders with the organizational identity.

Specifically, the study findings offer evidence for enhancing the University of Maine Extension brand image by emphasizing positive experiences and addressing stakeholders' challenges (Zagonel et al., 2023). One example could include utilizing storytelling in outreach and communication efforts. Many respondents indicated they had a long history with the University of Maine Extension, and capturing their history and stories would be beneficial in reaching key stakeholders. A strategic storytelling campaign could highlight different industries, work being done to address different issues, and capitalize on Extension's work of using research to solve today's challenges. Several of these challenges emerged in the key themes which suggests a need to improve compensation and career growth opportunities, bridging knowledge gaps in Extension and agriculture, advocating for farm viability, and securing funding for diverse research areas.

Future research directions should prioritize facilitating funding access, exploring effective marketing strategies for employment and staff retention, aligning program planning with public needs, promoting staff development, and fostering collaborations with external

agencies. Strategies to improve access, and enhanced advertising for opportunities, are recommended, alongside increased outreach efforts to address stakeholders' topics of interest like "native plant pollinators and climate change". Such strategies could determine how Extension systems can incorporate a regular "feedback loop" in order to stay up to date on the needs and changes in the communities in which they serve. With the restraints on time and finances among Extension professionals, it is difficult to ensure that programs and services offered by Extension are meeting the current needs in communities. This two-way communication could ultimately assist in helping Extension determine how to be more 'real-time' responsive to communities, which can enhance the overall brand. In addition, this connection could provide crucial data needed for internal planning, program planning and evaluation, and funding opportunities.

Additionally, greater engagement with producers is essential to support agricultural sustainability in Maine. Strengthening connections between youth and the aging agricultural community is vital for educational purposes, with the 4-H program serving as an exemplary model for diversified outreach. Several respondents indicated the University of Maine Extension was well integrated into the community/industries within the state. Using these connections and partnerships could be beneficial in strengthening the youth and an aging agricultural community. Collaborating with industry-specific organizations for specific programs, events, and training targeting 4-H groups with long-term farmers may be beneficial in establishing a foundation on which to grow. Lastly, expanding outreach to Indigenous communities and acknowledging their significance in natural history, along with educating on climate change mitigation, are crucial components for future Extension initiatives.

While the focus of the study was not on the methods, the authors believe it is worth noting how the auto-coding of sentiment was utilized in this study and the accuracy of the process. We utilized human coders in multiple stages to refine the sentiment analysis coding. In the responses to what was great about the University of Maine Extension, the auto-code was more accurate, with only two changes made in the first round and none in the second round. However, in response to the challenges, more changes were required, with human coders making 10 changes in the first round and eight in the second round of re-coding. The changes did not substantially alter the percentages of codes within each sentiment category and thus, did not alter the results or data interpretation, but it is worth discussing as our discipline continues to adopt more automated and artificial intelligence tools to aid in data analysis. For this study, it is worth noting that human coders were required for re-coding and ensuring the accuracy of data codes related to sentiment.

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