

# Extension Specialists' Attitudes Videocassettes as a Teaching Tool

James K. Randall

## More Than TV

Television, sometimes described as "a window on the world," is being enlarged and its shutters removed.

Viewers no longer are limited to just the content on a conventional broadcast station: their sets can be connected to cable, satellites, computers, videocassette and videodisc machines.

In 1976 the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service saw that the traditional methods of reaching people were perhaps not doing the job of informal education required to keep Nebraska citizens up to date in maintaining their economy and quality of life.

Perhaps, some methods could be modified and expanded, and other, more innovative methods could be developed and used to reach diverse audiences with equally diverse needs.

Videocassette entered the picture. Machines were placed, at first in district extension offices, and then eventually into all county offices. Program materials were produced by the Department of Agricultural Communications.

The high cost of travel and shrinking budgets persuaded administrators and specialists to use the system to commu-

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nicate to extension boards and other groups instead of putting in a personal appearance. Several counties established their own videocassette library of tapes from the Department of Agricultural Communications. County agents used the tapes to show people how to prune grapevines, can vegetables, lead a 4-H club, or one of several hundred other subjects.

The demand for videocassette programs created a need for better equipment. Before committing the money it was decided to survey attitudes of agents and specialists toward the medium.

### What Did They Think?

The county agent study revealed a favorable attitude toward using videocassette. Agents said they like the material and would use more (they now request more than 250 titles a month from the Department of Agricultural Communications Library).

However, few state staff specialists were developing videocassette material. Why . . .

Videocassette appeared to be a way of informing people and conserving travel funds.

What did the specialist think of videocassette . . . What did the specialist know about developing a videocassette program . . .

A questionnaire was mailed to 140 state and district Extension specialists + 101 were returned. Eighty-five percent of the respondents were male, 15 percent female. The majority of the respondents were between 30 and 59 years old.

Eighty-seven percent of the specialists who responded felt that videocassettes were an effective method. Sixty-two percent of the respondents had used videocassettes in their extension programming.

Specialists felt the effectiveness of the videocassette depended on three factors: program content, specialist's ability to project the subject material, and the discussion of the subject following its presentation.

Seventy-two percent of the respondents agreed that the videocassettes would increase the *ability* to reach additional audiences. Sixty-three percent said that it would be an *effective* way to extend the programming of the Cooperative Extension Service. In addition, 70 percent felt the system could save travel time and money because one program could be sent to several counties.

Respondents criticized videocassette machines as not

being very portable (as a result of this study one-half-inch Betamax units have been purchased).

A surprise conclusion of the study was that the age and sex of the respondents made no difference in the specialist's *attitudes* about videocassettes as an effective means of disseminating information. However, women produced more videocassettes than men; women produced four to 11 cassettes while the men produced from one to three.

As expected, specialists who develop several programs felt confident about preparing videocassettes and they also did not feel it was a time consuming project. Forty-percent were undecided as to whether preparing a videocassette program was too time consuming.

Sixty-four percent of the respondents said that they would like to develop videocassettes in their area of specialization, but more than half had no experience and lacked the confidence in their ability to use this medium.

Most of the extension specialist (72 percent) said they would like to see a workshop conducted on developing a videocassette program.

## **What Was Done?**

The results of the study showed that the Nebraska Cooperative Extension Service is apparently moving in the right direction in equipment, training and planning in regard to videocassettes.

Lighter weight one-half-inch Betamax machines have been purchased and all county offices have their own videocassette unit (either three-quarter-inch or one-half-inch).

Training has been conducted for agents and specialists on the use of equipment and in the case of specialists on developing the videocassette program.

Although a reduction of travel costs has not been documented, more videocassettes are being produced than in the past, especially by administrators. Specialists probably are conducting just as many meetings, but the videocassettes they are producing are getting wide distribution for other meetings. So people are being reached without specialists being present.

Follow-up on the effectiveness of the videocassette medium as a learning tool among extension audiences needs to be done. Do people get as much information at meetings where videocassettes are used as when the specialist is there in person? Does a good videocassette program influ-

ence the viewer to adopt a practice or change his or her attitude?

### **The Epilogue**

In Nebraska, the videocassette plays an important role in information dissemination. The day is approaching when a person can walk into a county extension office, check out a videocassette program, and take it home to play in his own videocassette unit.

Television's window on the world truly has been enlarged and is opening up new vistas for Extension.