

# Market Research and the Land Grant/USDA Communicator

By Ned Browning

The word "marketing" evokes a variety of meanings. Sales, advertising, and publicity are just a few terms used synonymously. However, marketing, in the contemporary sense, is much more. It is a total systems approach to an organization's relationship with its constituents, whether they be customers or the taxpaying public.

This business concept applied to public services has become an increasing part of government agencies' attempts to remain relevant (Rathmell, 1971). We are reminded that those agencies exist to serve the public. However, taxpayers often misunderstand and thus cannot take advantage of many specific services. Agencies need to understand the way their publics perceive them before they attempt to develop and deliver services.

With this challenge in mind, the Cooperative Extension System has adopted a marketing "mindset" in its educational programming. The key to success is to adopt a total marketing approach, not one limited to the "sales" stereotype.

## Dealing With Misconceptions

In recent years, communications specialists in the land grant/USDA system have found themselves thrust into this somewhat unfamiliar realm, one that seemingly is more suited to the profit-driven private sector. In conversations with ACE members and in the results of a recent survey (Ashman, 1986), pervasive misconception of the total marketing idea appears.

*Promotion.* When asked what is being invested in marketing, most reply in terms of new publicity efforts. That response is natural, since most communication specialists are trained and hired to publicize their organization's activities and services.

But, it must be stressed that publicity is only a single aspect of marketing. McCarthy (1968) has dubbed the process the "Four P's"—product, price, place and promotion. Effective promotion cannot occur until an organization has answered questions about the other three aspects.

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*Accountability and evaluation.* Another bit of confusion is tied to two related concepts uppermost in the minds of extension administrators—accountability and evaluation. Beeman (1982) explains evaluation as “a process of determining how well we do what we set out to do; or whether our programs achieved the specified goals and objectives.” Whereas, accountability “connotes responding to the inquiries of critics and supporters. . . With results clearly specified, the educational technician or agent becomes responsible for resources used and of results.”

Accountability and evaluation are “after-the-fact.” The goal of marketing is to implement a “before-the-fact” measurement of clientele needs, so that programs can be responsive to those needs. In Toffler’s (1981) terms, it is a *proactive* instead of *reactive* strategy.

## Nonprofit Marketing

Ideally, nonprofit marketing is more than the commonly perceived idea of sales. It involves *discovering* what the public needs, *analyzing* what the organization can do to meet those needs, *developing* programs and services responsive to those needs, *delivering* the programs and *evaluating* them (Kotler, 1979).

Three decades ago CBS Research Psychologist G.D. Wiebe (1952) asked, “Why can’t you sell brotherhood and rational thinking like you sell soap?” Analyzing the question, he proposed five audience factors which affect the degree of success of mass persuasion to motivate behavior:

- 1) The *force* of the motivation is “a combination of one’s predisposition toward the goal prior to the [message] and the motivation provided by the communication.”

- 2) “The *direction* of motivated persons to the mechanism consists of telling audience members specifically where or how they may easily consummate their motivation in interaction with a social mechanism.”

- 3) The *social mechanism* is an organization or place to which the individual can go in response to motivation.

- 4) *Adequacy* and *compatibility* are necessary attributes of the mechanism to meet the respondents’ goals.

- 5) “The *distance* of the audience member from the mechanism. . . [is the] subjective estimate of the intervening energy expenditure required, in comparison with the reward.”

A complete marketing strategy addresses all these issues. And, by intertwining Wiebe’s factors and McCarthy’s four P’s, we can begin to understand how to muster the successful forces of mass media advertising for nonprofit, social causes.

A commercial *product* is a tangible object or measurable service offered for sale. In the social marketing realm, it is usually an intangible, such as Wiebe’s brotherhood. In both, the challenge is to

discover consumers' needs and design the product to make the most of the motivational force to consume it.

*Promotion* is "the communication-persuasion strategy and tactics that will make the product familiar, acceptable, and even desirable to the audience" (Kotler and Zaltman, 1971, p. 7). For both profit and nonprofit, this aspect of marketing has received great attention in advertising, personal selling, publicity, and sales promotion.

*Place* incorporates Wiebe's direction and adequacy/compatibility factors. Successful commercial ventures always have a location and mechanism for the customer to carry out the exchange of resources for products. Nonprofit organizations often suffer in this respect due to the intangible nature of their products and their non-sales orientation.

*Price*, a natural consideration for profit, is often totally overlooked in nonprofit situations. Incorporating Wiebe's distance and some aspects of adequacy/compatibility, this addresses the amount of resources (time, capital, energy, etc.) the individual must expend to obtain the product.

### **Cooperative Extension Application**

The founding philosophy of extension work is to go to the people, find and report needs to the land grant system's researchers, and develop programs to meet those needs. Over the years many tools have been developed to determine clients' needs. Most run the risk of being biased.

For example, Cooperative Extension has different kinds of advisory councils to express the needs of persons in a local setting. The problem with this approach is that, despite the best efforts, these groups are biased. In general, the persons who serve are more motivated than their fellow citizens. And, as rural sociologists have discovered, after a period of time, these community opinion leaders become more like the change agents they advise and less like the citizenry they represent (Rogers, 1983).

The answer to these biases is market research. This is a direct, formalized asking of questions of the public that the organization is to serve. It may be the general public or a specific public (farmers, homeowners, youth, etc.). Such research is done on the "front end," before any programs are developed or promotion is attempted.

In an attempt to overcome this bias, the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service (ACES) has begun market research to determine public needs, and the public's awareness and perception of Cooperative Extension. Three counties were chosen to represent the state's administrative districts and a cross-section of the rural-urban spectrum. However, data from only one—Houston County—are reported here.

A preliminary market survey determined the general public's ratings of basic needs in the county and impressions of local extension services. From those data, the local agents can develop target programs and appropriate implementation and promotional strategies. Agents reported initial impressions of the process and their plans at the state staff conference in December, 1985. After portions of the plan are put into effect, a second survey in Houston County will measure changes in public and agency perceptions.

The goals of the ACES market research are to: 1) gauge needs in the communities served; 2) understand how the market perceives the agency; and, 3) gain some idea of market competition.

### Measurement Tool Is Needed

One way to gauge the perceptions which public agencies and their taxpayer clients have of each other is to use the coorientation model of communication (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). The result is a measure of organizational image as well as an assessment of public information needs.

In the mid-1960s, several scholars developed coorientation-type models based on Newcomb's (1953) concept, often labeled the "ABX Model." It deals with persons' (A & B) simultaneous orientation to a given object (X). Newcomb sees communication as the process by which parties maintain balance when:

"... certain observable group properties are predetermined by the conditions and consequences of communicative acts.

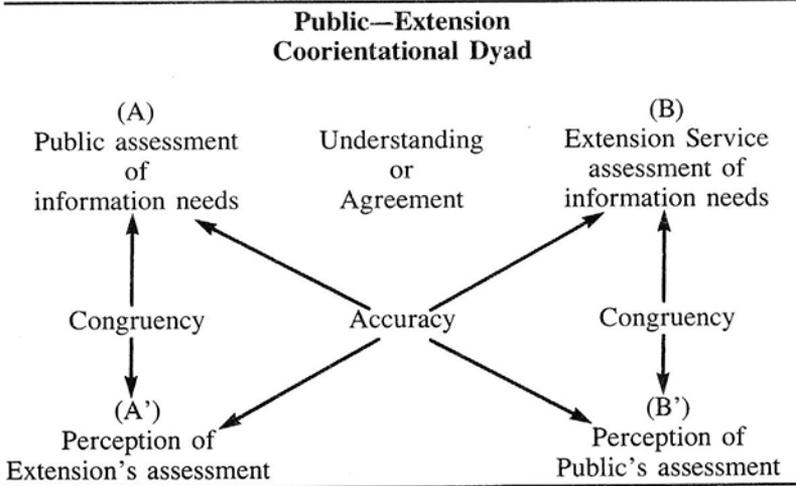
The initial assumption is that communication among humans performs the essential function of enabling two or more individuals to maintain simultaneous orientation toward one another as communicators and toward objects of communication (p. 392).

In particular, Chaffee and McLeod's (1986) coorientation model (Figure 1) deals with Newcomb's A, B, and X. It measures *understanding* and *agreement* between the two communicating parties about object X. It measures *congruency*, or how each party perceives the comparability of his orientation to X with the other's orientation toward X. And, it measures the *accuracy* of one's perception of the other's assessment of X relative to the other's actual assessment.

In the present study, X is information needed to improve the quality of one's life. The general public and county agents are the coorienting parties under scrutiny. The approach is similar to that of Karbon (1980), who studied the relations between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and its publics in two counties.

The public questionnaire consisted of six sections: an introductory question rating the quality of life; public ratings of their information

FIGURE 1



needs; public awareness of ACES; public perception of ACES information needs ratings; public media use habits; and demographics. Agents were asked about their ratings of local information needs and the public's ratings.

### Public Information Needs Sought

The original intent was to have open-ended questions for respondents to indicate their salient needs. Such an approach satisfies one of Chaffee's (in Karbon, 1980) warnings about pseudo-data, those answers which respondents give in response to questions which are not really relevant to their particular situations. However, pre-test of such questions revealed that the approach made the interview too long to be managed by telephone.

Grunig (1983) emphasizes assessing and communicating solutions to needs which can reasonably be met by programs for which an organization is equipped. So, the alternate strategy was to ask questions related to information which the Extension Service can offer. The questions were gleaned from extension program development materials (PDEMS, 1983) and from information gained in the open-ended pre-test. They were then reviewed by program administrators responsible for the different areas covered.

The Houston County instrument consisted of seventeen questions basically asking, "How great is your need for information about...?" Respondents were asked to rate their needs on a zero to seven scale. The option of answering "zero" allowed them to express disinterest in any given subject. From these basic needs determinants, the agents and administration can gain insights for programming decisions (Table 1).

## Awareness of Extension Determined

In the general public, only those persons revealing an awareness of extension were asked to respond to coorientation ratings. This procedure is based on the premise that lack of knowledge of extension would preclude any possibility of coorientation.

Another warning about pseudo-data concerns the necessity of A's and B's being simultaneously oriented toward one another (in McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). If the Cooperative Extension Service does not exist in the public's mind, the public cannot coorient with it. Thus, an identity question acts as a filter for the coorientation questions which follow.

Besides being a filter question, it reveals the degree of public awareness of ACES. An earlier study (Mullins, 1982) indicated, by default, a statewide awareness level of 77 percent when the respondents were asked simply to rate the effectiveness of the Extension Service. Following Chaffee's (in Karbon, 1980) pseudo-data contentions that people will blithely answer questions for which they have no true knowledge, this rating is suspect. In the present study, a stricter identity criterion was applied in which the respondents had to specifically name a county agent or give the location of the county office. The result was an identity level of 57 percent in Houston County.

*Public perception.* These questions were identical in content and format to the needs questions; however, they required the respondents to reify the Extension Service. The respondents were asked to "put themselves in the agents' shoes" and answer the questions as they perceived the Extension Service would answer. Conversely, the county agents were asked to rate their priorities for meeting public information needs and to reify the public's view. The public's and agents' responses were compared using Kendall's tau rank order correlation (Table 1).

*Agreement.* A negative correlation coefficient ( $\tau = -0.037$ ) hints at a disagreement between the public's and agents' information needs rankings. In addition, the lack of statistically significant correlation shows a need for administrative attention relative to the organization's programming.

*Accuracy.* A low coefficient ( $\tau = 0.104$ ) indicates that the agents' perception of the public does not correlate with the public's ratings of information needs. However, the public has an accurate appraisal ( $\tau = 0.502$ ) of the views of extension. This indicates that the persons aware of the organization understand it.

*Congruency.* A non-significant and negatively-oriented public correlation coefficient ( $\tau = -0.191$ ) indicates that the respondents do not think that their information needs match the ACES information delivery priorities. Couple this with the high accuracy rating, and the disturbing picture of an understood, yet not-so-relevant,

**TABLE 1**

Houston County, Alabama Public and Extension Needs Assessments Compared				
	(A) Public	(B) Extension	(A') Public's perception of Extension	(B') Extension's perception o the Public
"Quality-of-life" Information needed	rank (mean)	rank (mean)	rank (mean)	rank (mean)
Health	1 (3.96)	6 (6.29)	7 (4.66)	10.5 (4.86)
Home grounds care	2 (3.92)	1.5 (6.71)	5 (5.03)	2 (5.71)
Improving local job opportunities	3 (3.85)	17 (3.86)	16 (3.89)	10.5 (4.86)
Personal resource management	4 (3.77)	9.5 (5.71)	12 (4.21)	5 (5.29)
Taking advantage of community services	5 (3.52)	15 (4.57)	6 (4.88)	14.5 (4)
Youth development	6 (3.51)	1.5 (6.71)	8 (4.63)	6.5 (5.14)
Stress management	7 (3.43)	14 (5)	17 (3.68)	8.5 (5)
Improving human relationships	8 (3.33)	12.5 (5.29)	15 (4.04)	12 (4.71)
Housing and home furnishings	9 (3.3)	11 (5.57)	13 (4.09)	13 (4.43)
Preventing drug and alcohol abuse	10 (3.2)	7.5 (6)	10 (4.4)	6.5 (5.14)
Improving public services	11 (3.15)	16 (4.29)	11 (4.25)	17 (3.43)
Raising fruits and vegetables	12 (3)	3.5 (6.57)	3 (5.3)	3 (5.71)
Foods and nutrition	13 (2.9)	3.5 (6.57)	1 (5.64)	1 (5.86)
Caring for or making clothes	14 (2.8)	7.5 (6)	9 (4.52)	14.5 (4)
Canning and freezing foods	15 (2.67)	5 (6.53)	2 (5.32)	4 (5.43)
Preventing unwanted teen pregnancy	16 (2.43)	9.5 (5.71)	14 (4.04)	8.5 (5)
Raising livestock for food	17 (2.25)	12.5 (5.29)	4 (5.06)	16 (3.86)

A-B Agreement      B-A' Accuracy  
A-A' Congruency      A-B' Accuracy

**Results**

A-B Agreement: Kendall's Tau = -0.037, Z = -0.216, non-significant  
 A-B' Accuracy: Kendall's Tau = 0.104, Z = 0.600, non-significant  
 B-A' Accuracy: Kendall's Tau = 0.502, Z = 2.890, p < .001

Note: The "public" subjects in this analysis are respondents to a telephone interview who demonstrated a knowledge of their local County Extension Service. The "Extension" subjects are the local County Extension agents.

Public (A) n = 115  
 Agents (B) N = 7

organization begins to take shape. To emphasize the potential problem, there is a strong indication (tau=0.570) that the agents feel their ratings of public information needs are congruent with the public's, yet they are not, as indicated by the non-agreement.

*Market competition.* Market competition comes in two forms. Direct competition occurs when two organizations try to capture the market for a single type of product. In the public sector, such competition is rare. Indirect competition, where products are somewhat similar or time and place demands conflict, is more likely.

By describing the functions of the Cooperative Extension Service and asking respondents to identify it by name and office location, the interviewers were able to determine whether other agencies "competed" for extension's identity. In fact, confusion over roles of USDA-type agencies was very evident. Many people in the public apparently do not differentiate between Cooperative Extension, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service and the Soil Conservation Service, not to mention Farm Bureau and local farmer cooperatives.

In one of three original pilot counties, county agents immediately began a local promotional campaign to combat this misperception. The central message is simply to explain who they are as agents and where their office is located.

### **Results Reflect Five Step Process**

Fowler (1986) has synthesized marketing principles with the Cooperative Extension program development model. The result is a five step process: 1) *gaining knowledge* of the target market; 2) *product (program) development* in response to the market's interest; 3) *promotion* of services in terms of the public's expressed needs; 4) *delivering services* in ways convenient to the users; and 5) *exchanging* results for future support (accountability and evaluation). It is Step One, market research, which poses the greatest challenge for the Cooperative Extension System.

Land grant/USDA communication specialists, like their public relations counterparts in the private sector, have a stake in organizational marketing. They must, however, be involved in the total process. This requires acquaintance with the tools of marketing and involvement on the "front-end" to help shape initial market research. From that point, the job, while not easier, should be simplified.

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