

The Role of a County Communications Agent

Deborah Lee Payne

Is a county communications agent really needed? In heterogeneous, metropolitan areas — definitely!

To most farm families, the Cooperative Extension Service is well known and an important part of the community. They know what types of information are available, who to call for assistance, and where the extension office is located.

But this is not so for many urban residents who view the Cooperative Extension Service as just one of a number of government agencies listed in the phone book. They may not realize the extension programs are available to all and not just to special interest groups. Here is an organization that can answer gardening questions, assist in meal planning and budgeting, provide youth activities, give sewing tips, show how to preserve foods and help backyard animal raisers.

The communications agent works with staff members in order to: 1) increase community awareness of extension educational programs and services, 2) provide residents with a positive image of the Cooperative Extension Service, 3) determine local needs and interests, 4) meet local needs and interests. To do these things it's necessary to use research, planning, presentation and evaluation methods.

Research methods help identify publics and the special needs of groups. In metropolitan areas, audiences are diverse and their needs, wants and interests vary greatly.

Payne is from Nevada. She says communicators from other states are “generally surprised when they find out I am a County Communications Agent.” In her state, there are two: Jack Wise is in Las Vegas and Payne is in Reno.

Targeting Audiences Requires Analysis

We target audiences so that each group may be served more effectively. Work involves investigating and locating opinion leaders and researching the group's needs and interests. It also involves investigation of available demographic data from the land grant university; state, city and county governments; the Chamber of Commerce; utility companies and other organizations.

The population of Washoe County, Nevada, exceeds 200,000, and 45 percent of the population is employed in service industries including gaming, hotels and recreation. The warehousing industry is also important to the economy. The county extension office works with opinion leaders of these groups to determine needs of employees and to learn how to reach these audiences.

Special staff meetings are held with representatives from minority groups. This gives opinion leaders an opportunity to meet all the county extension agents, see the extension office and learn about types of information available. In exchange the opinion leader provides input for local programming. This two-way communications between county extension agents and opinion leaders has been valuable in giving us an opportunity to learn how to better meet each public's needs.

Planning methods are used when the communications agent advises the extension staff on the use of media and coaches them on how to get the most mileage with the information they are presenting. Knowing what communications method is most effective to get the information across is essential.

An Example of Planning

In prior years county 4-H Achievement Day activities were bringing in only the families of the youth involved. To get the community's attention a number of projects were planned. Included were:

1. **A 4-H publicity committee** made up of interested 4-H leaders to plan methods of increasing 4-H visibility. In the first year the committee had a poster contest and all posters went on exhibit in Citifare buses, at local banks, in the Reno-Cannon International Airport and in County Libraries.

2. **4-H supplement** in the local newspaper, a Gannett morning and evening publication. The communications agent spearheaded the project by developing individual and business interest forms, informing leaders and working with the newspaper's advertising department. 4-H members and leaders found advertisers who would be interested in supporting 4-H in the supplement and had them sign interest forms. They did not have to handle money or contracts, which were handled by the advertising department. As a result, a 20 page supplement, valued at around \$15,000, was developed with a full-color cover telling about the 4-H County Fair. All stories and photos were provided by the communications agent and 4-H got to tell its story to around 190,000 residents in northern Nevada.

3. **Name change.** 4-H Achievement Day is an ambiguous name to people unfamiliar with the program. The name was changed to 4-H County Fair because more people understand the concept of a fair. The name change was voted in by the Washoe County 4-H Leaders Council.

4. **4-H banner** across the state fairgrounds street. The banner showed people where the 4-H activities could be found. The local Ralston Purina plant donated a portion of the banner and the 4-H Leaders Council provided funds for the remainder. The banner has a velcro section which can be removed and the date changed each year. The total cost of the banner was around \$500.

5. **Public service directors** were contacted and information on the activities were sent to each.

6. **Other organizations** were contacted. The Reno Musicians Union donated a 14 piece band for a jazz concert at the 4-H County Fair. Their donation was worth around \$1400. The local police departments, Washoe County School District, Ronald McDonald, KCBN radio, a local bike shop, an entertainer from Circus Circus Hotel Casino, and the builder of a human powered vehicle from Oregon worked with 4-H on a bike road-e-o. Camrac Studio produced two free public service announcements for local TV stations on bike safety and the 4-H road-e-o using police officers and 4-H'ers.

7. **4-H Club participation.** The 4-H Southwest Community Club provided valuable assistance. They purchased bike road-e-o course signs from funds they raised, manned stations with police officers, got a grant from an insurance company for bike safety comics for 15,000 youth in schools,

made posters, and worked with officers in school safety programs. Members also served on the bike road-e-o publicity committee.

Presentation methods come into use when the communications agent acts as a liaison to link county extension agents with the media. This activity involves keeping media up-to-date on the programs of the extension service.

Another presentation aspect involves keeping community leaders informed of the programs of extension. This activity allows leaders to know what we are doing, who we are serving, and how we are spending taxpayers' money to provide educational programs in the community to help residents solve their own problems.

For *example*, we produce:

1. **A monthly calendar of events** for our public notification list.
2. **Program notifications for media** via news releases. The communications agent tries to make it easier for reporters to cover an event. A map may be included with the news release giving the exact location of the program, especially if it is on a private ranch or in a community horse arena. Face-to-face contact is used for major events that need coverage.
3. **A bimonthly newsletter** for influential leaders, including county commissioners, senators and representatives, the university president, board of regents, mayors.
4. **Extension News and Views**, a half hour television program aired Saturday mornings on KAME TV. The program covers popular topics and is hosted by the communications agent. Staff members participate on a rotating basis.
5. **A weekly garden segment** for the "Live at Five" Area Horticulturist program on KTVN.
6. **A weekly "Best Buys" food column written by a home economist for the local paper.**
7. **A biweekly horticulture column** written by the area horticulturist for the local paper.
8. **Energy tips** and other public service announcements for radio.
9. **Brochures** on the county extension office. The latest centers on the theme, "Linking People with Information."
10. **Public service announcements**, in the form of 30-60 second spots for local TV stations. The spots feature county extension agents and give simple tips in agriculture, home economics, and 4-H.

Evaluation Techniques Vary

Program evaluation is handled a number of ways. The communications agent keeps tabs on information used by the media, sends out questionnaires for feedback, asks key people what their attitudes were and how to improve, questions other agents on their reactions, and writes down suggestions for similar activities in the future.

For example, recently we met with public service directors of each local radio station and had them fill out a survey to determine their familiarity with the county extension office. We also asked them if they used extension information, what types of information they wanted that we could provide, and what channels were available to the extension service.

We also recently sent a bike road-e-o evaluation questionnaire to representatives of local police departments, the KCBN radio station, 4 Clubs, and the school district. To evaluate the 4-H County Fair, we sent a questionnaire to all 4-H leaders to determine their satisfaction with the activities and the coverage and to get their suggestions for next year's event.

