

Reaching Traditional and Nontraditional Extension Audiences

John G. Richardson
Douglas M. Clement
R. David Mustian

Abstract

Two diverse extension audiences in Polk County, North Carolina, were sent a mailed questionnaire to determine their levels of use of extension information and their preferred means for receiving extension information. Those audiences were Polk County beef cattle producers and county government personnel. Nearly all of the beef producers indicated "some" to "very much" use of extension information. However, county government personnel depended significantly less ($P < .05$) on extension for information than did the beef producers.

For receiving extension information on multiple subjects that extension offers, the top five preferences of beef producers were (a) newsletter, (b) bulletin/pamphlet, (c - tie) personal visit, (d) field day, and (e) method demonstration. The top five delivery methods preferred by county government personnel included (a) newsletter, (b) newspaper, bulletin/pamphlet, (d) workshop, (e) leaflet/flyer. Even though both audiences rated newsletters the

John G. Richardson is Extension Program Delivery and Accountability Leader, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, North Carolina State University, Raleigh. Douglas M. Clement is County Extension Director, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Graham County. R. David Mustian is Extension Evaluation Leader, North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, North Carolina State University, Raleigh. Acknowledgment is extended to Douglas M. Clement for his unpublished, Master of Education paper, *Barriers that Keep Clientele from Using Extension Information and Program Delivery Preferences*, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, 1994.

most popular of 35 delivery methods identified, the two audiences indicated significant differences ($P < .05$) in preferences for 8 of the 35 methods.

The county government personnel differ significantly from beef producers in level of use of extension information as well as different preferences for receiving information. Thus, program delivery methods and information must be specifically targeted for each audience to adequately meet its respective needs and preferences.

Introduction

In 1914, the Smith-Lever Act authorized the Agricultural Extension Service. The mission of extension was to "diffuse" research-based information to audiences by providing nonformal educational opportunities—which in 1914 consisted mainly of farm visits, demonstrations, meetings, and publications (Epsilon Sigma Phi, 1979).

Today, the Cooperative Extension System continues with the mission of disseminating research-based information to specific audiences, but the methods of delivery are changing rapidly (EDI, 1992). The electronics/computer age now allows messages to be transmitted across the world almost instantly. While delivery methods are changing, extension's audiences are also changing. Audiences are becoming more segmented in regard to information needed, and each segment often relies on different communication modes to receive needed information (Tyson, 1993).

As audiences become even more segmented and information technologies continue to advance, it is likely that a greater array of program delivery methods will be available in the future to reach a diverse clientele. Two of these diverse audiences were the focus of this study in Polk County, North Carolina.

Audience Diversity and Preferences

Many factors determine the success of an educational program. How people prefer to learn may influence their receptivity of information. If the message is about energy

conservation, Iams and Marion (1991) reported that clientele preferred print, aural, and visual learning methods via television, radio, and newspapers. Yet, for financial and health management information, clientele preferred to receive information via pamphlets, correspondence courses, and telephone. These researchers also found that age is a factor when considering program delivery methods. At the ages of 40-52, 82% of respondents were willing to rent educational video cassettes, while only 54% of those more than 61 indicated a willingness to rent an educational video. In a home study course, only 44% of those over 60 were willing to enroll, while 71% of those 40-45 were willing to enroll.

Ritter and Welch (1988) found that a home study kit was much more appropriate for home care-givers than were meetings. However, among North Carolina farmers, Richardson (1989) found that meetings were rated among the top, five, most preferred extension delivery methods. Research by Obahayujie and Hillison (1988) also found that different audiences prefer different methods. Part-time cattle farmers preferred personal visits and demonstrations, while full-time cattle farmers preferred newsletters, bulletins, radio, and pamphlets.

Research Objectives

For the research objectives, we sought to identify preferred means of receiving extension information by two specific audiences of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in Polk County, and to determine their levels of use of extension information.

Audience Selection and Methodology

This study originated from a desire to better serve the information needs of traditional extension audiences in Polk County, North Carolina, as well as to serve more effectively those audiences that have not been traditional users of extension information. Since beef cattle is a key agricultural enterprise within the county, cattle producers were selected as the traditional audience to survey. Also, since extension's involvement in the public policy arena has continued to increase, especially in the areas of waste management and water quality, a local public employees group was selected as a realistic nontraditional extension audience. With these two audiences generally seen as representative of traditional and

nontraditional extension audiences, the results from this study were expected to provide valuable information for effectively planning educational initiatives for the respective audience types.

The audience selection process involved identifying all personnel who were currently employed by the Polk County government and designating them as a target audience. Also designated as an audience, were all beef cattle producers in Polk County who had been identified previously by extension personnel and placed on the mailing list of the extension service. All members of each audience were mailed a questionnaire. The questionnaire asked respondents to list their top ten preferences for receiving information among a list of thirty-five readily available delivery methods.

For the question on level of use of extension information, a five-part question offered levels ranging from "none" to "very much". The questionnaire was developed and tested by using advice from extension specialists, nearby agents, and other local individuals thought to be vocationally compatible with members of the two audience groups. A cover letter explained the study and asked for their cooperation. A preaddressed return envelope was enclosed with the questionnaire.

Return rates for both groups were above 67 percent. The Z-test was used to determine any statistically significant differences between the two audiences. Significance was determined at the .05 level.

Findings

(Use of Extension Information)

The findings, as shown in Table 1, indicate that Polk County beef producers generally indicated "some" or the higher levels of "much" to "very much" use of extension information. Most of the county government audience had "some" or the lower use levels of "little" or "none" indicated. In a comparative analysis of the two audience groups, county government personnel used extension information significantly less than did beef cattle producers ($P < .05$).

(Program Delivery Preferences)—Beef Cattle Farmers

Polk County beef producers indicated newsletters as the most popular means for receiving information. This audience,

Table 1*Level of Use of Extension Information by Selected Audiences*

	Beef Producers		County Government Personnel	
	n	%	n	%
None	0	0	9	22
Little	5	10	10	25
Some	25	52	12	30
Much	9	19	6	15
Very Much	9	19	3	8
Total	48	100	40	100

which could be characterized as a "traditional" extension audience, held very similar preferences to other similarly targeted traditional audiences of extension in North Carolina (Richardson, 1993). Those methods rated most preferred were newsletter, bulletin/pamphlet, personal visit, field day, method demonstration, meeting, and on-farm test. The delivery preferences for the beef producers are shown in Table 2.

Table 2*Preferred Delivery Methods by Polk County Beef Cattle Producers (n=48)*

Delivery Method	Ranking	n	%
Newsletter	1	42	88
Bulletin/Pamphlet	2.5	28	58
Personal visit	2.5	28	58
Field Day	4	24	50
Method demonstration	5	23	48
Meeting	6	22	46
On-farm test	7	21	44
Office visit	8.5	18	38
Tour	8.5	18	38
Specialty publications	10	17	35
Workshop	11	15	31
Seminar	12.5	14	29

(continued on next page)

Table 2 continued

Delivery Method	Ranking	n	%
Telephone	12.5	14	29
Letter	14	11	23
Fact Sheet	15.5	9	19
Newspaper	15.5	9	19
Video cassette	17	8	17
Leaflet/flyer	18	7	15
Exhibit	20	6	13
Data Analysis/Results	20	6	13
Conference	20	6	13
Lecture	22	5	10
Home study kit	23.5	4	8
Discussion group	23.5	4	8
Fair	25.5	3	6
Notebook	25.5	3	6
Computer software	27.5	2	4
Audio cassette	27.5	2	4
Symposium	29.5	1	2
Television	29.5	1	2

(Program Delivery Preferences)—County Government Employees

An audience that could generally be classified as "nontraditional", the county government employees indicated their highest preferences are for printed information that extension has available. Those were newsletters, newspapers, and bulletins/pamphlets (Table 3). Altogether, this nontraditional audience preferred print delivery methods in five of their top ten rankings. Perhaps most informative is the high preference among both audiences for the newsletter as a means of receiving information that is made available by extension.

Comparative Analysis

In a comparison of delivery preferences of beef cattle farmers and county government personnel, significant differences were shown between the two audience groups for eight of the delivery methods (Table 4). The government personnel held significantly stronger preferences for newspapers, workshops, personal letter, leaflet/flyers, and exhibits than did the

Table 3*Preferred Delivery Methods by Polk County Government Personnel (n=40)*

Delivery Method	Ranking	n	%
Newsletter	1	33	83
Newspaper	2	28	70
Bulletin/Pamphlet	3	27	68
Workshop	4	22	55
Leaflet/flyer	5.5	19	48
Letter	5.5	19	48
Exhibit	7.5	17	43
Personal visit	7.5	17	43
Office visit	9	16	40
Seminar	11.5	14	35
Fact Sheet	11.5	14	35
Telephone	11.5	14	35
Method demonstration	11.5	14	35
Specialty publications	14	13	33
Field Day	15	10	25
Fair	16	9	23
Discussion group	17.5	8	20
Meeting	17.5	8	20
Tour	19	7	18
On-farm test	20	6	15
Home study kit	21	5	13
Teletip	21	5	13
Conference	21	5	13
Video cassette	21	5	13
Lecture	21	5	13
Television	27	4	10
Data Analysis/Results	27	4	10
Radio	27	4	10
Computer software	29.5	3	8
Notebook	29.5	3	8
Fax	32	2	5
Brainstorming	32	2	5
Symposium	32	2	5
Panel	34	1	3
Audio cassette	-	-	-

Table 4*Comparison of Delivery Methods Preferred (Percentages)*

Delivery Method	Beef Cattle Producers (n=48) %	County Government Personnel (n=40) %
Newsletter	88	83
Bulletin/Pamphlet	58	68
Personal visit	58	43
Newspaper	19	70 *
Workshop	31	55 *
Method demonstration	48	35
Office visit	38	40
Field day	50	25 *
Letter	23	48 *
Specialty publications	35	33
Meeting	46	20 *
Telephone	29	35
Seminar	29	35
Leaflet/flyer	15	48 *
On-farm test	44	15 *
Tour	38	18
Exhibit	13	43 *
Fact sheet	19	35
Video cassette	17	13
Fair	6	23
Discussion group	8	20
Conference	13	13
Data analysis/results	13	10
Lecture	10	13
Home study kit	8	13
Notebook	6	8
Teletip	0	13
Television	2	10
Computer software	4	8
Radio	0	10
Symposium	2	5
Fax	0	5
Brainstorming	0	5
Audio cassette	4	0
Panel	0	3

*Significant difference at .05

beef cattle farmers. The beef cattle farmers preferred field days, meetings, and on-farm tests significantly more than did the government personnel.

Discussion

The research results indicate that as a traditional extension audience, beef cattle farmers in Polk County have developed a reliance on extension as a supplier of agricultural information. Obviously, based on their indicated low levels of use of extension information, the county government employees do not rely on extension for much of their information needs. This lack of dependence on extension simply places extension as one of many available information sources. Under these circumstances, for these audiences, defining and providing specific information, within the constraints of organizational resources, may be quite difficult, considering other information sources exist.

The need for understanding newer audiences relates not only to the need for providing the appropriate information, but also to the calls for improved understanding of the preferences that diverse audiences hold for receiving information from extension.

As indicated in prior research findings, there is some predictability among different groups of extension clientele as to program delivery methods that will likely be most preferred by most individuals within those groups. However, equally predictable is the clear indication in this and prior research that, among groups, many different preferences will be expressed. However, as the analysis shows, the county government personnel prefer methods that allow them to direct their own learning experiences. Since they generally preferred printed materials, they likely feel that information contained therein can be studied, reviewed, or used for learning reinforcement and/or reference as they wish. Such use allows learners to pace their own study and to focus only on the information desired.

Implications

This study demonstrates the significant diversity of program delivery preferences among extension's audiences. While most of the preferred methods of both audiences can be considered traditional methods used by extension, a review of

the data indicates considerable differences in preferences for electronic delivery technologies, such as fax and computer software. If these trends continue, as the information technology explosion continues, these diverse preferences are likely to become even greater.

With the potential for less dependence upon a single source or provider of information by clients in the future, extension will need to exercise a delicate balancing act in its program delivery. For those audiences who are left behind in the information technology revolution, as well as those who prefer to receive information in a hands-on or other traditional manner, too much dependence upon newer technology for program delivery may alienate those audiences. Yet, for others, too little reliance on newer delivery methods and means may have a similar impact. Therefore, the extension educator will need to make sure that information opportunities are provided to diverse audiences via delivery modes that best fit the needs and preferences of those respective audiences. This will require continuous updating of knowledge and skills in using newer communications technologies by the extension educator. Also, it will require the application of program development skills in selecting appropriate delivery methods when developing program delivery systems for specifically targeted audiences.

In this client-driven mode, extension educators must focus on client needs as well as their preferences. While meeting informational needs of diverse clientele, extension should also educate clients on educational opportunities that are available, as well as the many different ways that information can be delivered.

Ultimately, as delivery methods are selected that will be most effective and efficient for specific audiences, the extension educator must use all available knowledge of those audiences and their preferences for learning and receiving information. By using this audience analysis for guidance in planning program delivery systems, extension educators should be successful in continuing to meet the needs of an ever-changing society.

References

- Epsilon Sigma Phi. (1979). The people and the profession. *Journal of Extension*, Madison, WI.
- Executive Development Institute (1992). North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service, NC State University, Raleigh.
- Jams, D. R. and M. H. Marion. (1991). Cost effective environmental education options. *Journal of Extension*, 29 (2), 12-14.
- Obanayujie, J. and J. H. Hillison. (1988). Now hear this: delivery method for farmers. *Journal of Extension*, 26 (1). Available: <http://joe.org/cgi-bin/mktoc/joe/1988spring>
- Richardson, J. G. (1989). Keeping pace with the times? *Journal of Extension*, 27 (3), 29.
- Richardson, J. G. (1993, February). *Clientele preferences for receiving information from extension: A North Carolina study*. Paper presented to the Agricultural Communications Section, Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Tulsa, Oklahoma.
- Ritter, E. M. and D. T. Welch. (1988). Reaching and teaching. *Journal of Extension*, 26 (3). Available: <http://joe.org/joe/1988fall/al.txt>
- Tyson, C. B. (1993). *The potential contribution of marketing concepts for improving effectiveness of international development of extension education programs*. Proceedings, AIAEE Conference, Arlington, Virginia.