Extension's Portfolio for the 21st Century: A Place for One-on-One Consultations

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Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Community-Based Learning | Community-Based Research | Entomology

Comments
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Introduction
As we move into the 21st Century, it is a particularly appropriate time for Cooperative Extension to reflect on where it has been and evaluate where it is going. This includes subject matter, audiences, and methods. This article examines individual consultation as a method still appropriate at the turn of the century.

The primary purpose for Extension in the early 1900s was to "take knowledge directly to the farmers" (W. Rasmussen, as cited by Schweider, 1993, p. viii) by working closely with farmers in one-on-one activities and demonstrations on their farms. Historically, one-on-ones were part of Extension agriculture, but became part of Extension to families during the farm crisis years. Over time though, Extension work became more identified with group meetings and use of media to reach large if not mass audiences. This was driven by several factors including efficiency in reaching larger numbers, limited resources, and reliance upon mass media as sources of information.

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Particularly vulnerable was support for one-on-one consultations, as they do not have the multiplier effect or reach as large a number of individuals as do group activities or train the trainer methods. This perceived drain on resources is evidenced in Journal of Extension articles regarding evaluation of one-on-one activities. One article suggests that "Apart from using valuable time, these [one-on-one] calls can reduce already scarce funds for travel and other program necessities" (Varner and Levins, 1987, p. 1). When the benefit of the individualized activities is acknowledged, a caveat is often attached. For example, one-on-ones such as farm visits are seen as holding "an important place in Extension education programs" yet in the same breath it is acknowledged that they are "costly and time consuming" (Calderwood, 1997, p. 3).

In this article, we revisit our roots, to the individual consultations that provided the base from which the Cooperative Extension Service grew. We argue that before completely abandoning one-on-one consultations such a decision should be carefully reviewed. Using data gathered from clients' and Extension field specialists' evaluations of one-on-one activities, we maintain that continuing (or re-implementing) these consultations as part of Extension's portfolio for the 21st Century has mutual benefit, both to the client and to Extension.

Methods

In 1996, 1997 and 1998, as part of its evaluation efforts, Iowa State University Extension to Agriculture and Natural Resources field (regional) specialists included follow up on their one-on-one activities. Surveys were created for the topic areas of crop management, farm management, livestock, and agricultural engineering. Information was gathered on behavioral changes and economic impacts resulting from the information, quality of the information received, and types of clients Extension serves.

In this article we highlight combined data from three years (1996-1998) of respondents who sought and received individual information regarding crop management (overall n = 462) or livestock (n = 407). Chi-square analysis conducted indicates the three years did not differ statistically. The surveys are given to different clients each year. In a few cases where the same client is served, it is for a different problem; therefore dependency is not an issue in our findings. We also include qualitative data collected from ten field specialists in summer 1999 by telephone or e-mail.

Findings and Discussion

We were first interested in knowing how clients used the information they received from Extension staff and what changes were made as a result of the contact. Table 1 presents the impacts of the Extension recommendations. Nearly half (48%) of those clients seeking information on crop management indicated they made a change in their operation due to the recommendation. Forty-five percent of the respondents indicated they also used the recommendation to confirm their own plan.

These findings are consistent with those who received information on livestock, with 47% of the individuals indicating they made changes in their operation due to the Extension recommendation. In both crop management and livestock, 7% or less of the respondents did not follow the recommendation given by Extension.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Percentage Indicating+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Crop Management</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made operation change</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used recommendation</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to confirm own plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not follow</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Livestock</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made change in operation</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>due to recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Used recommendation</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to confirm own plan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not follow</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>recommendation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ Respondents could indicate more than one.

These findings indicate in both subject areas a behavioral change was made by a large majority of the respondents. This change was either adoption of the Extension recommendation and/or seeking information to
confirm the client's own plan.

Information on the economic value of Extension to client's operations was also obtained (Table 2). Fifty-eight percent of crop management respondents indicated the information saved them $11 an acre or more. Those who sought out livestock information indicated substantial savings as well. For cattle, nearly half (48%) of the respondents reported the information saved them $11 a head or better. For swine and sheep, 54% indicated they were saving at least $1.01 a head. At a time when both crop and livestock prices are at record lows, these savings are crucial to the producer and show the value of Extension information to the producer’ operation.

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Indicating</th>
<th>Crop Management (n = 348)</th>
<th>Livestock-Cattle (n = 168)</th>
<th>Livestock-Swine/Sheep (n = 95)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than $5/acre</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$6-$10/acre</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>.51-$1.00/head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$11-$25/acre</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>$1.01-$2.00/head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$26-$50/acre</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>$2.01-$5.00/head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$51-$75/acre</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>$5.01 or greater/head</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$76 or greater/acre</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We were also interested in the quality of information provided, especially regarding the timeliness of materials requested, the usefulness of the information, and the effectiveness of the field specialist when communicating ideas or concepts. A very high majority of clients (ranging from 98% to 100%) in both topic areas indicated they were either "very satisfied" or "satisfied" with the information they received (Table 3). Only 2% or fewer of the clients indicated they were "not satisfied" with the information they received.

**Table 3**
Client Satisfaction with Information Provided 1996-1998

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage Indicating &quot;Satisfied&quot; or &quot;Very Satisfied&quot;+</th>
<th>Crop Management (n = 409)</th>
<th>Livestock (n = 324)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Timeliness of material requested</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usefulness of information provided</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effectiveness when communicating ideas/concepts</td>
<td>99</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Effectiveness when communicating ideas/concepts 99
+ Respondents could indicate more than one.

These findings clearly reveal that one-on-one consultations are of great use to Extension clients, beneficial change is made, and there is an opportunity to have measurable impact. Thus a change in human and financial capital of the client is one benefit that arises with individual consultation.

Several other advantages also accrue from one-on-one activities for Extension staff. These include providing on-the-job training that keeps staff current in their subject area and helps them establish credibility, making staff more effective change agents. On-the-job training includes augmenting needs assessments and providing an opportunity for "in the field" situations from which specialists learn. Keeping current and obtaining information on "real" problems also enhances credibility of the specialist. These benefits to Extension staff are evident in the field specialists' comments regarding one-on-ones.

As one livestock specialist noted, "I have viewed one-on-one consultations as 'on the job training and in-service for me.' They allow for keeping current of the real problems facing producers. If a producer asks for assistance, the suggestion I make will involve [my] seeking answers to the problem and researching for ideas and/or technology that will hopefully solve the problem." That is, the seeking and researching of the problem increases the knowledge base of this field specialist.

The visits also provide opportunities, if the specialists so choose, for their own research, as noted by this crop specialist: "The visits are an excellent learning experience. They provide an opportunity to see what is working and what is not working under various conditions. Thus, when we are 'up in front of people,' we can speak from a perspective of personal observation as well as theory."

Extension staff also utilize the individual activities to conduct needs assessment. "I monitor the types of questions I get and use them as a basis for potential areas of programming. For instance, a couple of years ago, I received a number of questions about grazing. This led to a winter grazing conference," noted a livestock field specialist. Additional livestock specialists commented that the information gained from the consultations allowed them to do more precise needs assessments. "I use individual consultations to double check priority issues. The agricultural press does a good job of identifying national issues for beef producers, but I use individual consultations to pinpoint which of these issues are a priority for Iowa beef producers."

Simply put by another specialist, "Keeping current on what is happening in the field is very important. The best way to do this is to make visits to producers to know the challenges that are facing them." That is, individual consultations assist Extension field specialists with a better connection with what is happening in the real world.

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A crops specialist summed up many of the benefits of one-on-one consultations when they commented, "I use part of these conversations to help develop views of what is needed by crop producers, and that shapes much of what I am able to cover in many programs the next summer. Also, I use these surveys to alter recommendations I make in the future sometimes, and to insure that I am giving good advice to producers. It makes a person a lot more trustworthy when you can say, 'Last year, when I made this recommendation to a producer about not replanting his beans after hail and they looked very similar to these, he reported that his yields were seven bushels better than his neighbor's who replanted.'"

The specialist continued, "Not only do you have the research to back you up, you also have a little bit of 'testimonial' type of information, which can help you 'sell' the farmer on the idea, too. After all," he concluded, "we are trying to influence the producer to use research data to make decisions, and salesmanship is a part of that."

Most individuals do not make major behavior change based on mass media information. The promise of the information age is tailored to the individual and people are demanding information to be specific. Although Extension evaluation data shows meetings contribute to some behavior change, large scale, significant behavior changes may be more likely in one-on-one contacts. Individual consultations provide a teachable moment allowing one to take advantage of the opportunity for a substantial change. The feedback data from ISU's one-on-one evaluations show that, when working individually, there is considerable and beneficial change. This impact not only the specific problem addressed, but also strengthen the thought process the clients underwent before, during, and after making the change. That is, the overall learning process is impacted.
The questions then become; (a) when are one-on-ones appropriate, and (b) are they in competition with the private sector. Peter Bloome (1996) discusses both of these issues in his work Extension's Contract with Society. Bloome proposes what Extension should, and should not be involved in. A primary reason for involvement is when the interaction is an exchange relationship, where both the Extension client and Extension specialist are learning from and with each other. Extension should not be involved in offering services that do not involve learning for Extension or program participants, or doing for others what they or other agencies can do (to which we add better). These criteria offer direction for when individual consultations are appropriate and clarification on how they differ from private sector activities.

The previous comments by field specialists reveal that an exchange relationship is clearly a feature in the one-on-ones they are conducting. Their comments strongly suggest that one-on-one consultations may result in benefits far beyond the cost. These consultations provide professional development for Extension staff as well as marketing for Extension overall, as they demonstrate Extension's credibility and competence. The impacts of individual consultation to Extension staff are not as easily measured or quantified, yet the benefits derived from them are unmistakable.

Conclusion

Our findings clearly show one-on-one consultations produce results. These results include an economic and educational value for clients. Moreover, the findings from the surveys have been used extensively by the director of agriculture and natural resources in supporting the work Extension Agriculture has done in Iowa. The results are shared with local Extension councils, commodity groups, policy makers and legislators and show that the public dollars invested in Extension result in improved decision-making by producers that increase profits and reduce losses. Consultations produce results for field specialists by providing them with information on what is happening in the field (both literally and figuratively); providing opportunities for on-going research; and assisting in building credibility.

While our discussion here has been limited to Extension Agriculture, we believe one-on-ones are an essential form of delivery for all components of Extension. Even in a high-tech information age, there is still a critical role for personal interaction. Therefore, a place must be made for one-on-one consultations in Extension's portfolio for the new millennium.

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