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The PNW Model: Lessons from Extension's Most Successful Regional Publishing Program

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The PNW Model: Lessons from Extension's Most Successful Regional Publishing Program

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Abstract: *The Extension services of Washington State University, Oregon State University, and the University of Idaho established Pacific Northwest Extension Publishing (PNW Publishing) in 1946 as a mechanism of regional cooperation and cost savings. Other regions followed suit in the decades that followed. Today, PNW Publishing is the last standing regional publishing cooperative in Extension. This article identifies factors that have contributed to the success of PNW Publishing and offers lessons that can be applied to other multi-state cooperative efforts in today's Extension environment.*

Introduction

"We could better supply the common demand and save on the expenditure of public funds," wrote E. V. Ellington, director of Extension at Washington State University (then called the State College of Washington) in 1946, in a message that would change the course of Extension publishing. That was the beginning of Pacific Northwest Extension Publishing (PNW Publishing)—a cooperative effort among the Extension services of Washington State University, Oregon State University, and the University of Idaho—and the many other regional Extension publishing efforts that followed.

Extension publishing has significantly changed over the last 65-plus years. The shift from periodic large offset print runs to electronic publishing and on-demand printing has lessened the direct cost savings of collaborative arrangements. However, regional Extension publishing as exemplified by PNW Publishing continues to be a viable model in the digital age to reduce duplication of effort and create outstanding-quality products in the face of ongoing budgetary constraints. The PNW Publishing track record includes collaboration on more than 630 publications, as well as production of videos, CDs, and computer software.

The following describes the context, policies, benefits, and liabilities under which the only surviving multi-state publishing cooperative within the land-grant university Extension system developed and still operates. We highlight the principles and practices that have allowed PNW Publishing to survive and flourish while other regional publishing initiatives have not. Historical records were examined, and relevant institutional knowledge was captured for the study. Our intent is to encourage similar journeys.

Benefits of Regional Cooperation

Initially, the benefits of PNW Publishing were defined largely in terms of the cost savings of a shared print run. By 1962, these benefits were understood more broadly: "The cooperative publishing program in the Northwest is highly satisfactory. In addition to cutting production costs by about half, it saves author and editor time and strengthens the subject matter programs by insuring uniform recommendations" (Salisbury, 1962).

At the 25th anniversary of PNW Publishing, the PNW Committee (1974) reported having printed nearly 5 million copies of publications with a cost savings of \$150,000. "Of course," noted Ralph W. Salisbury (1975), Oregon's representative on the committee, "the big savings are in avoiding duplication of writing, editing, and even the basic research."

Despite the popularity of electronic publishing, reducing print costs has never lost its appeal. When print copies are part of the PNW Publishing plan, all three states continue to save money by combining the print run (i.e., the cost per copy is reduced by printing higher quantities). These savings are then passed on to Extension clientele so they don't have to pay as much for printed publications. Other benefits from involvement in PNW Publishing that remain relevant include the following.

- Higher quality products resulting from reviews by all three states;
- Consistent recommendations addressing the needs of residents living in a tri-state region with shared geographic features;
- Educational materials in subject areas that some states are no longer able to support with Extension specialists;
- Wider distribution of materials;
- Increased author expertise from working with other authors and reviewers from different states; and
- Idea exchange and sharing what has been learned in a fast-changing communications world to improve the quality and efficiency of Extension publishing.

Investment Required for Regional Publishing

In order to experience the benefits gained through regional publishing, participating institutions must commit to the concept, agree to a process, and provide the resources required to successfully carry it out.

Focused effort is required for the PNW Committee representatives (one from each state's land-grant institution) to shepherd proposals, process content reviews, share printing estimates, solicit orders, maintain inventories, and keep records of print purchases, in addition to editing manuscripts and directing art and media choices. The resource-intensive nature of the three-state review has been identified as one of PNW Publishing's liabilities (PNW Committee, 1996).

Participation in a regional publishing cooperative also requires commitment to prepare for and participate in semiannual meetings (as well as cover related travel or telecom costs) and communicate the value of regional publishing and the procedures under which it operates to new authors, administrators, and committee members.

Careful peer review, editing, and design are crucial parts of any academic publishing process. Viewed holistically, fewer resources are required for regional than for individual state publishing because the result is a single, shared product rather than different ones (with inevitably-overlapping information) in every state. Regional publishing need not be an add-on responsibility, but instead an efficient mechanism for publishing material that is important to all participating states.

Rise and Fall of Other Regional Programs

PNW Publishing has often been cited as the model and inspiration for other regional Extension publishing efforts. The reputation of the program was already strong in 1956:

[T]he three Pacific Northwest states enjoy a nation-wide reputation as leaders in this field of Cooperative Extension publishing. Our series of PNW bulletins was cited in a meeting of the North Central states' directors.... I just heard, too, that the southern states' administrators and editors are meeting to draw up plans for Cooperative Extension publications. So it looks like the idea that has been flourishing for many years here in the Pacific Northwest is beginning to spread. (Nielsen, 1956)

In 1968, the Publications Committee of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors was inspired by the PNW success to prepare

a model "interstate cooperative printing agreement" that could be used or adapted by other regions (Meade, 1968).

Many other regional Extension publishing/distribution cooperatives rose, and fell, over the course of the 20th century. For decades, Midwest states produced publications in the North Central Regional Extension Publication series and worked through the North Central Region Educational Materials Project (NCREMP) to more broadly distribute Extension educational materials in the upper Midwest and beyond. The NCREMP boasted a service that could "provide access to thousands of Extension materials" (Brown, 1990). However, by 1995 concern had been expressed that the NCREMP was "no longer valid" (Brown, 1995).

Sorrel Brown (personal communication, December 14, 2009), past NCREMP coordinator, recalled the following:

Regardless that we showed how much each state was saving in dollars by collaborating with other states to produce regional materials, . . . the directors did not have a compelling enough sense of ownership for NCREMP to continue funding it.

Lack of support from Extension directors in the Northeast Regional Publications program led to a similar fate" (Carlson, 1983).

The tenets of regional publishing—multi-state partnerships, avoided duplication of effort, and cost savings—appeared to be beneficial and compensatory to Extension's trend of reduced state and federal support and need to demonstrate broader impacts. But ironically, many of the multi-state Extension publishing efforts, including Western Regional Extension Publications, were discontinued at about the same time that section 105 of the Agricultural Research, Extension, and Education Reform Act of 1998 introduced a requirement for agricultural Extension formula funds to be expended on multi-state Extension activities (USDA CSREES, 2000) and multi-institutional partnerships were being recommended as critical to the future of Extension (Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, 2002).

Factors for Success

PNW Publishing has remained viable for over 65 years, through many changes in economic conditions, publishing technologies, organizational trends, and leadership. Thus, the PNW model can be used to identify parameters that will increase the likelihood of success for other regional cooperative efforts. We have identified the following key factors to consider when initiating multi-state partnerships.

Shared Interests and Needs

It is widely understood that the PNW model works first and foremost because the three participating states share corresponding interests both philosophically and geographically. As stated in the PNW Publishing indicia, "similar crops, climate, and topography create a natural geographic unit that crosses state lines." This "common subject matter agreement" has been cited as a criterion for success in any regional Extension publishing program (Meade, 1968).

Similarly, Strieter and Blalock (2006) explained that successful collaborations are dependent on organizations with a common definition of the problem they want to resolve, compatible program goals, and adequate resources to support programming efforts.

Support from Administration and Faculty

The head of what was then Extension Information at Oregon State University stressed to fellow western region Extension editors that "regional publishing requires enthusiastic, continuing support from Extension and other university administrators who understand the nature of the effort" (Evans, 1975).

The significance of this high-level endorsement for sustaining PNW Publishing was recognized early on. In the Pacific Northwest, "we've been fortunate, I think, in having far-seeing administrators in all three states who have not only approved but have urged cooperative publications" (Nielsen, 1956).

The demise of the Northeast Regional Publications program was attributed to the fact that "northeastern Extension directors never supported regional publications" (Carlson, 1983).

Avoiding a Centralized Service

The PNW model succeeds, in part, because each of the three states supports its own publishing team (Carlson, 1983). Once a manuscript is approved through tri-state peer review, the lead author's state edits, designs, and prints and/or posts the publication online without further input from the other states other than in response to applicable print cost issues.

Regional initiatives such as the North Central program that were established with a centralized support structure requiring pooled funding eventually died in part due to the withdrawal of funding (S. Brown, personal communication, December 14, 2009).

It was a similar case in the Northeast. The Northeast Regional Publications program failure led to the conclusion that "it was a mistake to set up a central headquarters production and storage unit; the individual states could do better work since they had more facilities and more talent on their staffs" (Carlson, 1983).

Minimum Policies and Procedures

At the outset of many regional publishing programs, large committees were formed that created pages and pages of policies and procedures. In hindsight, this was a recipe for failure.

While PNW Publishing has its policies and procedures, most grew more or less organically in response to specific situations and in the interests of quality, efficiency, and continued cooperation. Once any of the three states identifies a problem, it is discussed in regular communication and at semiannual meetings to determine a resolution, which is incorporated into the procedures as needed. Procedural changes reflect changing political climates, technologies, and regulations at the participating institutions.

The following short, useful, and good-humored policies demonstrate the functional quality of PNW Publishing protocols (PNW Committee, 1954):

- "The manuscript is approved by the necessary subject matter authorities in each state (not so easy as it sounds).
- Editing and layout are the responsibility of the one state designated for a given bulletin. (Too many cooks confuse the stew.)"

A group of PNW Publishing professionals recently concluded that the cooperative "functions effectively because of its clear operating procedures and the trust and communication between its members. [It] is flexible and supportive so that it can be a mechanism of opportunity and collaboration" (Anderson-Wilk, Dailey, Ginsburg, Noel, Stout, & Rollins, 2009).

Manageable Size

Cooperative publishing can be "a cumbersome, time-consuming process when the number of participating states is large" (Evans, 1975).

Another reason PNW Publishing has succeeded and others did not relates to scale. Three states is manageable. Thirteen states (the number participating in both the Western and North Central Regional Extension Publications programs) is more of a challenge. These larger partnerships were found to be "too unwieldy" (Dey, 2000), largely because "the complexity of getting a manuscript approved for regional publication increases not linearly, but exponentially with each state that is added to the regional publishing agreement" (Evans, 1975).

Meade (1968), "based on knowledge of human relations," concluded that the number of states entering into a regional agreement should be limited to five.

Give and Take

Resistance to regional collaboration comes in many forms, including "a feeling that the prerogatives of a specialist may be impaired by compromising with specialists of other states in order to put out a cooperative bulletin" (Mileham, 1946). However, authors participating in the open PNW Publishing peer review process typically recognize and honor the needs of the other states by willingly incorporating reviewer suggestions into their manuscripts unless the change conflicts with their own state's recommendations.

If a recommendation is incompatible with one state, the disagreeing parties are encouraged to work out a mutually agreeable compromise. Franz (2003) called this "stretching, challenging, or pushing each other's thinking and capacities," which was found to be common to partnerships that exhibit "effective problem solving and . . . adaptation to change." If no compromise can be reached, the manuscript is respectfully withdrawn from further consideration as a PNW publication.

"States cooperating in regional publishing must be willing to sacrifice some identity to gain the advantage of maneuverability of inventories" (Evans, 1975), but it is reasonable for states to expect to gain something, as well as give something, in participating. In 1967, the findings of a survey on Northeast Extension publishing noted that "time taken from work in my state to help other states of the region should also bring some compensatory dividends to us" (Spaven, 1967). Anderson-Wilk et al. (2009) put it this way with regard to PNW Publishing: "Participation is based on mutual opportunity and benefit."

Respect for Autonomy

Regional cooperation works well when it is understood that, first and foremost, the participants remain part of and representatives of their institutions: "I think all of us, including editors, feel that our first obligation is to take care of timely needs in our own state. If PNW [Publishing] interferes with that we feel no obligation to PNW [Publishing]" (Carlson, 1975).

In the PNW cooperative, the lead state holds copyright and includes this information on PNW publications. All three states distinguish the lead institution by listing it first among the others on the front cover of publications. Individual institutional logos are not permitted on cooperative materials.

With very few exceptions, PNW Publishing "allows each participating state to follow the same publishing processes it does for its own single-state materials. "The cooperative does not force participating states to take actions that are not in the individual states' best interests or that are in conflict with the individual states' own practices" (Anderson-Wilk et al., 2009). This includes every issue from editing

and design to printing, online publishing, control of electronic files, warehousing, and pricing. However, the PNW Publishing representatives work together to identify options and compromises for PNW products.

Future of Cooperative Publishing

Although much of the reasoning behind organizing PNW Publishing in 1946 centered around cutting printing costs for the cooperating states, we believe the most compelling explanation for its longevity is the fortunate convergence of "Factors for Success" outlined above that result in efficient regional distribution of trusted information. This is especially critical for emergent regional issues such as pest infestations and disease spread.

The open nature of the PNW review process, in which authors and reviewers work together to improve manuscripts and resolve their differences, also reflects the "essential role played by discussion and debate in knowledge formation" (Fitzpatrick, 2011). An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* implies open review may be where much of academia is headed in the future to yield a more collective production of knowledge (Mole, 2012).

Terry Meisenbach (personal communication, December 16, 2009), eXtension communications and marketing director, noted that regional publishing efforts share with eXtension the objectives of "elimination of duplication, fostering cross-border collaboration and cooperation, and creating the 'best of the best' resources." We are confident that the sustained fulfillment of these objectives by PNW Publishing can also be attributed to the elements we identified that characterize our partnership. We expect PNW Publishing to play a meaningful role in the future not only because of this proven mix of ingredients for collaboration, but its prioritization of finding solutions to current challenges. This includes adapting to the changing needs and preferences of local Extension audiences with new methods of information distribution that incorporate commonly-used electronic technologies to maximize the value and acceptance of practical education (Mitchell & Gillis, 2006; Kinsey, 2010; Guenther & Swan, 2011).

Implications for Other States

Extension services in the Pacific Northwest are hardly unique. Persistent funding limitations throughout the country still inspire Extension faculty to work more cooperatively across state lines. Land-grant university researchers are confronting issues like climate change that don't adhere to political boundaries. We believe that other states with common geographies can benefit as we have from cooperative regional publishing, and we hope that our example will motivate the consideration of beginning similar arrangements. The PNW model provides some best practices. The recipe just needs to be sampled. Adjust ingredients as needed to suit specific institutional characteristics.

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