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Local Marketing and Promotional Efforts of Florida Extension Agents

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Local Marketing and Promotional Efforts of Florida Extension Agents

Abstract

The purpose of the study reported here was to gain a better understanding of what Florida Extension agents do to promote and market programs in their counties. The objectives of the study were to determine the perceptions of current Florida Extension agents as to specific methods or materials used to market Florida Extension programs and activities. A total of 175 Florida Extension agents responded in this study, for an overall response rate of 54.18%. Results indicated that Extension agents would benefit from the development of marketing and promotional tools that would help them to disseminate information to the public.

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Introduction

Among their many other duties and responsibilities, county Extension agents are in charge of promoting programs that are beneficial to the residents of their county. According to Varea-Hammond (2004), three main reasons exist for marketing Extension: political motivations, so that funding and support is gained; internal benefits, which happen when high-performance teams are created and good staff is attracted; and survival, competing for clientele who have resources available. Promotion and marketing help to enhance the impact of county Extension agents' efforts and to help maintain their presence.

Chappell (1990) stated that there is more to the Extension marketing process than merely developing good programs and then making them available for public use. Chappell suggested that the success of an Extension program relies on communicating with the public in a way that creates awareness, stimulates interest, and, in the end, produces involvement by targeted clientele. Extension marketing programs use "effective pricing, communication, and distribution to inform, motivate, and service clients" (Chappell, 1994, para. 3). The main objective of Extension

programming is to meet the needs of their clientele (Boldt, 1988).

Verma and Burns (1995) stated that in the 1980s, "marketing Extension" became popular in several states' Extension Services. New names, logos, outreach materials, and staff training programs were initiated. These materials together provided a unified, consistent, and cohesive image of the Extension Service. Yet the usage of Extension is declining in many areas, and public awareness of Extension programs is decreasing (McDowell, 2004).

Extension agents must use effective communication and distribution in order to best inform, motivate, and service their clients (Chappell, 1994). However, with the change in the diversity of the clientele, finding the most effective communication vehicle is becoming increasingly difficult. King and Boehlje (2000) pointed out that Extension's day of being a sole-source provider of information is gone. They mentioned that technology, combined with an open access to information, lure private organizations to compete for people who once relied solely on Extension's services.

Although Extension professionals are being encouraged to market their programs, their reaction to increasing their marketing efforts has been mixed (DeYoung, 1988). DeYoung stated that some agents are hopeful that their marketing efforts will increase funding for future projects. Others, however, fear that if a new audience is acquired, their time and resources will be overloaded (1988).

Little research has been conducted on the marketing and promotional efforts, as well as the training needs of county Extension agents. However, Extension agents are expected to use the media to varying degrees in order to get information out to their audience. A study of what media Extension agents currently use and what they feel comfortable using will help to provide a basis for developing marketing and promotional training tools for Extension agents. Therefore, the purpose of the study reported here was to gain a better understanding of what Florida Extension agents do to promote and market programs in their county.

Literature Review

American population centers have shifted from 80% rural to predominantly urban areas since the creation of Extension . Extension has traditionally focused on disseminating information to people within surrounding communities (McDowell, 2004); however, studies have demonstrated that the general public does not possess a clear understanding of the mission and funding of the Extension Service . In fact, Extension is perceived as better at carrying out effective programs than at communicating these programs . According to Fett, Shinners-Gray, Duffy, and Doyle (1995), most persons' only contact with Extension is through the mass media.

A goal in marketing is the development and repetition of a good name or brand image . Extension programs across the nation have identified with this goal, using marketing techniques to increase public awareness of their programs . Many state Extension services, from the mid-1980s on, began constructing a consistent and uniform statewide identity with new names and logos (Verma & Burns, 1995).

According to Verma and Burns, however, if Extension, or any other organization, is repeating a brand image or name that does not resonate with its stakeholders, the organization may be wasting its time and resources. As Topor (1986) stated: "A well-executed marketing plan will touch the lives and activities of practically everyone involved at your institution at one time or another. It's important, then, to involve as many people as possible" (p. 52).

According to Maddy and Kealy, the Extension Service must work on brand equity in order to attract repeat customers. Otherwise, if Extension educators do not effectively communicate the Extension brand, the consumer may not become a regular customer because they do not know how to engage in a relationship with the organization. They also point out that information is important to marketing in the future because due to the diversity of audiences, one medium will not work for all consumers (1998).

For example, a study conducted by the Magazine Publishers of America and J. Walter Thompson (Confer, 1992) indicated when print advertising was used with television advertising, the breadth and depth of the communication is enhanced and the advertiser achieves greater profits. A telephone survey conducted by Warner, Christenson, Dillman, and Salant (1996)--with a random sample of members of the general public--found that 45% of respondents had heard of the Extension Service, while only 26% indicated they or a member of their immediate family had ever used the services of Extension. The researchers noted that Extension continues to have a fragmented image and must do a better job of establishing linkages between individual programs and the overall mission of Extension.

Methodology

The research design for this census study was a descriptive survey of a population of active (employed) Extension agents in the state of Florida. The survey was conducted via mail using an adapted form of Dillman's Tailored Design method (2000). The total of accessible Extension agents in the state of Florida after August 10, 2004--when the survey was initially distributed--was 323.

The survey instrument was delivered via mail to all Extension agents in Florida. Respondents were given a period of 8 weeks to respond to the survey. Non-respondents were then contacted and sent a second, and final, wave of the survey. The response rate obtained by the survey was 54.18% (n=175).

The 25-question survey was adapted from two previous questionnaires, used in surveys of politically active agricultural leaders and of agricultural scientists in the southern United States (Lundy, Ruth, Telg, & Irani, 2005; Lundy, Telg, Irani, & Locke, 2004; Ruth, Telg, Irani, & Locke, 2004; Telg, Basford, & Irani, 2005). To ensure face and content validity, a panel of experts was utilized to review and finalize the instrument.

The data were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. The SPSS® 12.0 for Windows software package was used for the analysis. Frequencies, standard deviation, mean, and cross tabulations were calculated for all of the appropriate questionnaire items (Albright, 2000; Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). Post hoc reliability analysis for the standardized items was calculated using Cronbach's alpha. Standardized item alpha was subsequently calculated at $\alpha=.88$.

Results

In terms of gender, 58.3% (n=98) of the respondents were female, while 41.7% (n=70) were male. The largest percentage of respondents, 39.2% (n=64), ranged in age from 51-60; 4.2% (n=7) reported being above 60 years in age (Table 1).

Table 1.
Number of Respondents by Age

Age	n	%
26-30	17	10.5
31-40	24	14.7
41-50	51	31.3
51-60	64	39.2
61-66	7	4.2
Total	163	100.0

In terms of the highest educational level achieved, the majority of respondents, 76.3% (n=129), reported having a master's degree, 13.6% (n=23) held a bachelor's degree; and 10.1% (n=17) had a doctoral degree. As for the population size where they served, the largest percentage of the agents, 34.9% (n=61), reported working in an urban setting. The majority of respondents classified their current position within Extension to be "County Extension Agent" or "Multi-County Agent" (56.0%, n=94). "County Extension Director" (17.3%, n=29) was the next most common response.

Respondents were asked how many years of overall experience they have working in Extension. The highest number of respondents had been in Extension for 5 years or less (26.9%, n=45). Only 4.8% (n=8) had worked in Extension for more than 30 years (Table 2).

Table 2.
Years in Extension

Years of Service	n	%
0-5 years	45	26.9
6-10 years	38	22.8
11-15 years	15	9.0
16-20 years	18	10.8
21-25 years	29	17.4
26-30 years	14	8.4
More than 30 years	8	4.8
Total	167	100.0

Respondents were asked to indicate their primary, secondary, and tertiary clientele audiences. Homeowners were cited the most frequently as respondents' primary targeted audience. Volunteers were the second-most targeted clientele group, and the third-most targeted clientele group was youth.

The most-used method or material that was used in a typical year to market Extension programs and activities was word of mouth. More than 72% of respondents (n=122) used word-of-mouth 16

times or more in a given year to promote their programs. The second-most popular method used was online methods (46.5%, n=79). The least popular method or material that was used was paid newspaper advertisements, where almost 98% (n=163) of respondents used paid newspaper advertisements zero to five times in a typical year (Table 3).

Table 3.
Times in a Typical Year a Specific Method or Material Was Used

Characteristic	0-5 Times		6-15 Times		More Than 16 Times	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Word-of-mouth	9	5.4	38	22.5	122	72.2
Online methods (Website, email)	49	28.8	42	24.7	79	46.5
Brochures/Pamphlets	29	17.1	83	48.8	58	34.1
Spokespersons (advisory committee members, volunteers, clientele)	66	38.6	50	29.2	55	32.2
Newsletters	56	32.2	89	51.1	29	16.7
Press releases	59	35.0	67	39.7	43	25.4
Demonstrations (booths at fairs, civic meetings)	67	38.7	74	42.8	32	18.5
Signs and posters you design	81	47.4	65	38.0	25	14.6
Pre-produced UF/IFAS Extension materials	83	50.6	41	25.0	40	24.4
Direct mailings (postcards)	93	54.5	40	23.6	37	21.8
Newspaper columns you write	108	64.3	30	17.8	30	17.9
Public service announcements	125	74.8	28	16.8	14	8.4
Television interviews	147	87.0	16	9.5	6	3.6
Radio interviews	150	87.2	18	10.5	4	2.3
Radio programs	49	89.2	12	7.6	6	3.6
Point of purchase ads (grocery store)	151	91.0	13	7.8	2	1.2
Newspaper advertisements (paid)	163	97.6	4	2.4	0	0.0
Other	9	45.0	7	35.0	4	20.0

The respondents ranked word of mouth (M=4.72, n=169) to be the most useful method or material used to promote Extension programs and activities. Rankings were on a Likert-type scale with 5="very useful" to 1="not at all useful." The least useful method or material used was public service announcements (M=3.39, n=157), followed by print materials provided at retail outlets (M=3.03, n=144) and paid newspaper advertisements (M=2.91, n=128) (Table 4).

Table 4.
Usefulness of Methods and Materials Used in the Overall Marketing/Promotion of Extension Agents' Particular Extension Programs and Activities

Method or Material	n	M	SD
Word-of-mouth	169	4.72*	0.58
Direct mailings	168	4.27	0.94
Newsletters	171	4.23	0.93
Demonstrations	171	4.09	0.99
Signs and posters you design	170	3.94	0.96
Press releases	169	3.93	1.02
Newspaper columns you write	148	3.86	1.25
Online methods	164	3.73	1.05

Pre-produced UF/IFAS Extension materials	163	3.55	1.15
Television interviews	148	3.50	1.31
Radio interviews	148	3.41	1.14
Public service announcements	157	3.39	1.15
Print materials provided at retail outlets	144	3.03	1.17
Newspaper advertisements (paid)	128	2.91	1.38
*Five-point scale, with 1="not at all useful" to 5="very useful"			

Respondents were asked to rank the methods of promotion that they were most likely to use with the clientele they target the most often. Extension agents responded that they were most likely to use word of mouth (M=4.67, n=175). The least likely method or material to be used was television interviews (M=2.43, n=163) (Table 5).

Table 5.

Likelihood Extension Agents Are to Use Particular Methods to Market/Promote an Extension Program or Activity with the Clientele They Work with Most Often

Method or Material	n	M	SD
Word-of-mouth	175	4.67*	0.70
Newsletters	174	4.29	1.16
Direct mailings	173	4.19	1.17
Signs and posters you design	172	4.03	1.10
Demonstrations	170	3.95	1.18
Online methods	163	3.85	1.24
Press releases	173	3.70	1.38
Pre-produced UF/IFAS Extension materials	168	3.20	1.40
Newspaper columns you write	161	3.20	1.52
Public service announcements	167	2.84	1.37
Radio interviews	165	2.56	1.39
Television interviews	163	2.43	1.38
Point of purchase ads	160	2.09	1.29
Newspaper advertisements (paid)	160	1.79	1.26
*Five-point scale, with 1="not at all useful" to 5="very useful"			

Respondents also were asked to rank the methods of promotion that they were most likely to use with the general public or people who do not typically use Extension's services. Respondents stated they were most likely to use press releases (M=4.21, n=174) to reach this audience. Respondents tended to use word-of-mouth (M=4.13, n=168) next. Respondents ranked online methods (M= 3.84, n=165) as something they were likely to use, as well. The least popular methods or materials were television interviews (M=2.77, n=164), point of purchase advertisements (M=2.25, n=164), and paid newspaper advertisements (M=1.94, n=161) (Table 6).

Table 6.

Likelihood Agents Are to Use Particular Methods to Market/Promote an Extension Program or Activity with the General Public or People Who Do Not Typically Use Extension Services

Method or Material	n	M	SD
Press releases	174	4.21*	1.16
Word-of-mouth	168	4.13	1.13
Online methods	165	3.84	1.28
Demonstrations	169	3.78	1.20
Signs and posters you design	171	3.77	1.20
Newsletters	171	3.47	1.42
Newspaper columns you write	165	3.41	1.52
Public service announcements	164	3.38	1.39

Pre-produced UF/IFAS Extension materials	166	3.34	1.35
Direct mailings	169	3.25	1.44
Radio interviews	162	2.91	1.42
Television interviews	164	2.77	1.47
Point of purchase ads	164	2.25	1.33
Newspaper advertisements (paid)	161	1.94	1.39
*Five-point scale, with 1="not at all useful" to 5="very useful"			

Respondents were asked to rate their attitudes toward Extension marketing/promotion using a set of belief statements. Sets of bipolar adjectives, each on a one- to five-point semantic differential scale were used to scale the responses. The sets of descriptors were good (1) to bad (5), positive (1) to negative (5), beneficial (1) to not beneficial (5), favorable (1) to unfavorable (5), important (1) to not important (5), difficult (1) to easy (5), up to me (1) to not up to me (5), and in my control (1) to out of my control (5). Overall, the findings indicated the respondents felt Extension marketing/promotion was good, positive, beneficial, favorable, important, difficult, up to them, and in their control (Table 7).

Table 7.
Respondents' Attitudes About Extension Marketing

I believe that extension marketing/promotion, in general is . . .	n	M	SD
Good (1), Bad (5)	167	2.86	1.25
Positive (1), Negative (5)	167	2.03	0.87
Beneficial (1), Not Beneficial (5)	169	1.94	1.01
Favorable (1), Unfavorable (5)	166	2.01	0.84
Important (1), Not Important (5)	167	1.40	0.73
Difficult (1), Easy (5)	168	2.51	1.01
Up to me (1), Not up to me (5)	166	2.29	1.09
In my control (1), Out of my control (5)	167	2.77	1.11
*Descriptor word sets were on a five-point scale			

Respondents were then asked to rate the marketing/promotion of their specific Extension programs. The same sets of bipolar adjectives, each on a one- to five-point semantic differential scale, was used. Similar to the general attitudes toward Extension marketing/promotion, the findings indicate the respondents felt that Extension marketing/promotion of their specific programs, was good, positive, beneficial, favorable, important, difficult, up to them, and in their control (Table 8).

Table 8.
Respondents' Attitudes About Marketing/Promoting Their Specific Programs

I believe that extension marketing/promotion, of my specific programs, is . . .	n	M	SD
Good (1), Bad (5)	167	2.29	1.05
Positive (1), Negative (5)	168	1.85	0.83
Beneficial (1), Not Beneficial (5)	170	1.69	0.84
Favorable (1), Unfavorable (5)	167	1.77	0.80
Important (1), Not Important (5)	169	1.38	0.72
Difficult (1), Easy (5)	169	2.54	1.04
Up to me (1), Not up to me (5)	169	1.58	0.94
In my control (1), Out of my control (5)	169	1.99	1.04
*Descriptor word sets were on a five-point scale			

Participants were asked to indicate how confident they were in their marketing and promotions capabilities in specific areas. Respondents were most confident in writing and designing a newsletter (M=4.26, n=175). The second- and third-highest ranked methods that respondents

were most confident with were writing newspaper columns and press releases (M=4.07, n=175). The respondents were least confident in writing a public service announcement (M=3.83, n=175), establishing a marketing/promotions program (M=3.21, n=175), and developing an educational program for radio (M=3.13, n=175) (Table 9).

Table 9.
Respondents' Confidence in Their Marketing/Promotion Capabilities

Characteristic	n	M	SD
Writing and designing a newsletter	175	4.26	0.96
Writing a newspaper column	175	4.07	1.00
Writing a press release	175	4.07	1.01
Designing displays/exhibits	174	3.95	1.04
Designing posters	173	3.94	1.00
Contacting the news media	174	3.93	1.10
Designing brochures	174	3.90	1.06
Being interviewed by a news reporter	175	3.86	1.20
Writing a public service announcement	175	3.83	1.13
Establishing a marketing/promotions program	175	3.21	1.14
Developing an educational program for radio	175	3.13	1.25
*5 point scale, with 1="very unconfident" to 5="very confident"			

Respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement with seven belief statements pertaining to marketing and promotion of Extension. Respondents agreed the most with the statement, "Marketing/promotion is an important part of my job" (M=4.21, n=168). Respondents also agreed with the statement, "I feel comfortable contacting local news media outlets" (M=4.08, n=172). The least agreed with statement was, "I would consider using paid television commercials to market/promote my next event" (M=2.37, n=167) (Table 10).

Table 10.
Respondents' Level of Agreement Pertaining to Marketing and Promotion of Extension

Characteristic	n	M	SD
Marketing/promotion is an important part of my job.	168	4.21	0.85
I feel comfortable contacting local news media outlets.	172	4.08	0.95
I would like to learn more about the use of marketing to promote my local activities.	170	3.93	1.00
I am very knowledgeable about the use of marketing to promote my local activities.	172	3.54	0.98
I would consider using paid newspaper advertisements to market/promote my next event.	166	2.71	1.41
I would consider using paid radio commercials to market/promote my next event.	147	2.54	1.43
I would consider using paid television commercials to market/promote my next event.	167	2.37	1.36
*5 point scale, with 1="strongly disagree" to 5="strongly agree"			

Respondents were asked to indicate how likely they would be to participate in training if it were made available. Respondents would be most likely to attend a training on how to establish a marketing/promotions program (M=3.78, n=174), followed by how to design displays/exhibits (M=3.62, n=175) and how to design brochures (M=3.55, n=175). The respondents were less likely to attend training programs on writing a newspaper column (M=3.13, n=174), writing a press release (M=3.15, n=174), and being interviewed by a news reporter (M=3.17, n=173) (Table 11).

Table 11.
Respondents' Likelihood to Participate in Training Programs

Characteristic	n	M	SD
How to establish a marketing/promotions program	174	3.78	1.15
How to design displays/exhibits	175	3.62	1.27
How to design brochures	175	3.55	1.25
How to design posters	175	3.43	1.29
How to develop an educational program for radio	175	3.43	1.30
How to write and design a newsletter	175	3.38	1.37
How to contact the news media	174	3.22	1.25
How to write a public service announcement	175	3.18	1.36
How to be interviewed by a news reporter	173	3.17	1.36
To write a press release	174	3.15	1.34
How to write a newspaper column	174	3.13	1.38
*5 point scale, with 1="not at all likely" to 5="very likely"			

Discussion and Conclusions

Results indicated that the majority of respondents in this study use word of mouth 16 times or more in a year to market their programs and activities. Paid newspaper advertisements were the least-used method for marketing and promoting Extension programs and activities, used on average zero to five times a year. Word-of mouth was ranked as the most useful, and paid newspaper advertisements were ranked to be the least useful method or material used to promote Extension programs and activities.

An implication of these findings is that respondents target current and previous clients when disseminating their information, which may also indicate that Extension agents are more confident in contacting the audience they already have, rather than trying to get information to the general public or an untested audience. The findings on using paid newspaper advertisements also indicate a possible lack of budget for promoting and marketing activities and programs. For both current clientele and the public at large, the least likely method to be used was paid newspaper advertisements.

With current clientele, Extension agents responded that they were most likely to use word of mouth, indicating that respondents depend on their current clientele to help get the information out about Extension. With the general public, however, Extension agents were most likely to use press releases. This may indicate respondents realize that to access the public at large, the information must go through mass media channels reached with a press release.

Previous research (Fett, Shinnars-Gray, Duffy, & Doyle, 1995) implies that the general public receives information about Extension through mass media channels. If agents desire to reach new audiences, using methods and materials that can be widely dispersed are crucial to the success of an Extension program. However, because press releases are not included as one of the most useful methods or materials used, it can be inferred that the respondents in this study may not be necessarily trying to obtain a new audience.

Overall, respondents perceived Extension marketing to be good, positive, beneficial, favorable, important, difficult, up to them, and in their control. These findings indicate that respondents are satisfied with the job of marketing Extension. Not only do they think it is a necessary part of their job, they also find it to be rewarding. It is interesting to see that in the perceptions of "general" and "specific" Extension marketing, respondents indicated that they found it to be difficult to market Extension, perhaps suggesting that training on how to market Extension may be useful in the future.

An interesting finding of the study dealt with the fact that respondents said they felt confident in writing and designing a newsletter, writing a newspaper column, and writing a press release. Yet they indicated that they did not use these techniques as often as other methods. It may be the case that some type of training has been obtained previously on these methods. This training may be either formal training or just on-the-job experience.

It is also interesting that one of the least confident areas for the respondents was establishing a marketing/promotions program. Results indicated that respondents would be likely to participate in training on how to establish a marketing/promotions program, as well as how to design displays and exhibits. Agents were least likely to attend training sessions on how to be interviewed by a news reporter, how to write a press release, and how to write a newspaper column. Extension agents may feel they know how to develop certain promotional materials, but may not have the experience of putting all of these materials into a cohesive marketing message for their local programs.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

The field of agricultural communication would stand to benefit from conducting this study in other states, as well as at a national level. This information could become the basis of a more uniform training program that could be offered to Extension professionals at meetings, conferences, or possibly as online training sessions. More research also needs to be conducted in the state of Florida on Extension clients' needs. This study specifically focuses on Extension agents' use of the media, what they are confident in using, as well as the areas in which they need training. It also would be important to survey both clients and, potentially, non-clients to find out their needs and in what methods they prefer to receive information.

Based on the research, it can be concluded that Florida Extension agents would benefit from the development of marketing and promotional tools that would help them to disseminate information to the public. Communication professionals can use the findings of this study as a basis for developing training sessions to be presented to Extension agents. It is recommended that training be conducted in the areas in which the respondents were most interested. These areas include how to establish a marketing/ promotions program, how to design displays/exhibits, and how to design brochures. However, it also would be beneficial to offer training in all the areas of marketing/promotion. Based on this study, it is also recommended that more focus may need to be placed on teaching fundamental marketing/promotions skills in Extension education courses and curriculum.

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