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## Guidebook for Marketing Cooperative Extension

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## Guidebook for Marketing Cooperative Extension

### Abstract

*Marketing Cooperative Extension at the Local Level* is a highly pragmatic guidebook that stresses the need for creating visibility and recognition for Cooperative Extension county-based and regional programs. The guidebook offers a well-organized menu of strategies, tricks of the trade, and innovative ideas for getting programmatic recognition and developing political support. All staff, not just County Directors, will find useful ideas.

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## Introduction

Cooperative Extension in many states is struggling to survive under budget cuts and changing legislative priorities. The guidebook *Marketing Cooperative Extension at the Local Level* was written to help Cooperative Extension staff increase, or at the very least maintain, funding and support. The guidebook offers strategies to "market" Cooperative Extension. "Marketing," for the guidebook's purposes, refers to a combination of methods such as public relations, communication, and networking to broadly increase visibility and understanding of the value of Cooperative Extension. The guidebook makes the case that marketing is the responsibility of all staff members, not just the County Director, and provides ideas for volunteer and clientele involvement.

The guidebook resulted from a survey in which 49 County Directors in 13 states responded to this request: "Please email five or less of the most effective practices you use to 'market' Cooperative Extension in your county." Respondents all echoed the importance of marketing to help ensure the survival of Cooperative Extension and reiterated the need to, above all, deliver solid programs.

The key word for this guidebook is "practical." Many strategies are presented to allow for maximum flexibility based on locale, program type, and personal work style preferences. The reader is encouraged to select from the options and schedule them to develop a personalized action plan.

## Our Survival Depends on Marketing

The author begins by presenting the rationale for developing a marketing plan. She points out that marketing wasn't as crucial in earlier times because Cooperative Extension was the "only show in town." Those times are then contrasted with today, and the factors that have led to Cooperative Extension's anonymity or low recognition factors are identified.

### Back "Then"

The early days are best described as a time when everyone recognized Cooperative Extension, commonly known as "Agricultural Extension" or, simply, "the County Agent." Other than doing a good job, there was little need for additional efforts to publicize Cooperative Extension. The likelihood was high that any member of a Board of Supervisors (County Commissioners) was also a farmer who personally relied on the services of Cooperative Extension.

## Obscured by Changing Forces

Those days of easy recognition are gone for Cooperative Extension. Although the United States is no longer an agrarian economy, Cooperative Extension has transformed its programming to serve through each new economic phase and in the many different geographical areas of the U.S., finding new roles to play, as well as adapting the traditional farm, nutrition, and youth programs to fit the changing composition and needs of clientele. Nevertheless, fewer people know about the existence of Cooperative Extension and its value to society.

Changing demographics is the first of two significant challenges to Cooperative Extension's visibility. The second major challenge is the proliferation of information and methods of receiving it. Cooperative Extension competes with numerous businesses and non-profit organizations, all vying for the time and attention of oftentimes the same clientele. The pressure to be more accessible, more useful, quicker, and smarter grows dramatically.

## The Rationale for Marketing

The guidebook defines the following reasons for marketing Extension:

- Political--To enhance the sources of funding and support,
- Internal benefits--Creating high performing teams and attracting good staff, and
- Survival--competing for clientele who have other resources at their disposal

A point made by survey respondents was that without good programs, you have nothing to market. The basic principle and starting point for *any* marketing plan has always been to have a good product. Survey respondents said, "Good programs are the best form of marketing." "The best marketing is excellent programming." "Have relevant programming."

In the new environment, being good at programmatic disciplines is still vital, but not enough. The need for marketing is a reality.

## Getting Down to Business

Following the discussion on the need for marketing, the guidebook proceeds with the "how-to's" and specific techniques.

## How Information Is Spread

After a brief review of advertising, publicity, public relations, and marketing, the next chapter correlates the findings of Malcolm Gladwell in *The Tipping Point* to the traditional trio in Cooperative Extension: The Advisors/Agents, the cooperators/clientele, and the County Director. Each has a role in creating beneficial change and spreading the news about the value of Cooperative Extension.

## Specific Strategies

Every marketing plan begins with a strategic plan. County Directors first need to define their message and the best methods to communicate it.

Communication tools are discussed, and the point is made that our traditional tools, such as charts and statistics, are less memorable than real life stories that create an emotional link to the listener.

There are tips on creating and maintaining visibility, such as:

- Dealing effectively with the media,
- Using awards as motivators and publicity tools,
- Conducting special events,
- Networking,
- Offering superb customer service,
- Using technology, and
- Budgeting for marketing.

A chapter is devoted to the ways others can have active roles in marketing. Advisors/Agents are key players, but not to be overlooked is the extended network of clientele, political supporters, advisory boards, focus groups, and volunteers.

The guide concludes with a planning matrix.

Copies of the guidebook can be obtained by sending \$11.00 to Monterey County Cooperative Extension, 1432 Abbott Street, Salinas, CA 93901.

## References

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