

6-1-2002

## Brown Bag Lunch Programs: Another Avenue to Access?

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### Recommended Citation

Johnson, M. (2002). Brown Bag Lunch Programs: Another Avenue to Access?. *The Journal of Extension*, 40(3), Article 24. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol40/iss3/24>

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June 2002 // Volume 40 // Number 3 // Tools of the Trade // 3TOT3



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## Brown Bag Lunch Programs: Another Avenue to Access?

### Abstract

Finding ways to "get the word out" is always a challenge for Extension. Developing brown bag lunch programs is a way to reach a new Extension audience. Determining how best to do this in each community can give the Extension educator an opportunity to provide another resource and more opportunities for programming, teaching, and educating. Brown bag lunch programs have been a success for our office in that we have had an audience for all the sessions, and, most important, we have seen new faces, people new to Extension who are becoming more involved with us and our programs.

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### Lunch and Learning--Can They Coexist?

Brown bag lunch programs, where participants have lunch and listen to a speaker, are something I know I've heard about but never applied to my Extension programs. When this came to mind a few months ago I thought "what a good way to give people more access to my Extension programs!"

As Extension agents, I am sure we have all done the typical programs for a special interest group or sector of the community, but I can't recall having seen a series of lunch programs in any Extension offering. Isn't it possible that the person who eats lunch at his or her office or goes out for lunch, would be intrigued by the opportunity to learn something during this time? These might be individuals who notice an ad for the more often done evening Extension program but want to go home because they have family or other commitments to be addressed at night. Just as important, if you like to teach--and I mean really like to be in front of a group teaching--wouldn't this increase your opportunities?

### Bringing Them In

The Grand County, Utah State University Extension office is in Moab, the largest city in the county. The county population is approaching 9,000, and the Moab City population is just under 5,000. Grand County is experiencing a transition from an agriculture/mining economy to a tourist economy. We have a large senior population and a growing business community. Most interesting is the influx of younger, educated, environmentally aware individuals who find the chance to work and play in the scenic outdoors greatly appealing.

Our potential clientele are quite busy developing businesses, working, volunteering, and recreating, so finding time for something else can be difficult. We have all heard "I just can't go to an evening program" or "I had other things to do that evening," but many will also say "I really would have liked to learn more about that subject." After giving this some thought, I decided that people might be willing to attend a lunch program during the week without a specific invitation or program directed at a specific group. Even those working at home, or those not working at all, could attend such a program.

### Timing and Workload

What is the best time? Many people eat lunch around 12:00 noon and others at 1:00 p.m. I put an ad in the local papers advertising the noon program and also stated that I was willing to present it

again at 1:00 p.m. if people were interested. No one asked for a 1:00 p.m. repeat. Also, people need time to leave work, drive or walk to the program, and then to get back to work. Because the physical layout of our community is not large, I scheduled the programs for 12:10 to 12:50 p.m., feeling this would give most people time to arrive, enjoy a 30-minute program, participate in a 10-minute Q/A or discussion, and get back to jobs. To make the best use of my time and resources, while in the development stage of this series, I revised some PowerPoint programs I had developed for other venues. I determined what was the most basic and needed information and adjusted it to fit my time slot.

## **Programming and Participation**

So far, the programs have focused on horticulture subjects. This type of information is some of the most sought-after by the community. Without targeting a specific audience, most of the traditional Extension or other learning opportunities in this county have generally seen audiences of 25 or 30 at most. For these lunch sessions, the largest audience I have had to this date is 10 individuals, which I consider to be acceptable.

More important, people are asking when the next programs are scheduled. At this point, there have been four programs, with better than 50% of the participants new to Extension and 40% attending regularly. While it's pleasing to see people show up with their lunches and take time to learn something of interest to them, perhaps the greatest pleasure is seeing and interacting with people who haven't been coming to Extension programs in the past. After doing these horticulture programs, I see the potential to address many other topics, such as nutrition and health, food safety, and child/parent issues.

## **Can It Work for You?**

Will this only work in a "small" county? Previously, I worked in a large urban county with a population of approximately 500,000. I would like to have tried this in that county. Challenges present themselves in large population areas, such as the difficulty of travel in a "lunch" period. Start by looking at your area and determining what are central locations the prospective audiences would know about. There are the traditional ones such as libraries, local Extension offices, even schools, and the non-traditional such as larger food establishments and larger "grouped" office complexes, both of which might have an available meeting room.

New types or ways of programming can take time to build up an audience, and not every subject draws as much interest as the next. However, the brown bag lunch programs have definitely shown themselves to be something for our office to continue working on. We want to see where it leads us.

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