

Public Relations in Extension

**Effective programming under the leadership
of competent personnel becomes the basis
for meaningful public relations**

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EXTENSION public relations is essentially a condition or a partnership between the Service and the publics with which it functions. It is not logically another Extension project in the order of human nutrition or soil improvement. Neither should it be regarded as a special technique nor as an activity requiring the allocation of time in a manner similar to other operational phases of Extension. It is a clear fact that public relations is stark reality. This conclusion deserves consideration in light of current temptations to project an image of "what the public ought to think" Extension represents instead of what Extension really is and what it is actually doing.

The public image of Extension work deeply concerns Land-Grant institutions. Even though public relations has existed from the first day, recent and continuing expansion of Extension's scope makes the matter of special concern today.

This article will explore the concept of public relations in Extension as an approach to more effective program through a high grade of public service—a responsibility of every staff member. The basic factor in Extension public relations is a sound program in which appropriate and diverse publics participate with the leadership of competent, well-trained personnel. Good internal staff relations and amiable, cooperative relationships with other agencies are also important.

✧ This concept is based on the work of a committee appointed by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy in the early 50's. (The conclusions of this committee of five administrators and one subject-matter consultant were published by the University of

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California.¹) This committee was convinced that many public relations practices, particularly the aspects of public relations conducted by business-oriented organizations that are more publicly observable, have only slight application to the Extension Service. To the casual observer, characteristics of this type of public relations effort appears to be limited largely to intensive publicity, press agency, spot concentrations, and the utilization of catchy advertising methods. Responsibilities for such activities are usually assigned to a single department or person. Often this seems to be the Extension person's impression of what constitutes public relations. To the committee, Extension seemed to require a very special and different management of such elements of a public relations program.

Publicity, in the usual sense, is only one element in establishing Extension public relations. Promotion of good will is not the ultimate goal; understanding is. In other words, good public relations can not be considered a destination but rather a pathway. The sound public relations program is directed to the end that people may be served by a grade of public service that will make them better informed, happier, and more prosperous.

PARTNERSHIP IN PROGRAMS

In attempting to arrive at a suitable definition, the committee concluded that "Extension's public relations consist of doing good work in a way which develops in the public mind appreciation for and recognition of the program." One state defined it as "the tactful and wise use of a person's or a group's energy which results in better service to the people." Because of that unique characteristic of Extension teaching—of applying knowledge and principles to the solution of specific problems²—partnership is implied in both definitions.

If these definitions are accepted, it becomes evident that we are

¹ *Report of the Subcommittee on Public Relations*, November, 1952. Membership of this committee included: Maude E. Wallace, Virginia; C. M. Ferguson, Ohio; H. C. Sanders, Louisiana; I. O. Schaub, North Carolina; and F. L. Ballard, Oregon, chairman. On his retirement, Director Schaub was replaced by Associate Director Boykin of New Mexico. Upon Director Boykin's resignation from Extension he was succeeded by Associate Director Lord of Maine. L. A. Schlup, Chief, Division of Extension Information, Federal Extension Service, rendered valuable information as consultant. An important phase of the committee's work was an inventory of the public relations situation in the states. M. C. Wilson, Chief, Division of Field Studies and Training, F.E.S., organized this inventory and analyzed the data.

² See E. T. York, Jr., "The Professional and His Journal," *Journal of Co-operative Extension*, I (Spring, 1963), 5-8.

dealing with the everyday behavior of every staff member in the Service. It reflects the fundamental philosophy, aims, and objectives as they find expression in the relationships stemming from a functioning partnership between staff and audience. Almost every consideration of any aspect of public relations for Extension persistently leads back to one base point—program. If Extension is to arrest the attention and hold the interest which it seeks, it must be in a position to identify the significance of what it has to teach.

A first point in establishing desired relations is a vital program formulated through the involvement of the people to be served. If these considerations have been well managed, there is a more general understanding, a greater sense of responsibility, and, therefore, measurable public help in advancing such a program.

Content of Program

Even in the midst of growing demands for broadening the scope of Extension programs, a core of up-to-the-minute subject matter in the physical and biological sciences must be maintained. It was on such a base that Extension laid the foundations for its present position. Distribution as well as production, public policy as well as pest control, family life as well as clothing, and urban adaptation as well as rural application of subject matter are examples of likely components of current programs. Priorities of emphases are best determined through consultation between professional staff and competent people who have attained leadership stature in groups constituting Extension's immediate clientele.

From the Extension standpoint, education holds the added dimension of action to the common concept of the term. The fact that subject matter has been applied to specific problems in such a way as to produce measurable results is largely responsible for Extension's obtaining its status in adult education. In the early days appropriations by county governments required substantial evidence of accomplishment. A common attitude of county officials reflected the feeling that if the application of science is an objective there should be visible results.

Staff Competence

County Extension programs are the core of Extension work; the major function of administrators, supervisors, and specialists is to support county Extension staffs with suggestions, guidance, and leadership on program content and teaching methods. It is also as-

sumed that the quality of Extension's public relations is directly related to staff competence. Vernon Darter has stated that "one of the best routes to good public relations is the *simple matter of doing a good job.*"³

No program can be strong in its public impact unless the people responsible for its advancement are truly competent. The teaching position of Extension is unique. Work with voluntary audiences, as contrasted with the usual classroom or laboratory situation, adds to the kind of competence demanded. One may be highly trained in a subject-matter field and still have little influence on a voluntary audience. A research worker of some repute may, because of an inherent attention to detail, soon exhaust the patience of a voluntary audience. One may possess all of the elements of scholarship and still not be able to teach voluntary audiences. Therefore, an Extension staff should include persons who, in addition to being well grounded in subject-matter technology, possess a sensitivity to human reactions and a grasp of useful techniques for rendering public service—along with an understanding and acceptance of the underlying philosophies, objectives, and policies of the organization.

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS

When it is accepted that public relations is neither project, method, nor commodity, but a condition of partnership, the obvious question is where or with whom lies the responsibility for building this partnership. It seems inappropriate to assign responsibility for public relations to a staff member as if he were to serve as a project leader, to one functioning as a personnel officer, or, in fact, to any one individual. Every member of the Extension staff—from the Director to the most recently employed secretary in the smallest or most distant county office—is involved with the public. Extension public relations is not a function that is extra or separate from daily work. It is a continuous process—a day-by-day way of life. It is the reflection of the fundamental philosophy, aims, objectives, methods, and accomplishments of the organization.

Because public relations depends so heavily upon program and since county program is largely the public contact point, a heavy responsibility rests upon Extension supervisors. When initially employed, county Extension agents generally have not had training in the techniques of program development. They may not be sufficiently experienced to grasp quickly the possibilities which may

³ Vernon W. Darter, "From Your Director," *Tennessee Extension Review*, XLV (April, 1963), 2.

surround them. Here is the opportunity—or better, the responsibility—for supervisors to give leadership and guidance.

CONCLUSION

This concept of public relations in Extension is based on the premise that what members of the organization do—the program—becomes the basis for effective relationships with Extension's many publics. This implies that effective programming, under the leadership of competent personnel, is public relations at its best. It involves leadership from personnel at all levels—administrators, supervisors, specialists, county agents, and office staffs. It also encompasses the appropriate involvement of local people in planning, executing, and evaluating the program. Such a conception eliminates the possibility of dealing with public relations as an entity within itself. Rather, it identifies public relations as a continuous, day-by-day, integral part of the responsibilities of every member of the organization.

WORRY affects the circulation, the heart, the glands, the whole nervous system. I have never known a man who died from overwork, but many who died from doubt. —CHARLES H. MAYO.

YOU cannot gauge the intelligence of an American by talking with him; you must work with him. The American polishes and refines his way of doing things—even the most commonplace—the way the French of the 17th century polished their maxims. —ERIC HOFFER.

THE VISION of things to be done may come a long time before the way of doing them becomes clear, but woe to him who distrusts the vision. —JENKIN LLOYD JONES.

IN TRUTH, people can generally make time for what they choose to do; it is not really the time but the will that is lacking. —SIR JOHN LUBBOCK.

IDEALS are like stars: You will not succeed in touching them with your hands, but like the seafaring man on the desert of waters, you choose them as your guides, and following them you reach your destiny. —CARL SCHURZ.

I WILL UTTER what I believe today, if it should contradict all I said yesterday. —WENDELL PHILLIPS.