

try it, you'll like it!

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The computer age has arrived! And, we believe that the computer is one of the modern Extension agent's best teaching tools.

As field agents, we've used many different computer programs in different situations with different audiences. We've had our share of frustrations, too. First, we had to learn to use the various programs. Then, the computer "crashed" during a widely publicized community program. Party lines have interrupted the telephone connection to the time-share computer.

Our frustrations have been kept to a minimum by planning and by having a back-up program in case of technical difficulty. We have a checklist to follow when setting up mall displays, fair exhibits, or other programs that will handle large numbers. The checklist requires initial contacts, publicity staffing, last-minute details, running the program, and evaluation.

We have sample printouts available for large groups as well as for individual counseling. Participants examine them, ask questions, and leave their completed input form. Later, the program is run and the output is mailed to the participant. A printed comment sheet accompanies the printout.

Telplan Programs

Michigan State University CES agents use computer technology in many ways. Two of the programs highlighted in this article use Telplan—a software package of problem-solving computer programs.

The Telplan system operates from a wide variety of terminals connected to a remote access computer by telephone lines. The most useful programs involve field staff, Extension specialists, and researchers working closely on the planning through implementation stage.

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involving agents in both agriculture and family living. We've also used it individually in our specific program area assignment.

When we develop an educational program, either jointly or separately, we consider our long-range objectives and our short-term goals. Computer programs are chosen as an educational activity only when we know that they'll help us reach those objectives and goals. Here's a description of two successful Telplan programs we've used in educational activities.

\$ Watch

"\$ Watch" is a comparative family budget analysis designed for families who want to compare their spending patterns with a "typical" family of the same size and income. This computer program is based on a program developed at Clemson University.

One of the long-range objectives of the Berrien County Family Living Education program is: families will develop skill in money management and make informed consumer decisions. One short-term goal in reaching this objective is: families will examine their spending patterns.

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Several activities helped reach this goal. A "\$ Watch" booth at the Berrien County Youth Fair included a display and handout materials. A commercial artist prepared the portable display, a local bank paid for the telephone installation, and county newspapers and shoppers' guides published the promotional literature. We distributed a leaflet called "Try a New CAP (Computer-Assisted Plan)." It listed more than 78 Telplan programs available through Michigan State University.

This activity proved to be an excellent awareness-level teaching tool, and an excellent public relations exposure for the total Cooperative Extension Service.

Small group applications of the "\$ Watch" program have included several presentations for community groups and in-service education for home economics teachers and Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program aides. Here are four typical participant reactions:

- After studying the output, one husband said to his wife, "I guess we're not so far off on our food budget after all."
- Another couple discovered that their installment debt obligations were dangerously high, and they postponed a major appliance purchase for a year.
- One family was considering an addition to their house. Several adjusted analyses were run so they could examine their options and know the financial consequences of their decision.
- Another family wasn't satisfied that they had accurate figures for the input form. As a result, they now keep complete financial records so they know their spending patterns.

*Whole Farm
Financial
Planning*

Farm families are interested in their family living requirements, and farm financial planning should include the financial requirements of the family.

One popular Telplan program is "Whole Farm Financial Planning." This program analyzes and compares long-range plans for the complete farm business, and deals with the financial consequences associated with each plan. The plans include family living requirements and the possibility of off-farm income. This computer program came to Michigan State University from the University of Wisconsin.

Young farm couples in Berrien County used this computer program during a 12-session, family-farm management program, "Reaching for Results." Couples who enroll can now compare alternate long-range financial plans for the families and businesses.

Each couple received an information packet listing the educational objectives and goals for each session, the daily agenda, worksheets, and reading assignments. This series involved teaching by an agriculture agent, farm management agent, and home economist at each session.

The first year, couples were encouraged to apply the management by objective principles of planning, organizing, directing, communicating, and controlling. At the end of the first year, the couples evaluated the series and were asked about their other management needs. They said they needed skills in long-range financial planning for their businesses.

As a result of this evaluation, the second year of the program centered on comparing long-range financial plans for each family and business. Preparation for this comparison began one week before the couples examined the computer output. Input forms were explained to the participants, and

they were taught how to examine their records to get meaningful data for the input. Their assignment was to record the data for "\$ Watch" and "Whole Farm Financial Planning." Each couple delivered the input forms to the Berrien County Extension office, and the first analysis was run.

The output was returned to each couple at the next workshop. They discussed some of the output with the team of agriculture-family living agents, either individually or in the group. Alternative plans were considered, and the computer runs were made during the session with each couple watching as the adjusted analysis came from the terminal.

As a final activity to encourage commitment to the accomplishment of the objectives and goals each couple had written during the first year, Extension staff members visited the farms and photographed significant progress of the family. These slides were used by the participants to share their results with the rest of the group.

This approach worked. During an unrelated, total county program review six months later, participants in this program remarked:

- "Without the total Extension staff and Telplan, we couldn't be where we are today. We had computer programs run, we studied that output, and we based our decisions about expansion on our analysis of the alternatives."
- "'Reaching for Results' and other in-depth programs are exactly what we think the CES should be doing more work on."
- "We both learned better methods or principles of managing—we worked together on our homework and shared ideas that we kept to ourselves before the program."
- "I see what our bottleneck is now. Cost control is a must—so is knowing where you really want to go."
- "Sound maximum return/minimum risk marketing is necessary for us."

Summary

We have found that all of the family living and agriculture-marketing computer programs lend themselves to individual office or farm/home visits. It's extremely useful to explain the type of information required and provide the person with worksheets before meeting with the agent and using the computer. This makes the time spent with the computer more effective. The person is prepared and has thought about his/her records, looked at trends, checked outlook reports,

futures prices, investment requirements, etc. This preparation pays off with an effective learning experience.

Another advantage of the computer-assisted, problem-solving experience is that the word travels, and new audiences actually do beat a path to Extension's door. And, backed up with effective computer power, an Extension agent can help more people find better solutions to their problems.