

your extension image is important

Daniel J. Decker

Introduction

The success or failure of an Extension program is influenced by many factors. However, it's doubtful that any is more important than the image of the Extension agent.

Extension programs depend on *cooperation* between state Extension specialists, county Extension agents, volunteer leaders, and program participants. Since most Extension programs are coordinated at the county level by an Extension agent, the agent's image can be either an aid or a barrier to the cooperation needed to implement programs. The flow for this cooperation resembles that shown in Figure 1.

As an Extension agent, your ability to obtain cooperation and input from resource people and your ability to obtain cooperation from key community leaders, volunteer leaders, and participants depends a great deal on your image among these groups. If you've been in the field for any length of time, your resource people and clientele will have an image of you in your role as an Extension agent. If you're a newcomer, your image among these groups will be forming rapidly with each and every contact you make.

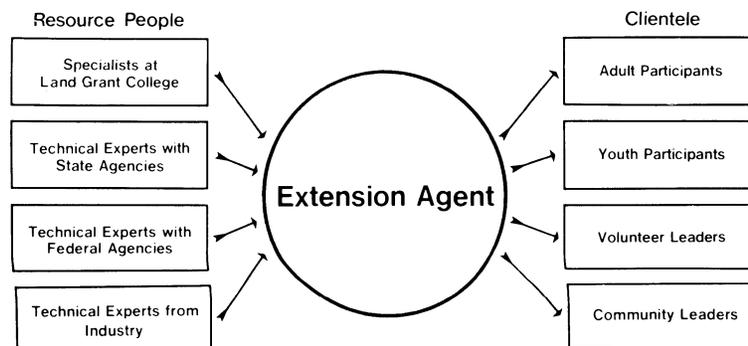


Figure 1. Cooperation flow for Extension programs.

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What's an Image?

An individual's (or group's) image of an agent is essentially the aggregate of his/her (or their) attitudes about and perceptions of the agent. Image formation isn't based entirely on facts. Attitudes and perceptions can be influenced by incorrect information and social-psychological phenomena, like selective perception and retention. Consequently, it may be best to think of an image as a stereotype of beliefs and attitudes that are consistent with one another and act as "facts" for the image holder.¹

The influence of attitudes on image formation indicates that: (1) you should know the sociological characteristics and attitudes of your publics so you can develop an image acceptable to individuals in those publics and (2) a person's image of you is formed through experiences with you—actual interpersonal contact and reputation, and should be reinforced periodically to remain accurate and intact. Essentially, you must maintain continual favorable contacts with your program resource people and clientele, and use them as an opportunity to reinforce or to change your image.

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Is Image Important?

Whether you choose to do something about it or not, you should realize that you have an image—good, bad, or indifferent. If your image is favorable, you can expect *program resource people* to place a high priority on promptly supplying the materials you request. If your image is poor, resource people may provide only minimum input, and then only if convenient. In other words, your image among resource people affects their cooperation.

✓ If your image (and that of your program) is favorable, clientele are more likely to: (1) attend programs (in the case of program participants), (2) offer their services to aid in program implementation (volunteer leaders), or (3) seek your input in community decision making (community leaders). Agents with a poor image can expect low participation in their programs, little interest in programs by potential volunteer leaders, and few opportunities for input into community decision making.

In short, agents with a good image can expect a much higher rate of success than those with a poor image . . . they're more likely to "make a difference" in their community. Also,

a good, solid, positive image can help smooth over an occasional mistake or give the agent the benefit of the doubt concerning a controversial program. However, these situations have to be infrequent to maintain a favorable image.

The Image-Building Process

PR Factor

Image-building for an Extension agent can be considered a personal public relations program, a continual, day-by-day responsibility of every agent. An easily remembered definition of public relations is the equation:

$$\text{PR} = \text{Performance plus Recognition}^2$$

As the equation indicates, good performance must precede public recognition and appreciation. This was recognized by Ballard who stated:

. . . 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. . . .³

Since program effectiveness is determined by the agents who implement the program, their image is critical in the public relations process. Often a poor image is rooted in the soil of indifference. A positive self-image, coupled with a positive image of your program, is essential to a positive public image.

Young and Cunningham identified several factors clientele used as evaluative measures of Extension program effectiveness.⁴ They found measures relating to the agent rated as being highly important to "good" programs. Seven of the 10 most important measures identified by clientele were:

1. Agent knows where to get information and resources.
2. Agent is respected by farmers.
3. Honesty and devotion of agent.
4. Agent's character is good.
5. Agent is knowledgeable.
6. Agent's ability to apply knowledge.
7. Agent's response to requests for assistance.

These results clearly demonstrate the important role of an agent's image in the overall formula for "good," effective Extension programs. They also provide an insight to the characteristics of an agent that are considered important by clientele.

Steps in Image-Building

The following steps can act as a guide to your image-building effort:

Step one: Realize the need for a strong, favorable image and make a commitment to fill it.

This initial step requires a degree of courage. You must be willing to take an honest look at yourself and your interaction with others. If you feel your image needs improvement, you must be prepared to analyze how that can be achieved quickly and effectively. If your image is generally good, you should try to maintain it.

Step two: Identify your present image and why it exists.

You must know what your present image is among both program resource people and clientele before you can decide how to change it. A simple question to ask these key publics is: "What can I do to help you more effectively and efficiently?" You can conduct this evaluation yourself or have a colleague assist you.

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Step three: Determine the image that will make you most effective with your publics.

Think long and hard about the personal image that would make you most effective when dealing with your key publics. Consider the characteristics of the groups and the types of programs you plan to ask them to support or participate in. Consider once again the findings of Young and Cunningham. Once the "ideal" image is determined, your subsequent interactions should reinforce that image. In effect, it serves as a self-image, a personal behavioral goal.

Step four: Design a strategy for changing your image.

This step is intended to make you think of your image-building effort programmatically. You don't simply awaken one fateful morning encompassed by a bright new image. Rather, a personal, soft-sell public relations program is needed. Remember the simple definition of public relations: performance plus recognition.

"Performance" means you must correct the real problems causing your image difficulties. "Recognition" means that your new image should be discreetly, but adequately, communicated to your key publics. The old saying "actions speak

louder than words" has direct application for those trying to improve their image. Be the person you want people to think you are—and they will!

Step five: Evaluate your image-building efforts.

Evaluate your image among key publics periodically. If it's improving, continue on your present course. If it isn't improving, take a closer look at your efforts, your performance, yourself. Modify elements obviously lacking . . . and keep trying.

Summary

Extension programs depend on cooperation and rapport between several program resource people and clientele, but usually the catalyst for these programs is the Extension agent. How well the agent functions as a catalyst depends on his/her image among those publics. That image can't be ignored. It affects the credibility and the success of Extension programs. Consequently, image-building should be regarded as a critically important responsibility of every Extension agent and should be a top priority in the agent's professional development.

Footnotes

1. W. W. Reeder, N. L. LeRay, Jr., and S. T. Mackenzie, "Problem Diagnosis: Applying Social Theory to Problem Solving," *Journal of Extension*, XII (Spring, 1974), 20-35.
2. S. M. Cutlip and A. H. Center, *Effective Public Relations* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964).
3. F. L. Ballard, "Public Relations in Extension," *Journal of Extension*, II (Winter, 1964), 216-20.
4. R. Young and C. J. Cunningham, *Extension Output Measures As Identified by Extension Clientele* (Columbus: Ohio State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1977).