

how agents and clients view programs

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How do clientele really perceive agricultural Extension programs? More importantly, can agents determine how clientele perceive evidence of the total program accomplishments?

When agents reflect on their total program, they often feel totally inadequate to measure and/or document Extension *output* effectiveness. Young and Cunningham¹ developed an instrument to measure Extension output with clientele (people served) as the evaluators.

Judging Extension Output

Young and Cunningham assumed that participants in Extension programs would have an opinion about what constitutes a good program. Their study identified two objectives. The first was long-ranged. It aimed "to identify the concrete evidence that clientele accept as demonstrated Extension program accomplishments." The second, more immediate objective, was "to create and test a technique for obtaining from Extension clientele valid output measures of an Extension program."

The primary outcome of their study was a 43-item survey consisting of program outputs that can be used in evaluating county Extension agricultural programs. The 43 items were classified in 4 categories: information, Extension agent, Extension methods, and educational program.

The Young and Cunningham study showed that Ohio agricultural Extension clientele used criteria other than primarily production-oriented state or national objectives in their evaluations.² Clientele were more concerned with the quality of the information they received, the personality and character of their county agricultural agents, and the quality and quantity of methods they saw being used by the agents.

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Pennsylvania Study

With only one minor modification, the same instrument developed by Young and Cunningham was used in the Pennsylvania study.³

The basic purpose of the Pennsylvania study was to assess the quality of county agricultural Extension programs as perceived by Extension staff, Extension clientele, county executive committee members, and administrators.

Some of the objectives of the study were: (1) to describe and compare the perceptions of Extension clientele, county executive committee members, agricultural agents, and administrators as measured by their mean scores on specific elements of a total county agricultural Extension program and (2) to investigate the relationship between the clientele perceptions about the information, Extension agents, Extension methods and educational program elements, and personal and educational factors, such as: (a) extent of participation in Extension executive committee activities, (b) extent of participation in Extension agricultural education programs, and (c) years of formal education.

If agricultural agents and county lay planning groups want to do a better job of developing a comprehensive agricultural Extension education program and effectively meet the needs of all clientele, they must consider a variety of clientele characteristics

Methodology

The instrument developed by Young and Cunningham was used with one modification—an additional question asked for an overall evaluation of the county agricultural Extension program. Extension clientele, county executive committee members, agricultural agents, and administrators were asked to respond to 44 statements concerning the total Extension agricultural program. The study included six Pennsylvania counties. Each respondent was asked to circle one of five responses—from excellent to poor—that best expressed his/her evaluation of that element of the total Extension agricultural program in that county. Excellent ratings were valued 5; poor ratings, 1.

The study population consisted of 3,280 Extension clientele, 67 county executive committee members, 15 agricultural agents, and 2 administrators. The survey was sent to a stratified random sample (20% of the population in each of the 6 counties in the Southern Allegheny Extension Region) of the clientele. The Southern Allegheny Extension Region is located in south central Pennsylvania. Each county has an

active Extension agricultural program and is served by at least one agricultural agent. Agriculture is important to the economic base in each of the six counties. The same survey was sent to all 67 county executive committee members, 15 county agents, and 2 administrators.

Survey Response

The Total Design Method for mail surveys developed by Dillman⁴ was used to collect the data.

The percentage of usable questionnaires returned by the 4 groups surveyed was 80.8% (Extension clientele, 78.6%; county executive committee members, 92.5%; agricultural agents, 100%; administrators, 100%).

Findings

Here are the findings from the survey:

1. The four groups surveyed generally had a positive perception of the agricultural Extension program. All ratings were at a "good" or higher level.
2. Agricultural agents generally had the highest perceptions of the agricultural Extension program compared to the three other groups. Although their perceptions of Extension programs were positive, Extension clientele generally had the lowest ratings among the four groups surveyed.
3. Little difference existed between the mean scores of Extension clientele and county executive committee members as a whole. But, there was considerable variation in the Extension clientele and county executive committee member ratings reported by individual counties.
4. Thirteen of the 44 statements were rated significantly different by the 4 groups. The greatest number of differences occurred between the agricultural agent and the Extension clientele. The agricultural agents generally assessed the quality of the agricultural Extension programs at a higher level than did the Extension clientele, the county executive committee members, and the administrators. The statements for which a significant difference (.05 level of confidence) occurred were:
 - a. Agents know where to get information and resources.
 - b. Information is accurate.
 - c. Information is practical.
 - d. Hard working agents.
 - e. Experience and background of agents.

- f. Honesty and devotion of agents.
 - g. Number of meetings held.
 - h. Visits by agents or specialists to farm.
 - i. Program meets local expectations.
 - j. Program is adapted and oriented locally.
 - k. Citizens' opportunities to serve on Extension boards and committees.
 - l. Scope of the total Extension agricultural program.
 - m. Extension's efforts to help clientele save money.
5. Service on the Extension executive committee apparently has little influence on the Extension clientele's perception of the quality of the agricultural Extension program.
 6. A positive relationship existed between those Extension clientele who attended Extension educational meetings and their responses to the 44 evaluative statements. As the Extension clientele attended more meetings, their perception of the quality of Extension programs improved, except in the case of those clientele who attended 11 or more meetings. The latter group was very small.
 7. An interesting, but confusing finding, was that Extension program ratings were lower by clientele who hadn't completed college than by clientele who had elementary, high school, or college degrees.
 8. Clientele of varying age levels perceived the agricultural Extension programs differently. Extension programming wasn't reaching the older clientele (66 years of age or older) as effectively as those under 65.
 9. Major source of income apparently had little relationship to program ratings given by the Extension clientele.
 10. The averages of the amount of time Extension staff spend on agricultural programs, number of agricultural meetings held, number of radio programs presented, number of individual assistances, years of education, years in current position in county, and years in Extension apparently had little influence on the program ratings given by the Extension clientele.

Implications

The findings have the following implications:

1. If agricultural agents and county lay planning groups want to do a better job of developing a comprehensive

agricultural Extension education program and effectively meet the needs of all clientele, they must consider a variety of clientele characteristics including degree of participation in previous Extension education meetings, age, and level of formal education.

2. The merit of using Extension clientele (and/or county executive committees) for program planning is reinforced by this study. Extension agents were found to rate all aspects of the Extension program higher than did the other three groups.
3. One way for agricultural agents to improve meeting attendance is to improve the quality of the meetings. However, the greatest single need for improvement appears to be in the area of visits by agents or specialists to the farm. This statement "visits by agents or specialists to the farm" received the lowest mean rating of the 44 statements.
4. Programs must be adapted and oriented to local clientele needs. The findings also suggest that Extension educational programs need to deal more with specific subject-matter topics. Based on the ratings of the evaluative statements, it appears that Extension clientele would also like to see more programs that would improve clientele income and, in turn, affect their standard of living.
5. Extension program planning should be approached primarily from the point of view of the clientele served, and secondarily from a subject-matter point of view.
6. This study supports the Young and Cunningham recommendations that this survey can be used as a way to measure the quality of county agricultural Extension programs.

Summary

If Extension wants to continue providing effective programs for its clientele, and change with the times, it must know the attitudes of clients about the information they receive, the effectiveness of agents who deliver the information, the appropriateness of the methods used, and whether programs meet the needs of clientele. Measuring the quality of county agricultural Extension programs is a professional responsibility that can provide job satisfaction as well as timely and relevant information for planning future Extension programs.

- Footnotes**
1. R. E. Young and C. J. Cunningham, *Extension Output Measures as Identified by Extension Clientele* (Columbus: Ohio State University, Cooperative Extension Service, 1977).
 2. *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20.
 3. D. L. Kantner, "An Assessment of Extension Agricultural Programs as Perceived by Extension Clientele" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, 1980).
 4. D. A. Dillman, *Mail and Telephone Surveys—The Total Design Method* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1978), pp. 160-99.
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