

negative results? they may not be!

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In Cooperative Extension, we get so involved with helping people adopt new ideas or innovative technology we can forget clients' negative decisions may be wisest for them. Well-structured evaluation can reinforce that fact, as well as stimulate the development of educational objectives more appropriate to Extension. Satisfaction of Extension staff can also be increased by recognizing that negative results, too, *can* be legitimate.

Negative Results

Good evaluations capture knowledge about those who decide whether or not to adopt a new idea or technology. The nonadopters, those providing negative results, are an important component of the audience, but often are brushed over in Extension program evaluations. By ignoring them, we risk fooling ourselves that we know who should adopt which ideas. A better approach is to recognize that even individuals who decide against adopting new alternatives may have benefited from Extension educational programming. Here are two evaluations where this value seems evident.

Extension Bulletin

An evaluation of an Extension bulletin published in 1978 was undertaken in 1980. The bulletin was intended to help individuals decide whether a new technology, a floating tire breakwater for controlling wave damage, could be appropriately used to mitigate deterioration of marine facilities.¹ The names and addresses of those ordering the publication over the 2-year period were recorded, and 142 individuals (a 10% random sample of that group) were contacted by mail survey to determine:

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1. Strengths and weaknesses of the bulletin.
2. Characteristics of the individual and the problem he/she faced.
3. Actions decided on by the individual as a result of the bulletin.
4. Estimate of annual dollar gains and capital construction savings among those who'd constructed a breakwater.

Using appropriate survey techniques,² a 73% response was received. No contact was made with the remaining nonrespondents.

Nearly half (48%) of those responding said the bulletin did permit them to reach a decision on building a breakwater. Of the remainder, 35% didn't reach a decision, but reported the bulletin did increase their knowledge. Extension agents and many staff of regulating agencies would of course fall in that "no-decision" segment. Among respondents, 17% couldn't identify any use they'd made of information contained in the bulletin. Libraries would be such nonusers.

Of those who'd reached a decision, 37% adopted the new technology. Of prime importance to this article, 63% reaching a decision said the bulletin helped them reject this technology.

We can't be certain which individuals made a "correct" decision. But, a major role of this bulletin, and many others of the type, is to help individuals reach their own decisions, not decisions we in Extension necessarily favor.

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*Campground
Conference*

A second evaluation involved those attending a "New and Prospective Campground Operators Conference" in the early 1970s. Evaluation forms were completed at the end of the conference. Nearly half the prospective operators indicated they wouldn't enter this business, while the remainder were moving ahead with plans because of the knowledge gained during the session. Those planning this conference recognized most individuals shouldn't enter the campground business and therefore the negative results—those

deciding not to enter the business—were seen as an important educational attainment.

**Relevance
to the
Objective**

Revelation of “negative” results through program evaluation need not be threatening to, or ignored by, Extension staff. We should recognize that “negative” results are valuable tools for generating better Extension programs, primarily by stimulating us to construct clearer educational objectives.

In both examples discussed, the involved Extension educators recognized their role was to present objective information, not to advocate a particular point of view. They saw their role as stimulating individuals to use the information presented to make a decision appropriate to their situation. Therefore, objectives phrased “To have 300 persons decide whether an erosion-control device has relevance in their situation” or “To aid prospective campground operators to decide if this business is appropriate for them” are preferable to more directive objectives.

We encounter similar instances where Extension staff can more appropriately exercise professional ethics by writing an objective to influence a decision rather than to prejudge it. For example, “To have 500 migrant workers understand health hazards from fish they catch from Lake Ontario and methods for reducing contaminants in those fish” is a different objective than “To have 500 migrant workers understand they should not eat fish they catch from Lake Ontario.” In a similar vein, an objective “To have 100 farmers reach a decision on using no-tillage planting this spring” means negative decisions are seen as an appropriate attainment; they wouldn’t be were the objective “To have 50 farmers use no-tillage planting this spring.”

The direct tie between objectives and evaluations becomes evident to those who have had the opportunity to instruct others in evaluation. On completing training in how to conduct evaluations, Extension staff often say “Gee, we should first have started with how to write clear program objectives.”

It’s true that to demonstrate effectiveness, evaluations must await identification of program objectives. Equally true, carefully designed evaluations can enhance the appropriateness and clarity of future educational objectives. Negative results can be powerful aids in that.

Well-designed evaluations tell us many things. We typically recognize and construct evaluations to tell us who did what, and often we try to determine why some did those things and some didn’t. Evaluations can go a step further in helping us write objectives that recognize the appropriateness of negative decisions by some clientele.

Conclusion

Too frequently one encounters instances of Extension objectives and evaluations that suggest adoption as the only valid result of the educational process. We believe this is contrary to a view of Extension as an educational resource. Appropriately constructed objectives, and effective evaluations, help us remember that negative results can also be beneficial.

Footnotes

1. Bruce DeYoung, "Enhancing Wave Protection with Floating Tire Breakers," Information Bulletin 139 (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1978).
2. Tommy L. Brown and Bruce T. Wilkins, "Clues to Reasons for Nonresponse and Its Effect Upon Variable Estimates," *Journal of Leisure Research*, X (No. 3, 1978), 226-31.