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October 2009
Volume 47 Number 5
Article Number 5IAW4

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Addressing Ethnic Change in the Northern Gulf of Mexico Seafood Industry

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Abstract: Language and cultural barriers have prevented Extension from effectively engaging Vietnamese-Americans within the Gulf of Mexico fishing industry. A partnership formed with other agencies facing similar problems that allows for hiring appropriate staff seems to be a good solution. Experience has shown what works and what doesn't when engaging this particular constituency.

The Workforce Changes

Like many other Sea Grant Extension programs throughout the United States, Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension supports the marine fisheries industry through education and outreach activities, as part of a broader overall effort in coastal and marine-related programming. The influx of many new Asian workers, primarily Vietnamese, into the northern Gulf of Mexico commercial fishing and seafood processing industries has required tactical change to more effectively reach these new constituents.

In most instances, Asians have adapted quite well to working in the seafood industry. However, many of them do not speak or understand English well, which poses a communication problem, particularly in respect to compliance with regulations. In our experience, Asians are very cooperative among themselves in sharing their labor and finances, but they are also closed to non-Asian outsiders with whom they are not familiar. This is particularly relevant to outsiders who are perceived to be associated with government agencies.

The percentage of Asians employed in this sector of the coast economy has been increasing steadily since the mid-1970's. This is particularly true in Mississippi and Alabama, where "coastal villages" of Asian ethnicity have developed within the cities of Biloxi, Mississippi and Bayou La Batre, Alabama. According to the latest census figures, 6,646 Vietnamese-Americans reside in the five coastal counties of Alabama and Mississippi. Of these, 2,871 reside in Harrison County, Mississippi and 2,304 reside in Mobile County, Alabama (U.S. Census Bureau, Census 2000). About half of the Vietnamese-Americans in Mississippi live in Biloxi.

A study of the community done in the late 1990's showed that an estimated 90% were Catholic, and 90% worked in the seafood industry (Peterson, 1999). This percentage has diminished somewhat due to transition of Vietnamese-Americans into other occupations and an increasing Hispanic labor pool, but the Northern Gulf seafood industry is still predominantly Asian in composition.

In the region's largest fishery, the shrimp fishery, most of the fishing power Gulf-wide is generated by Vietnamese-American owned and operated vessels. In 2006, 62% of the license sales in Mississippi for vessels greater than 45 feet in length went to people with Asian surnames (Mississippi Department of Marine Resources, 2007). In Louisiana, Asians hold about 75% of the licenses for vessels greater than 50 feet in length (Horst & Holloway, 2002). Similarly, about 65% of shrimp licenses in Alabama for vessels over 45 feet in length are held by Asians (Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 2006). As of October 2007, approximately one-third of Gulf of Mexico commercial boats with federal shrimp permits were owned and operated by Vietnamese-Americans (Crabtree, 2007).

A large number of seafood processing plants in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana are now primarily staffed by Asian people. Vietnamese are the largest percentage of the work force, followed by Laotians and Cambodians. In 2005, there were 2,284 seafood plant employees in Alabama, 3,614 in Mississippi, and 2,593 in Louisiana (Pritchard, 2007).

New Audience Calls For New Approach

For the past two decades, the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension Program has been using various traditional Extension methods to engage the Asian constituency. These include meetings and workshops; media outlets using newspaper columns, television news coverage, and press releases; event and aquaria displays; (informal) educational products; and a vast array of written materials, including newsletters, reports, pamphlets, circulars, booklets, and books. New methods of information delivery are utilized where appropriate such as computer-generated presentations, interactive Web pages and satellite downlinks of appropriate programs. Many of the earlier attempts met with limited success due to language and cultural barriers as well as a basic misunderstanding of how information flows through the Vietnamese-American community.

It was decided that the best strategy would be to hire an individual with dual language capabilities and knowledge of the fishing industry. Because state and federal resource management agencies were experiencing similar problems in getting important information across to fishermen and seafood industry workers, a partnership was proposed to help fund this new Extension position.

The tipping point came shortly after the devastating 2005 storm season and federal agency recognition of the value of the Extension network in recovery efforts (see Cathey, Coreil, Schexnayder, & White, 2007). The National Marine Fisheries Service provided funds to Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Extension for this new hire. Based on the subsequent substantial increase in Vietnamese-American clientele contacts, the results have been excellent. Here are some important points that have been learned throughout the process of engaging this new constituency:

- Newspapers, radio and television spots, newsletters, and Web pages are all largely ineffective means of reaching Vietnamese-American constituents. This was determined by asking individuals how they got their news. Most do not subscribe to local papers or watch television news. If households have computers, they are used primarily by the children.
- Word of mouth is by far the most effective means of getting one's message across. There is no substitute for face-to-face contact and a good list of home and cell phone numbers.
- When promoting meetings and workshops, focus on the female side of the family. The men may do the work, but the women run the households. Post notices in nail salons, grocery stores, and

restaurants.

- Try never to mix Vietnamese- and English-speaking audiences, and avoid presenting material in English followed immediately by Vietnamese translation. A better approach is to train the presenter in the subject matter prior to the meeting and use Vietnamese language only.
- One picture is worth a thousand words! For example, language-neutral pictograms and posters about good sanitation practices can be used quite effectively in seafood processing plants.

Summary

The hiring of an Extension associate familiar with the language and culture of the target audience has proven to be an elegant solution to an on-going Gulf-wide communication problem. While the language barrier was recognized, a lack of cultural understanding contributed significantly to programming difficulties experienced prior to adding the new staff member. Other regional Extension programs with similar needs should consider at least adding a part-time staff position for this purpose. Resource limitations can be overcome by identifying and partnering with other agencies facing similar difficulties in getting their messages across.

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