

Agent Satisfaction with Extension Publications: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

In this age of high speed, electronic communication technologies, Extension bulletins and fact sheets are often regarded as less important or desirable than the new high-tech delivery systems. Yet studies of audiences, ranging from groups like farmers to the general public, find that publications are generally the most frequently mentioned source of Extension information. In fact, some studies report that publications are the preferred source of educational information from Cooperative Extension (Yarbrough. 1987).

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Extension's stated mission of providing research-based information to the public can be improved by better understanding of how the public perceives, uses, and receives educational publications. The uses of publications, their distribution, and the attitudes of the audience toward particular publications are to some extent the product of the county agent's attitudes toward publications from Cooperative Extension.

If agents are negative toward a publication they are likely to limit its distribution or not use it at all. Even if agents distribute publications that they don't like, their negative attitudes may be picked up by the end user.

The study reported in this paper examines these important perceptions and attitudes of county agents toward Cooperative Extension publications and publication support. The objective of this paper is to provide an overview of agent attitudes toward the publications available from Cooperative Extension.

Data for this study comes from a state-wide study of Cooperative Extension agents in all New York counties. Mail questionnaires were used to collect the data in the spring and summer of 1987. The initial mailing included a cover letter from the director of Extension, along with a postage-paid return envelope. A follow-up letter was mailed two weeks

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later, with a second follow-up letter and a replacement questionnaire mailed one month after the first mailing. Of the 473 agents contacted, 312 responded for a final response rate of 66%.

Nearly 59% of county extension agents are female according to personnel office records, compared with 55% of respondents. The mean age was 34, with 19% of respondents under 30. Respondents were about equally divided in subject specialty between agriculture (38%) and human ecology (35%). An additional 17% were youth or 4-H agents and 9% were sea grant agents or administrators.

Study Findings

One of the difficulties of a study such as this is that there is little pertinent literature in the field, and thus little evidence on which to judge the findings (See for example Anyanwu, 1982; Beal, 1976; Havelock, 1973 and Lionberger and Wong, 1982). How satisfied should agents

be with Extension publications? It is difficult to answer that question without other studies for comparison. While this study documents how satisfied agents are with Extension publications, it must be left to the reader to judge how satisfied they should be. Similar studies presently underway in several other states will provide useful comparison.

Figure 1 shows overall agent satisfaction with publication support. Agents were asked "Overall, how satisfied are you with the support you get from the Cooperative Extension in terms of publications?" As shown in Figure 1, only 10% of the agents said that they were "Very Satisfied" with Extension publication support and 44% said they were "Satisfied." Less than 1% said they were "Very Dissatisfied" but nearly 16% were "Dissatisfied." Perhaps most surprising is the large number of agents (29%) saying that they were "Neutral" about this support. Further analysis shows that satisfaction

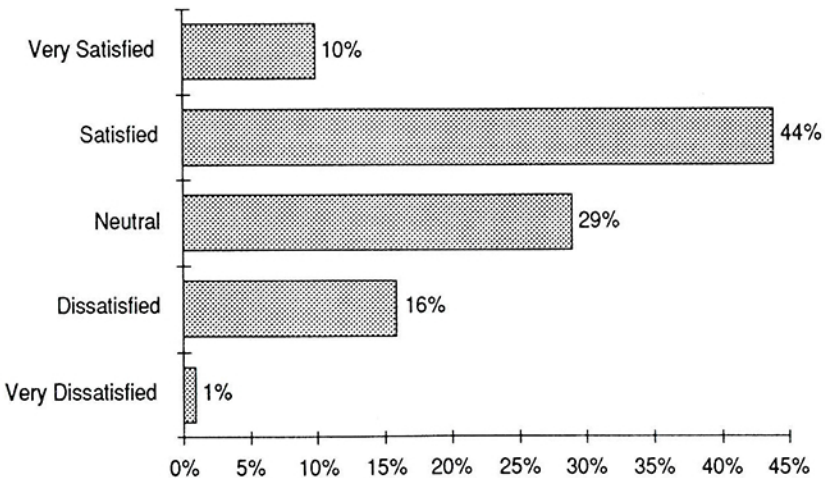


Figure 1

Overall Agent Satisfaction With Extension Publication Support

about Extension publication support is not related to length of tenure with Extension, age, or sex of the respondent. However, as shown in Figure 2, the relationship between the source and number of copies of educational publications used by an agent and overall satisfaction with publication support is striking.

The **more publications** an agent uses the **less satisfied** they are with Extension publication support. As Figure 2 shows, use of Extension publications, remains relatively stable, except for very low use by agents who report being "very satisfied" with publication support. Agents who are less satisfied with publication support are also the heaviest users of publications—especially locally produced publications. This of course is somewhat counter intuitive. One would expect that the more an agent is dissatisfied with publication support, the fewer publications they would use. Figure 2 shows however, that agents who use more copies are less satisfied

than are agents who use fewer copies.

The most pointed conclusion one derives from this analysis is:

Agents who demand very large numbers of publications can't find what they want from Extension. They consequently seek other sources, and as a result, are less satisfied with Extension as a source. Those agents who use smaller numbers of publications in their programs continue to be satisfied with what Extension provides.

Further analysis shows that satisfaction and number of publications used are not related to such factors as subject matter speciality, size of the county or level of urbanity in the county. Further study needs to determine other factors related to high or low publication use. To what extent is it related to job performance? Are high publication users also high media users? Or are low publication users those most likely to be high users of mass media—thus placing less emphasis on pub-

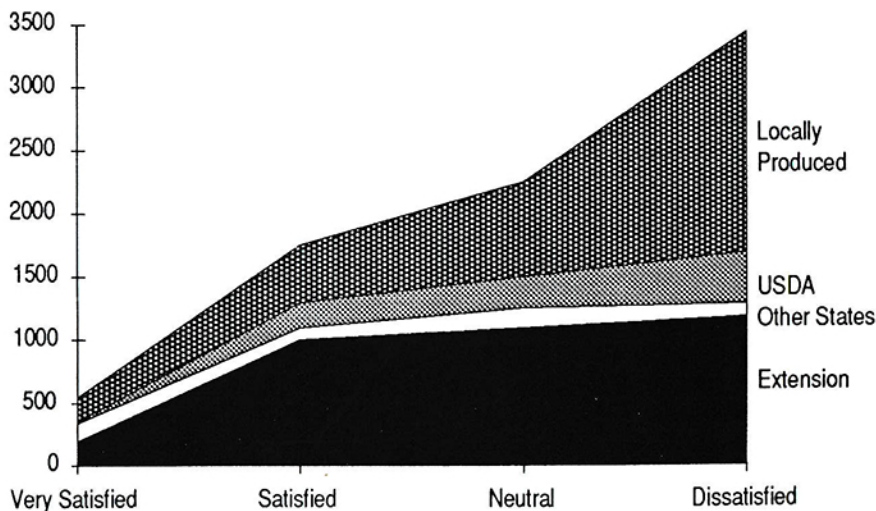


Figure 2
Agent Satisfaction by Source and Volume of Educational Publications Used

lication use? Is publication satisfaction related to job satisfaction? Are those most dissatisfied with publication support also generally more dissatisfied with their jobs?

Satisfaction with Bulletins and Fact Sheets

Because of assumed differences in use, content, and agent satisfaction of bulletins and fact sheets, the study asked agents to rate each on 12 different dimensions. These dimensions included distribution factors (two questions), technical factors (two questions), the extent to which agents perceive that publications meet their needs (three questions), and agent perceptions of how clients respond to publications (five questions). Table 1 shows the overall ratings for bulletins and fact sheets on each of these factors.

Two trends stand out clearly: 1) Agents consistently score fact sheets higher on nearly all dimensions, and, 2) The most visible reason for dissat-

isfaction overall is with price. Only 43% of agents believe that bulletins are fairly priced while 56% believe that fact sheets are fairly priced. This is the lowest rating for any dimension for both bulletins and fact sheets. Pricing of Extension publications has been the subject of considerable concern since the implementation of the charging policy in 1983. The low ratings given to prices charged for both bulletins and fact sheets suggest that agent dissatisfaction probably centers on current publication pricing policies. However, regression analysis shows that only six of the 24 factors are important in predicting overall agent satisfaction with publication support. The price of bulletins is the least important of the six factors and the price of fact sheets does not contribute significantly in explaining overall satisfaction.

The six factors which predict overall satisfaction in terms of their degree of importance to agents are:

Table 1
Agent Satisfaction with Extension Bulletins and Fact Sheets

	Percent of Agents Agreeing	
	Bulletins	Fact Sheets
Distribution Factors		
Prices are fair	36.4%*	55.6%
Ordering procedures are good	59.9	57.2*
Agent Factors		
Meets agent's subject needs	51.8*	61.1*
Projects good public image	73.1	76.9*
Information is up-to-date	43.5*	61.7
Technical Factors		
Technical quality is excellent	80.0	76.7
Design is excellent	58.7	65.9
Client Aspects		
Pubs are easy to understand	69.8	71.5
Clients like these pubs	61.5	68.5
Complexity is OK	55.9	58.4
Excellent audience content	54.3	67.2
Good sense of audience needs	46.8	58.7

*Factors which predict overall agent satisfaction.

- Extent to which bulletins meet agent subject matter needs,
- Ordering procedures for fact sheets,
- Extent to which fact sheets meet agent subject matter needs,
- Timeliness of bulletins;
- Extent to which fact sheets have a good sense of audience need;
- Price of bulletins.

If agents are satisfied on these six factors, they are likely to express satisfaction with overall publication support. The other 18 factors do not contribute in explaining overall satisfaction with publication support.

While price of bulletins does contribute to the explanation of overall satisfaction, it is less important than the other factors. Less than half of the agents responding to this study believed that bulletins had a good sense of audience need, were priced fairly or were up-to-date. It is also important to note that of these six factors, four relate to meet-

ing agent needs and two relate to distribution factors (Table 1). None of the important factors relate to technical or client aspects of the bulletins or fact sheets.

Based on the data analysis of the variables discussed in the preceding section, we conclude that when agents express dissatisfaction with publication support, especially as they relate to bulletins, the issue of price becomes the "lightning rod" which focuses their dissatisfaction. *If publications are not available to meet agent needs, agents are most likely to complain about the price.* However, what they may really be saying is that "the price is too high for what I am getting, because it isn't really meeting my needs." When publications are perceived to meet agent needs, price does not seem to be of concern. This comes out most strongly for bulletins. Agent support for fact sheets is quite strong, and would argue for continued expansion of that delivery channel.

Table 2
Satisfaction with Extension Bulletins by Agent Subject Speciality
Percent agreeing with the following statements

Bulletins...	4-H Youth	Agriculture	Human Ecology	Others
Prices are fair	36.0%	40.7%	34.0%	29.6%
Ordering procedures are good	49.0	59.3	67.0	55.5
Meets agent's subject needs	47.1	50.4	56.3	48.1
Projects good public image	58.8	74.3	78.7	74.1
Good sense of audience needs	<u>25.5</u>	52.3	50.0	40.7
Information is up-to-date	39.2	40.2	52.4	40.7
Technical quality is excellent	80.4	73.4	85.5	85.2
Design is excellent	49.0	55.0	68.0	55.6
Pubs are easy to understand	<u>51.0</u>	75.0	73.5	70.4
Clients like these pubs	<u>43.1</u>	65.1	63.1	70.4
Complexity is OK	35.3	62.4	58.3	59.3
Excellent audience content	47.1	54.1	55.0	66.7

Underlined percentages are significantly different from other row percentages not underlined at $p < .05$

Agent Subject Matter Specialty and Satisfaction

Tables 2 and 3 present more detailed information about agent satisfaction with bulletins and fact sheets by agent subject matter responsibilities. The only significant relationships on these two tables are that 4-H and youth agents are consistently less positive about bulletins and fact sheets than are other agents. Table 2 for example shows that 4-H and youth agents are the least likely to agree that bulletins are easy to understand, have a good sense of audience needs, or that agents like the bulletins. 4-H and youth agents and other agents (mostly sea grant agents) disagree that fact sheet content is excellent for their audience, they are least likely to agree that the complexity of the content is about right for their audience, or that the design is excellent. These findings are not altogether unexpected. Fewer publications tend to be done for youth agents than for either human ecology or agriculture agents.

Conclusions

Overall, this study found that agents appear to be moderately satisfied with publication support. What emerges from this analysis as perhaps the most critical issue in maintaining agent satisfaction is the subject matter content of publications. As long as the publication system can produce materials targeted to agent programs, satisfaction is likely to remain high. While the price of publications is, and will likely continue to be an issue, this study suggests that publication price is much less important than other factors such as making sure publications are up-to-date and have a good sense of audience needs.

Bulletins are consistently rated lower than fact sheets. Agents are more likely to view bulletins as out-of-date, not appropriate, expensive, and slow to produce. Fact sheets, on the other hand, are viewed by agents as more appropriate for their needs, more timely and more cost effective.

Table 3
Satisfaction with Extension Fact Sheets by Agent Subject Specialty

Percent agreeing with the following statements Fact Sheets...	4-H		Human Ecology	
	Youth	Agriculture	Ecology	Others
Prices are fair	36.0%	40.7%	34.0%	29.6%
Ordering procedures are good	49.0	59.3	67.0	55.5
Meets agent's subject needs	47.1	50.4	56.3	48.1
Projects good public image	58.8	74.3	78.7	74.1
Good sense of audience needs	<u>25.5</u>	52.3	50.0	40.7
Information is up-to-date	39.2	40.2	52.4	40.7
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 This study has only provided one limited view of county extension agents and their use of extension publications. It is clear from the limited published literature in this area that considerably more work needs to be done to understand the use of research-based information by county Extension agents.

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