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University of Tennessee Agricultural Experiment Station

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Elements In A Cooperative Membership Information Program

Erven J. Long, R. B. Hughes, Jr., and F. P. Bowers

**THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE
AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION
KNOXVILLE**

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Elements In A Cooperative Membership Information Program

TWO CASE STUDIES

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INTRODUCTION

Any farmer cooperative association—whether a marketing, bargaining, or purchasing cooperative—needs the intelligent participation of its members. Such participation requires that the members have constructive attitudes toward the association and recognize their individual responsibilities in shaping its policies. It requires also that the membership be fully and accurately informed on matters relevant to the association's problems and activities. Consequently, the development of a good membership information program is an important responsibility of the association management.¹

¹Information relevant to the development of membership information programs ranked high on the list of desired research data at a meeting of representatives of several Tennessee cooperative agencies, December 5, 1952.

This bulletin gives the findings from research conducted to provide an understanding of factors to be considered in developing such a program. It reports conclusions drawn from two case studies—of the Eastern Dark-Fired Tobacco Growers' Association and of the Western Dark-Fired Tobacco Growers' Association, with headquarters respectively at Springfield, Tennessee, and at Murray, Kentucky. Most Tennessee farmers served by the two associations are in 17 Tennessee counties.² A total of 200 farmers were interviewed, 100 from each of the associations.³

PURPOSES OF THE STUDY

The specific objectives of this study, as it developed in its later stages of analysis, were to determine the factors which affect the extent to which members are informed about their association, and the effect that such knowledge has upon members' attitudes toward their association. These objectives served the more general purpose, which was to gain insight into the factors which make for a successful membership information program for these and other cooperative associations.

SOURCES OF MEMBERS' INFORMATION

In the "Eastern" Association, newspapers outranked all other sources of member information about association affairs at the time of the study, both in the number of members who obtained some information from them and in the number of members for whom they were the *principal* sources of information. Twice as many farmers obtained most of their information from newspapers as from conversations with neighbors, the next most popular source of information (Table I). In the "Western" Association, newspapers were listed by growers as second to tobacco auctions as a source of such information.

²According to managers of the two associations, Tennessee counties served are: Eastern Association—Macon, Sumner, Trousdale, Wilson, Robertson, Cheatham, Davidson, Williamson, Hickman, Dickson, Montgomery, Stewart, Houston, Humphries, Obion, and Henry. Western Association—Weakley, Obion, and Henry. The associations hereafter in this bulletin are referred to as the "Eastern" and "Western" association, respectively.

³Some of this information on the "Eastern" association (with much information not included in this bulletin) is presented in a Master's Thesis, University of Tennessee, *Farmers' Knowledge of and Attitudes Toward the Eastern Dark-Fired Tobacco Growers' Association and the Government Programs*, By Furman Preston Bowers, August, 1951.

Table I.—Sources of Information about Association of 200 Tennessee Dark-Fired Tobacco Growers

SOURCE OF INFORMATION	NUMBER OF FARMERS			
	Receiving Some Information From This Source		For Whom This Was The Most Helpful Source of Information	
	"Eastern" Association	"Western" Association	"Eastern" Association	"Western" Association
Newspaper	63		34	23
Neighbors	51		17	14
Radio	41		13	17
Office Personnel	22	No	10	8
Auction Floor	16	Data	8	31
Association Meetings	11		7	1
P.M.A.	5		4	1
All Other	12		4	2
No Information	3		3	3
TOTAL	224		100	100

On the average, "Eastern" farmers received information from 2.24 different sources.

RELATIVE VALUE OF VARIOUS INFORMATION MEDIA

The grower's source of knowledge about his association is in itself unimportant, except as it determines how fully and accurately he is informed. It is not enough to know merely the "source of information" given by a farmer; the reliability of the "source" as a means of disseminating information accurately also must be appraised. Accordingly, growers' knowledge of their association was tested by asking them nineteen specific questions about their association. The "score" of correct answers so obtained was then related to the principal source of information listed by the grower. The questions, and the percent of growers answering them correctly, are given in Table II.

Table II.—Percent of Growers Giving Correct Answers to Specific Questions

QUESTION	"Eastern"	"Western"
	%	%
Can non-members sell through the association? -----	97	96
What is the source of association finance? -----	77	66
Who owns the association? -----	68	47
Do members get additional payment for tobacco? -----	53	No Data
Where is the location of headquarters of the association? -----	52	75
How does one become a member? -----	48	69
What voice do farmers have in controlling the association? -----	37	32
What is the name of the manager? -----	24	18
Do you know the manager when you see him? -----	32*	32*
How does the association differ from an individual or company? -----	31	24
Who sells the tobacco for the association? -----	26	12
How are district directors elected? -----	21	18
Can one withdraw when he wishes? -----	17	19
Do you expect to get additional payment? -----	14	13
How many years has the association been operating? -----	13	18
How many pounds of tobacco were purchased by the association of 1948 crop? -----	9	3
What is the term of office for district directors? -----	6	3
What is the name of the district director? -----	6	10
If you withdraw, can you rejoin when you wish? -----	3	7

*Percent answering "yes".

Newspapers Best Source of Information

By and large, the best informed members were those who obtained their information largely from newspapers and other printed matter. Persons who relied principally upon verbal information, passed on to them by neighbors, were found to be the most poorly informed, as is shown by comparing the "score" of the two groups. (The score is based on the number of proper answers to the nineteen questions). For the "Eastern" Association the score for growers obtaining their information from newspapers was 8.35 questions answered correctly, while for growers getting their information from neighbors, the average score was only 5.41. For the "Western" Association the scores were 7.52 and 4.43, respectively.

One might suppose that the reason that growers who received most of their information from newspapers were better informed than those relying principally on neighbors was because they were better educated. However, careful examination of the evidence does not support this supposition.

In the first place, there was not as much difference in the educational levels of the two groups as one might assume. Although a larger percentage of the persons obtaining information from newspapers had more than an eighth grade education than was true of the other group, the differences in the educational levels of the two groups were not great. In fact, in both associations, there is a probability of about three chances in ten that whatever differences existed in the educational levels of the two groups were simply a result of sampling error.⁴ In any event, such differences as did exist in the educational levels of the two groups surely could not account for all the difference in their abilities to answer the questions correctly.

More significant, however, is the fact that within any given level-of-education group the growers who used the newspapers as their principal source of information about association affairs had a higher score (i.e. answered more questions correctly) than did growers of the same educational levels who relied principally upon neighbors for their information. (Table III).

⁴The research reader may be interested in the Chi-Square test of this point. Data are as follows:

School Grade Completed	Distribution by school gr. of those using newspapers	Distribution of those relying on neighbors	Distribution of Total	Group (1)	Group (2)	Total
a. "Eastern" Association						
0-6	13	9	22	14.67	7.33	22
7 & 8	11	7	18	12.00	6.00	18
9, 10 & 11	7	0	7	4.67	2.33	7
12 & Over	3	1	4	2.67	1.33	4
TOTAL	34	17	51			
Chi-square=4.27						
b. "Western" Association						
0-6	6	5	11	6.72	4.28	11
7 & 8	11	9	20	12.22	7.78	20
9, 10 & 11	3	0	3	1.83	1.17	3
12 & Over	2	0	2	1.22	.78	8
TOTAL	22	14	36			
Chi-square=3.71						

Table III.—Comparison of Scores of Growers Obtaining Information from Newspapers and from Neighbors, by Educational Level

Level of Education	Average Score of Growers Obtaining Information From:		Probability that difference is not due to sampling error greater than:
	Newspapers	Neighbors	
a. "Eastern" Association			
0-6 Years	8.46	5.00	95%
7 & 8 Years	9.45	6.14	95%
b. "Western" Association			
0-6 Years	7.50	4.20	95%
7 & 8 Years	7.65	4.56	95%

Neither association embraced enough cases in the education-level groups above 8 years to permit including them in the analysis. However, a basic fact stands out clearly: the growers who obtained their information from newspapers knew a great deal more about the affairs of their association than did those who relied upon neighbors for their information. This difference was not due to differences in the educational levels of the two groups.⁵

In fact, there appeared to be no relationship between educational levels and the score achieved by the growers. Although Table III would tend to suggest such a relationship, statistical analysis shows that none actually existed between the number of years the grower attended school and the score he achieved in answering these nineteen questions.⁶

Relative Values of Other Media

The comparisons above are between the two extreme types of media for communication of information—printed materials, and the round-about processes of verbal communication through informal discussion with neighbors. Between these extremes there are the other media, shown in Table I. Comparisons like that shown above between "newspapers" and "neighbors," were made for these other media only for the "Western" Association. These other media, among which comparisons were made, were: "Radio," "Office Personnel," and "Auction Floor." In all cases, comparisons were made within given level-of-education groups to eliminate the possible influence of differences in education. The average scores achieved by persons obtaining information from various

⁵Nor was it very likely due to sampling error, as there is a greater than 95% probability that subsequent samples of similar size also would show a difference in the scores of the two groups.

⁶For the "Eastern" Association (treating those who relied primarily upon newspapers as one sample and those who relied primarily upon neighbors as another) coefficients were computed for the regression of education upon score. The respective regression coefficients were 0.03 and 0.04. For each the "t" value for testing the hypothesis of no regression was approximately 0.13. Thus the positive association that existed in the sample was probably the result of chance in sampling. For the "Western" Association, average scores for growers with 0-6 years, 7 & 8 years, and over 9 years of education were, respectively, 6.07, 5.33 and 5.92. Clearly, therefore, there was not a consistent positive relation between educational levels of the growers and the scores they obtained.

Table IV.—Relation of Score of Growers to Principal Source of Information, within Level of Education Groups ("Western" Association).

Level-of-Education (School years completed)	Average Score of Persons Obtaining Information From:		Probability that difference is not due to sampling error
	Newspapers	Neighbors	
0-6	7.50	4.20	95
7 & 8	7.64	4.56	95
9 & Above	(No Basis for Comparison)		
	Newspapers	Auction Floor	% (approximately)
0-6	7.50	6.33	50
7 & 8	7.64	4.75	99
9 & Above	7.60	5.30	80
	Newspapers	Radio	
0-6	7.50	5.40	70
7 & 8	7.64	4.86	99
9 & Above	7.60	7.20	50
	Auction Floor	Neighbors	
0-6	6.33	4.20	80
7 & 8	4.75	4.56	50
9 & Above	(No Basis for Comparison)		
	Auction Floor	Radio	
0-6	6.33	5.40	50
7 & 8	4.75	4.86	50
9 & Above	5.30	7.20	70
	Radio	Neighbors	
0-6	5.40	4.20	60
7 & 8	4.86	4.56	50
9 & Above	(No Basis for Comparison)		

sources, together with statistical estimates of the probability that these represent real differences and are not due to sampling error, are given in Table IV.

The crude averages suggest that, judged by the scores of growers who relied upon them as their principal sources of information, the various media would be ranked in this order: (1) newspapers, (2) "Auction floor" or radio, (no detectable difference between these two) and (3) "neighbors." However, when statistical significance criteria are applied, the only reliable inference that can be drawn is that growers obtaining their information principally from newspapers consistently outscored those obtaining information principally from any other source.

An extremely interesting fact is that, for growers obtaining their information principally from a given source, their educational level has no significant effect upon the score they achieve. Thus, differences in

Table V.—Relation of Education to Score of "Western" Association Growers, by Principal Sources of Information

Principal Source of Information	Educational Level		Probability that difference is not due to Sampling Error % (Approx.)
	0-6	7 & 8	
Newspapers	7.50	7.64	50
Neighbors	4.20	4.56	50
Radio	5.40	4.86	50
Auction Floor	6.33	4.75	80
	0-6	9 & Above	
Newspapers	7.50	7.60	50
Radio	5.40	7.20	50
Auction Floor	6.33	5.30	60
	7 & 8	9 & Above	
Newspapers	7.64	7.60	50
Radio	4.86	7.20	70
Auction Floor	4.75	5.30	50

scores achieved by persons of differing educational levels can be assumed to be due to the differences in the proportions of the people who read newspapers, and not due to the differences in educational levels themselves (Table V).

Effects of Tenure Status

The tenure status of the grower appears to affect appreciably the source he relies upon for information about the Tobacco Marketing Association, and thus affects also the accuracy of his knowledge about its affairs. "Eastern" Association tenants achieved an average score of 6.05 questions answered correctly, compared to 6.96 for owners. Although this difference is not great, it is statistically significant. (The probability that a difference in score between owners and tenants was not due to sampling error is 95%). "Western" Association tenants made an average score of 4.37 while the owners averaged 5.99. (In this sample, the probability that a difference in score was not due to sampling error was 99%). This difference probably can be attributed to the fact that, as compared with the owners, the tenants relied much more heavily upon neighbors than upon reading materials for their information (Table VI).

Table VI.—Percent of Tenant and of Owner Growers Relying Principally Upon Newspapers and Upon Neighbors for Information

	OWNERS		TENANTS	
	Newspapers %	Neighbors %	Newspapers %	Neighbors %
"Eastern" Association	34	14	33	29
"Western" Association	25	14	11	16
TOTAL	29	14	23	23

It would appear, therefore, that this greater reliance upon reading material for information is the reason for the owners' higher average

score, in view of the demonstrated tendency of persons obtaining information from newspapers to rank higher than persons relying upon their neighbors in their ability to answer correctly the questions upon which the scores were based.

PARTICIPATION IN MEMBERSHIP ACTIVITIES

From the standpoint of attendance, member participation in neither association has been strong; only about one "Eastern" Association member in five had attended any meetings during the year prior to the interview, and only one in ten had attended more than one meeting. (For the "Western" Association, only three members in the 100 interviewed had attended any meetings, and only one had attended more than one meeting. Consequently, all discussion below of membership attendance at meetings refers only to the "Eastern" Association). Significantly, perhaps, four of the nineteen "Eastern" Association members who had attended at least one meeting felt that they had not benefitted from it.

Owner-operators and landlords who received substantial proportions of their incomes from tobacco had somewhat better attendance records than did tenants (only one of the 21 tenants attended any meeting) but even among the owners, only about 25 percent attended any meetings. Operators of the smaller and middle-sized farms, for whom tobacco contributed a large proportion of their total incomes, had a slightly better attendance record than did the operators of the largest farms. Size of tobacco allotment, rather than total size of farming operations, had most effect upon attendance.

Table VII.—Effect of Growers' Tobacco Acreage Upon Attendance at Association Meetings ("Eastern" Association)

Tobacco Acreage	Percent of growers attending at least one meeting
	%
Under 2 acres	7
2-4 acres	17
Over 4 acres	24

Participation in membership meetings appeared to have had little effect upon the growers' ability to answer correctly questions about the association; no relationship appeared between the number of meetings attended and the number of questions correctly answered. Since only 21 growers had attended any meetings, however, the sample was very small; it is possible that a larger sample might reveal some relationship.

Attendance at meetings is, of course, of much broader importance than merely as a source of information to the members. It is there that the member has his best opportunity to influence the policy of his association and to acquire a sense that it truly belongs to him. Perhaps the meetings might better serve to stimulate growers to become better informed if a good membership informational program were designed and discussed at the meetings.

RELATIONSHIP OF GROWERS' KNOWLEDGE TO THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD THEIR ASSOCIATION

Does providing association members with better information help develop in them more favorable attitudes toward the association? This is a strategic question facing all cooperatives. Some information on this subject was obtained by classifying the growers into three groups, according to their knowledge of the association as indicated by the number that correctly answered ten questions.⁷ Growers answering 7 to 10 questions correctly were classified as having "good" knowledge, those answering 5 and 6 questions correctly were classified "medium", and those answering fewer than 5 questions correctly were classified as having "poor" knowledge. These three groups, in each of the Associations, were then compared with respect to their various attitudes toward their association.⁸

A great majority of the members of both associations were satisfied in a general way with their association's past accomplishments. This was about equally true whether the growers fell into the class of having "good," "medium," or "poor" knowledge of their association. Similarly, virtually all (193 of the 200) growers felt that their association had succeeded in improving the prices they received for their tobacco.

The differences that appeared among the three groups of growers are suggestive rather than conclusive. Approximately 70 percent of the "Eastern" and 50 percent of the "Western" growers felt that their association should expand its services but this did not appear to be related to the level of the grower's knowledge. However, the growers with a good knowledge of the association had a more clear-cut idea than those with poorer knowledge, of what services are now being rendered and of the ways in which these services could be improved and of which additional services should be added. Similarly, although growers of all three knowledge levels were about equally satisfied with the advantages of marketing through the association, the growers with the better knowledge identified more clearly what those advantages were.

In general, one can say that improved knowledge may not effect a favorable attitude on the part of the growers toward their association; but it does make their judgment more discriminating. The better informed growers know what they like and do not like. This implies, of course, that as a membership education program becomes increasingly

⁷These 10 questions were selected from the 19 for the purpose of this problem because it was believed that they were basic to an understanding of the membership relations and operations of the cooperative, and because they were questions on which information was easily available to the members.

⁸The number of growers falling into the respective "knowledge" classifications are as follows:

	"Eastern" Ass'n.	"Western" Ass'n.
Good	32	12
Medium	32	38
Poor	36	50
TOTAL	100	100

successful, association management has to do an increasingly efficient job or suffer the criticism of the cooperative's membership. It was found in the case of the "Eastern" Association, for instance, that although the better informed members were at least equally as appreciative as were the poorly informed members of the association's program in general, they made many more specific criticisms of management and policies.⁹ This kind of constructive criticism by members can serve to improve association policies if it is properly harnessed and comes from a well informed membership.

GROWER'S INTERESTS IN RECEIVING MORE INFORMATION

Eighty-five of the 100 "Eastern" growers and 76 of the 100 "Western" growers interviewed said that they needed more information about their association, even though all but seven of the 200 indicated they had received some such information from some source or sources. In the "Eastern" Association the desire for further knowledge by the farmer appeared to increase with the amount of education; this did not appear to hold true, however, for the "Western" Association.

Table VIII. — Relation of Farmers' Education to his Desire to Have More Information About his Cooperative Tobacco Marketing Association

Level of Education	Percent of growers indicating a desire for more information	
	% "Eastern" Ass'n	% "Western" Ass'n
Below 6th grade	77	89
6th, 7th and 8th grades	87	70
Above 8th grade	95	83
TOTAL	85	76

The growers' total interest in obtaining further information about their association was further demonstrated by their suggestions as to how such additional information could be disseminated. The most commonly made suggestion was that the association should send by mail some form of informational literature to the members. The growers felt quite strongly that this or any information program should be made systematic and should bring them information rapidly and smoothly from the association. The advantage claimed for mailed information was that it could be held for further reference. Many growers suggested that more use should be made of the radio in disseminating information about association affairs.¹⁰

⁹When asked to rate the management as "good," "fair," or "poor," slightly more than half of the "Eastern" growers with a good knowledge of the association rated the management "good," compared to two-thirds of the other two groups. No one rated the management "poor." Conversely, 92% of the "Western" growers with a good knowledge rated the management as "good," compared to about 72% of the other two groups. Again, no one rated the management "poor." A somewhat disturbing note is suggested by the fact that slightly more than 20% of the growers of each association felt that the association was not being run by the farmers.

¹⁰Ninety-three of the 169 growers desiring more information suggested that some form of printed information should be distributed through the mail (newspapers, association paper, mailed literature), 50 suggested greater use of the radio. Proportions between the two associations were almost identical.

FACTORS IN A SUCCESSFUL MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION PROGRAM

A better informed membership leads to a more careful appraisal by members of association activities, and hence to a more effective participation of members in association policies and programs. This should have the effect of continuously improving the soundness of the association. Eighty-five percent of the growers interviewed expressed a need and desire for more information about their association. The central question is, then: What kind of educational program would be most effective?

All evidence in this study supports one conclusion—that the printed page is a much more effective mode of communicating information to members than any other of the methods used. Certainly any information program should be built around an effective system of providing information to members in written form—in newspapers, association literature, or both. This basic principle is supported by the following facts: (1) twice as many growers felt that written materials were more useful than any other source of information, (2) growers obtaining information from written sources were consistently better informed than other growers—regardless of educational level or tenure status, and (3) written materials were preferred by twice as many growers as was the next competitor (radio) as the medium of *additional* information desired.

Many reasons suggest themselves as to why growers who rely upon written information appear to be the best informed.¹¹ When all factors are considered, it appears that the principal reason is that written material is simply a better means of communicating factual information than are the more informal methods of group meetings, radio and visits with neighbors. There may be several reasons for this. First, there is a greater chance for mistakes to get into the roundabout process of getting information from neighbors. Second, written materials can be re-read, if the member does not get the information correctly the first time. Third, the member is less likely to be able to sift the true from the untrue information he gets from conversations than from written materials. Fourth, most people remember what they read more clearly than what they hear. And fifth, information obtained from conversations, even though correct, is apt to be picked up in little pieces from several different conversations and sandwiched in with other subjects of conversation. Consequently, the member has difficulty fitting the little pieces together so that he gets the whole picture correctly. All these reasons were subjects of comment by the growers in their conversations with the interviewers.

In addition to an active program of providing members with written materials, the association probably should try to increase member par-

¹¹One such thought is that perhaps a more intelligent group of people rely upon reading than upon other means of communication, and that, therefore, the "readers" get a better score because they are more intelligent. This may be true to a certain extent. However, the fact that educational level does not appear to be related to the score suggests that the real cause is more probably that written materials are simply a better means of reliably communicating information.

ticipation in association meetings. This would have many other desirable effects; but as far as the informational program is concerned, the association meeting would appear to serve at least four important functions. It could be used to stimulate the members' interests in becoming better informed; as a means of distributing, and informing members of, written information; to clarify through discussion particular items covered in the written informational program; and to convey information to members who could not or would not avail themselves of written materials. Information conveyed this way could be much more accurate than that obtained through informal visiting with neighbors.

A third means of communicating information which would appear to have a place in a membership education program is the radio. There was a substantial interest in this as a source of information although relatively little use was being made of the radio at the time of the study. Comments by the farmers suggest that the principal contribution the radio could make to a membership education program would be stimulating members' interest, and conveying timely informational items. The claim could well be made that the foregoing analysis badly overstates the case against the radio, and in favor of written materials, owing to the fact that neither association was making as much use of the radio as of newspapers for the purposes being discussed. Furthermore, inaccuracies in answers given by persons obtaining their information principally from radio, as compared to newspapers, could be due to a relatively greater amount of inaccurate information included in the radio programs than in the newspaper articles, and are not, therefore, a legitimate indictment of radio as an informational medium. This hypothesis neither can be proved nor disproved in this study, but would be an extremely important subject for additional study under carefully controlled conditions. This study, like all others, terminates in some unanswered questions. Since neither association made significant direct use of the radio, it appears that the radio programs which 20% of the growers listed as their principal source of information were based upon the newspaper articles. At best, therefore, the subject matter included in the radio programs could be no better than that carried in the newspapers. How many slips occur "twixt the page and the mike" we do not know. Perhaps the most reliable basis of judgment on this point is the comment of the growers, referred to above, on the limitations of oral, as compared to written, communication.

Television, combining features of both radio and newspapers, is a medium whose possibilities were not observed in the study.

The development of a sound and adequate membership information program is an important part of the operations of any cooperative association. The problem of what constitutes a good program is not simple. It is hoped that this study provides some guidance on this point. The experiences of cooperatives as they work on the problem should provide improvements on the conclusions reached in this study until eventually, perhaps, the characteristics of a good cooperative membership information program may be known with certainty.