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Third Thursday Thing: A Success Story for Reaching Underserved Clients

Abstract

Kentucky State University has been conducting a monthly field day known as the Third Thursday Thing for many years. This program has been successful in reaching limited-resource, minority, and underserved clients. The success of the program has indicated that a nontraditional approach can be successful when working with nontraditional clients. The program also strives to offer topics that focus on interests of those operating small farms and to have specific months dedicated to specific topics. Departing from some of the traditional meeting scheduling protocols has proved to be successful and continues to attract new clients to the program.

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Introduction

Extension has a long history of serving midsize farms, especially those producing standard commodity crops and large-scale specialty crops (Meier, 1989). However, many small-farm, limited-resource, and minority agriculture producers feel that traditional Extension programs do not address their needs or that they cannot attend programming due to other commitments. Extension is used as a source of information by small farm operators, but it is not always associated with success (Muhammad, Tegegne, & Ekanem, 2004). This situation indicates a need for change in the overall way Extension programs are offered to help meet these client's needs; such change is critical for reaching minority producers (Brain, Irani, Hodges, & Fuhrman, 2009; Marshall, 2012). These producers often have full-time off-farm jobs that limit their ability to attend Extension programs. To reach this audience, new methods must be used, and traditional Extension program scheduling must be reevaluated. Programs targeting underserved producers have been successful; one is the Kentucky State University Third Thursday Thing, a sustainable agriculture workshop series.

An Idea That Worked

Many underserved producers in Kentucky expressed concern that normal Extension programs did not address their needs. Extension agents and paraprofessionals also needed more knowledge on the specialty crops many wanted to produce. To address these issues, Kentucky State University initiated a series of workshops in 1997 to increase the knowledge of Extension agents, Extension paraprofessionals, and other agency personnel working

with small-farm, limited-resource, female, and minority producers. The idea was to conduct monthly workshops on topics related to sustainable, small-scale farming practices at Kentucky State University's Research and Demonstration Farm so that attendees could observe the monthly progression of different crop and livestock enterprises. These workshops were funded by a Sustainable Agriculture, Research, and Education Professional Development Program grant. Because the target audience was professionals, a weekday was selected for the programming. Producers began attending in August 1997. The workshop series became known as the Third Thursday Thing because the workshops happened to fall on the third Thursday of each month.

Producers who attended were generally small-farm, limited-resource, female, and minority producers who had off-farm jobs and were farming part time. Many producers were from underrepresented and underserved groups that did not use Extension. Because of this circumstance, and the timing of the program, the producers' strong desire and willingness to attend was not expected.

Results of the Program

Workshop topics were selected to give hands-on training on basic production information and to highlight the diverse areas of research and Extension at Kentucky State University. Topic areas included horticulture crops, organic and sustainable agriculture, vegetable production, marketing, livestock production, pastured poultry, economics, aquaculture, and AgrAbility, with producers providing input about desired topics.

Through evaluations, producers and professionals have indicated that the regular scheduling for the Third Thursday Thing makes it easier for them to plan ahead around their off-farm work obligations. They like the prearranged schedule because they can mark the dates on their calendars. Annual participation ranges from 700 to 1,200, and, at the time of this writing, the program had had over 20,000 participants during its 18-year tenure. Producers have become the major audience, but a number of Extension and agency personnel attend as well.

The program has attracted producers from long distances; there are producers who regularly travel over 100 mi to attend. The combination of classroom and hands-on training is the reason most producers cite for continued attendance at the workshops.

Evaluations have indicated that producers are from a variety of farming operations but that most regularly attend workshops on the particular topic areas they are interested in. Some producers have attended workshops on particular topic areas for over 10 years. The fact that a particular topic area is traditionally offered in a specific month has helped producers request time off or arrange work schedules well in advance to be able to attend the specific sessions that interest them.

Producers who participate have indicated through the program evaluations that they feel their needs are being met. Observations of group activities and interactions outside the formal sessions indicate that many show a sense of community at the workshops. Cooperatives and informal relationships have been developed, and over 12,000 producers have delineated through program evaluations direct benefits of participating in the program.

The Third Thursday Thing team received the 2013 U.S. Secretary of Agriculture's Honor of Excellence Award, the highest honor bestowed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for its positive impacts on producers. The team also received the Epsilon Sigma Phi Southern Region Team Award and has been recognized nationally.

Why Has It Worked?

Evaluations have been conducted for several years at the different workshops. These evaluations have included questions related to number of programs attended, years of participation, and reasons for attending. Questions also have asked what participants like about the workshops and whether the workshops have helped them in their enterprises. The results of these evaluations indicate that the major reasons this program has worked are consistency and quality. Because the workshops are on prescheduled days, producers are able to arrange their off-farm work schedules so that they can attend desired sessions. The focus on smaller producers is another stated reason for continued attendance. Also, the flexibility in programming is yet another reason given for the program's success. Specific subjects within topic areas can be changed to fit the production year or specific environmental, regulatory, weather, or economic situations or other immediate needs with minimal notice.

A few other universities have used the model of the Third Thursday Thing to create successful monthly programs in their states. The critical factors in the success of this program relate to the deviation from the normal Extension and field-day models. The program initiators looked for a monthly date for regular meetings to allow for coverage of production systems. This approach has allowed producers to plan ahead and work around other activities to increase their ability to attend the workshops. Providing the programming on weekdays has been more successful in targeting part-time producers than having evening or weekend meetings would have been because these producers tend to prefer using evening and weekend time for farm and family activities. Focusing on general topic areas each month and being able to change specific subjects within those topic areas has increased success and continued to attract producers to the program.

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