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Adapting Publications for Local Audiences: Learning from Focus Groups and Community Experts

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Adapting Publications for Local Audiences: Learning from Focus Groups and Community Experts

Abstract

Many Extension professionals rely on publications such as brochures and fact sheets to communicate with members of unique populations. This article describes the process of adapting existing publications for local audiences, with examples from a project adapting brochures for custodial grandparents in Hawaii. Benefits of this process include more effective publications that have been tailored to local populations as well as increased communication with such populations.

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Introduction

Publications such as brochures and fact sheets are fundamental tools of the trade for many Extension professionals. As the cultural diversity of the clientele served by Extension increases (Schauber, 2001), so does the need for developing culturally accessible publications. One efficient technique for developing such publications is to modify an existing publication, intended for a different audience, for a local audience. Adapting publications is best achieved through a process of consulting with local experts and focus groups of community members. This article outlines such a process, providing examples from a project adapting a series of brochures for custodial grandparents in Hawaii.

Important Considerations

The process of adapting publications for specific populations involves thoughtful consideration of the prioritized population as well as attention to the basic principles of clear communication. The following points are essential.

- Work with your community to understand its needs. Your publication must meet a community need as well as communicate information in a relevant manner. For instance, the idea for the series of brochures that we developed for grandparents raising grandchildren came from the community. Local agencies requested a way to communicate small amounts of information with grandparents too overwhelmed to seek help.
- Consider culture. Cultural sensitivity includes attention to surface structure (observable characteristics) as well as deep structure (values and beliefs). Effective communication must occur on both levels (Resnicow, Braithwaite, Ahluwalia, & Baranowski, 1999). The brochures were modified on a surface level by changing images to familiar ones - of local people and places. The brochures were modified on a deep level by conveying information in culturally appropriate ways - changing the focus of statements from self to family.
- Present the information clearly and simply. Use short sentences and paragraphs to present only the most important information (Ingram, Dorsey, & Smith, 2004).

Steps in the Adaptation Process

- Establish a panel of experts. The first step in our process was to enlist the help of people who were familiar with our prioritized population, two local students who had been raised by their grandparents and two grandparent support group leaders. These experts provided comments on brochure drafts at each stage of preparation.
- Find a good template. The second step was to locate source material and obtain permission to use it. We started with an excellent series of fact sheets for grandparents published by the University of Wisconsin (2002).
- Create pilot brochures. The next step was to create pilot brochures. Consistent with recommendations from the National Institute on Aging (2002), we enlarged the font, widened the margins, and increased the number of headings and photographs in the original brochures. Photographs of culturally diverse families were obtained from the Microsoft word Web site <<http://office.microsoft.com/clipart>>.
- Use focus groups to test your pilot brochures. We showed our brochures to grandparent focus groups and asked for their feedback. They suggested ways to present information that made sense within their cultural framework, such as emphasizing family harmony. They also suggested that we replace the stock photographs with images of local people and places.
- Proof and edit carefully. After we incorporated the changes suggested by the focus groups, our panel of experts reviewed the drafts for authenticity. We then enlisted the help of our College publications department for final professional editing.
- Use information gained in the process to inform your distribution strategies. We used locations suggested by focus group participants to distribute the brochures.

Implications for Extension

The technique of modifying existing material for local audiences can save time and money. The process outlined in this article provides information useful to researchers and Extension educators who develop publications for unique populations. It also helps to increase the effectiveness of these publications, because it ensures that their content will be delivered in a culturally accessible manner. Additional benefits are that it involves members of prioritized populations in the process of disseminating information and fosters increased trust and communication between extension professionals and the communities they serve.

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