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Tips for Designing Publications for Underrepresented Audiences

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Tips for Designing Publications for Underrepresented Audiences

Abstract

The article presents a number of practical tips on designing publications for underrepresented and non-traditional audiences. The process of designing an effective publication requires the incorporation of cultural preferences of the target audience. Incorporating design principles that consider culture in the areas of formatting written content and selecting images, graphics, and pictures that are representative of the target audience are important. Other tips, such as using local resources to ensure the product is a quality publication that incorporates language and images reflective of the intended audience, are also useful.

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Introduction

Extension professionals often develop brochures, fact sheets, and other types of publications that offer valuable information to various audiences. Developing a product that meets audience needs, helps accomplish a goal, or solves a problem is sometimes challenging and may present hidden complexities (Bly, 1989). As the need to develop publications for underserved communities continues to grow, so does the importance of special considerations in the writing and design process. Audience background and experience should be considered in all phases of development. The following are helpful points to bear in mind.

Culture

A key to designing publications for underrepresented audiences is to consider the culture of the audience. This requires special attention to audience preferences and involves taking a few extra steps to learn about your audience before creating the publication. Look for opportunities to talk to individuals from your audience. Preferences, traditions, values, and expectations can vary greatly among people who have been categorized as belonging to the same group. For example, although Japanese, Hmong, and Filipinos can all be lumped under the "Asian" umbrella, there are many cultural differences among these groups. The same may be true of Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, and Guatemalans, who may all be considered "Latinos."

Written Content

Present the information in a simple manner. The level of difficulty should be similar to that of material that the reader normally reads for pleasure (USDA, 1998). Write as if you are speaking to the reader. Additional special considerations may be needed for low-literacy audiences or those

who use English as a second language.

- Present only the most important information.
- Use headings and subheadings to signal to the reader about upcoming information. Break up large amounts of information into easy-to-read sections (Agriculture Communicators in Education, 2001).
- Use short sentences and short paragraphs. Sentences should be no more than 25 words, and paragraphs should be no more than 60 words.
- For audiences that use English as second language, it is preferable to write in their native language. If that is not possible, consider using materials written for lower literacy levels in their second language.
- Set quotes or phrases of information off to the side of the main body of text. Use buzzwords to draw the reader in or to notify them of information.
- Leave an adequate amount of white space along the margins and throughout the publication. This is especially important for low-literacy audiences. Avoid overcrowding each page with words.

Graphics

Carefully consider the use of graphics and images, including pictures of people, illustrations, tables, charts, and drawings, in your publication. Sometimes a well-designed graphic can clarify the message being presented or even replace large blocks of text. Special attention should be given to the selection of images of people. Again, culture and audience preference plays an important role in deciding what is an acceptable image or graphic to include. The following are some points to consider.

- Seek specific feedback regarding potential images you intend to include in your publication. If at all possible, use pictures of people and backgrounds that are representative of the intended audience. Although difficult to find only 10 years ago, today clip art designed for specific audiences is increasingly available.
- Show various types of families in your publications. Include pictures of two-parent families, single-parent families, multi-racial families, and families that depict grandparents raising grandchildren, among others.
- Show images that reflect a variety of different types of residences. Family residences are typically depicted as a single family home with a porch and private backyard. For some of your intended audiences, a picture of an apartment building, a row house, a duplex, or a mobile home may feel more like home.
- Show people in a variety of occupations, including those that are non-traditional. An example might include a male nurse, a female engineer, or a person with a disability in a job most often held by people without visible disabilities.

Conclusion

The suggestions in this "Tools of the Trade" may help to increase the effectiveness of publications designed for members of underrepresented and other non-traditional audiences. These are only a few tips to aid in the development of audience-sensitive publications.

One of the most important tips to follow, however, is seeking counsel from members of the intended audience. Partner with local agencies that regularly work with your target audience, and share your materials with several people from the target audience (Bairstow, Berry, & Driscoll, 2002). Their feedback can be invaluable in creating an effective publication and in avoiding unintended *faux pas*.

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