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Building Buy-in: A Qualitative Study Seeking to Understand Stakeholder Perceptions of a University Extension System Through the Lens of External Branding

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Building Buy-in: A Qualitative Study Seeking to Understand Stakeholder Perceptions of a University Extension System Through the Lens of External Branding

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Building Buy-in: A Qualitative Study Seeking to Understand Stakeholder Perceptions of a University Extension System Through the Lens of External Branding

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A brand is an organization's link to its audiences. When the audience is asked to participate in building a brand culture, they are more likely to hold a favorable attitude toward the brand and be loyal to the brand long term. The purpose of this study was to understand the UF/IFAS Extension brand's image from the perspective of the brand's stakeholders, specifically focusing on brand awareness, audience groups, and potential future obstacles for the brand. A series of six online focus groups were conducted during the spring/summer of 2021 using Zoom. Major themes identified were a public knowledge gap related to Extension and agriculture, the focus of UF/IFAS Extension was (too) broad, agriculture was not valued in the state, and a disconnect existed between the public and Extension and agriculture. Results confirm the complexity of branding an organization when efforts need to highlight products, such as programming, and services, such as soil sampling, while also embodying unseen values and culture associated with the brand. Results from this study can be used to improve the UF/IFAS Extension brand through increased marketing, determining appropriate focus and communicating that focus, and continuing to engage stakeholders in the co-creation of branding.

Keywords: branding, Extension, agriculture, focus groups, stakeholder engagement

Introduction/Literature Review

At its simplest level, Kornberger (2010) describes a brand as an organization's link to external audiences. A brand can be complex due to its ability to showcase products, goods, or services while also embodying—sometimes unstated and unseen—the values and culture of the organization (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Additionally, brand communications often include traditional components of organizations, such as a specific color palette, logo, or slogan (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). Increasing awareness of a brand among its external audiences is important because a brand can create a greater shared meaning when communicated to stakeholders (de Chernatony et al., 2013). When audiences engage in the co-creation of a brand, a favorable attitude toward the brand should form, which has been shown to be an indicator of

brand loyalty (Merrilees & Fry, 2002). This process, where a brand is conceptualized in the mind of a stakeholder through a social process, communicates the brand's promise (Burmam et al., 2009). The outcome of this process is a brand's image (Keller, 1993), which is recognized as an external audience member's individual perception of a brand (Burmam et al., 2009). Whether a brand fulfills its promise is dependent on the external stakeholder's satisfaction and experience with all brand touchpoints (de Chernatony & Harris, 2000).

The purpose of the current study was to gather insight into stakeholders' perceptions of the UF/IFAS Extension brand's image. Previous work recommends brand image be studied in terms of audience perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and associations (Hofstede et al., 2007). Since stakeholder perceptions of a brand's image can be multifaceted and require a recall of memories (Keller, 1993), a qualitative approach is appropriate for its ability to explore meanings and interpretations of a topic (Liamputtong, 2011). As shown by the abundant amount of literature related to branding, it is considered a strategic endeavor to benchmark different features of an organization's brand over time in hopes of moving the needle forward (de Chernatony et al., 2013; Libai et al., 2010; Merrilees & Fry, 2002; Romaniuk & Gaillard, 2007; Settle et al., 2019).

Branding is considered an important aspect of all organizations (Libai et al., 2010; Romaniuk & Gaillard, 2007) but should especially be focused on in Extension systems because Extension's viability can heavily rely on public support in the form of funding dollars (Campbell, 1999; Hoggett, 2006). Extension, similar to not-for-profit or community organizations, often operates in dynamic environments "where competition for resources, employees, and clients is prevalent" (Miller & Merrilees, 2013, p. 172). Although a fairly new area of research, several studies have shown that these organizations struggle with branding in terms of positioning and marketing (Grounds & Griffiths, 2005; Hankinson, 2000; Kennedy, 1998; Lindsay & Murphy, 1996; Miller & Merrilees, 2013; Mort et al., 2007). Two characteristics of community organizations are that they typically answer to multiple stakeholders causing conflicting needs, and they can encounter issues with staff morale or effectiveness due to a lack of low compensation. Both of these factors can negatively affect an individual's perception of a brand's image and sentiment toward the brand (Miller & Merrilees, 2013).

Support of Extension from stakeholders is not possible without a positive perception of the brand's image and a general awareness of the brand (Settle et al., 2019). Nationwide, Extension is considered a "collaboration of state, federal, and county governments that provide scientific knowledge to the general public through educational programs" (Barry et al., 2020, p. 1). Specifically in Florida, the land-grant institution began as Florida Agricultural College. In 1905 multiple colleges were combined to establish the University of the State of Florida, known today as the University of Florida. After the Smith-Lever Act was passed in 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service began as an arm of the university, helping to educate the public on scientific research. UF/IFAS Extension retains its presence throughout the state, with offices in every county and many research and education centers (Barry et al., 2020). It is important to assess

brand image factors related to UF/IFAS Extension because these can differ from state to state in Extension systems (Settle et al., 2019) and can even differ from community to community (Israel et al., 2011).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore the UF/IFAS Extension brand's image from stakeholder perspectives. This specific set of stakeholders included association leaders, producers from many aspects of Florida's agriculture and natural resources sectors, and community leaders. The purpose of the study was fulfilled through the following research questions:

RQ1: What are stakeholder perceptions of UF/IFAS Extension related to brand awareness?

RQ2: What audience groups do stakeholders feel UF/IFAS Extension should focus on?

RQ3: What obstacles do stakeholders see for UF/IFAS Extension in the future?

Methods

To explore and answer the research questions of this qualitative study, researchers conducted a series of six online focus groups with UF/IFAS stakeholders. Focus groups were held between April 20 and June 3, 2021, using the videoconferencing platform Zoom. Each focus group lasted an hour and a half. Online focus groups were selected as the research method due to their ability to gather quality insight from many different perspectives while remaining geographically distanced (Oringderff, 2004), which was necessary due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling and Procedure

Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants to take part in the online focus groups. This sampling technique was selected because participants needed to have a comprehension of the organization in question to understand the research questions (Creswell, 2007). An email was sent to 130 potential participants through an email listserv. These recipients were considered UF/IFAS stakeholders and were identified by UF/IFAS administration. Potential participants ranged from association leaders to producers who represented many aspects of Florida's agriculture and natural resource sectors to community leaders. Focus groups were heterogeneous, as participants could select which day/time best fit their schedule. There were 57 responses to participate in the focus groups, and 45 of those respondents participated. Each focus group included between five and nine participants.

Prior to beginning this study or recruiting participants, approval was received from the UF/IFAS Institutional Review Board (#IRB202100410). Each focus group session began with an introduction to the study and information related to the consent form, which was shared with participants in the Zoom chat box at the start of the focus group session. Participants were

informed that remaining in the Zoom room was considered their consent to participate. In addition to participants, each focus group included a moderator, assistant moderator, and note-taker. Members of the research team who participated in these roles were trained prior to the sessions beginning. During the discussion, the moderator read instrument questions directly from the guide for consistency between focus groups, remained neutral to participant dialogue, and probed discussion when necessary. Probing occurred if participants provided vague or unclear answers to the posed question. The assistant moderator served as a backup to the lead moderator in case of technical issues. Notes provided by the note-taker were cross-referenced with transcriptions and audio recordings to ensure accuracy, dependability, and internal validity of the data (Flick, 2009). At the end of each focus group, the research team debriefed participants with a summary of the discussion, requested any additional comments or clarifications, and asked participants to confirm if this summary was an accurate reflection of the group discussion, which served as a member check (Creswell, 2007). Focus groups were recorded using the built-in recorder on the Zoom platform. These recordings were then transcribed using a paid transcription service.

Procedure

To ensure that discussion and data focused on the brand of this specific Extension system, researchers used empirical resources, such as language from previous communications materials and organizational mission and priorities, to formulate questions. Each focus group began with icebreaker questions for participants to share their names, general location in Florida, career, and any experience they have had with UF/IFAS Extension. Next, participants discussed how UF/IFAS Extension utilizes teaching, research, and Extension. Then participants were asked if UF/IFAS Extension was fulfilling its brand promise in terms of meeting stakeholder needs and if there were any programming gaps. Following this, the moderator led a discussion related to balancing UF/IFAS Extension's different audiences (i.e., providing communities with long-term support, helping the agriculture and natural resource sectors within the state, etc.). After that, the discussion shifted to whom the efforts of UF/IFAS Extension have been most beneficial. Finally, participants were asked if and how they felt connected to UF/IFAS Extension brand with specific consideration to methods of communication and content information. Many of these questions and topic areas were asked in varying ways, so they related to each local community, within the state, and specific industries. The discussion concluded with participants' thoughts on where UF/IFAS Extension should be in the next 10 years in relation to local, statewide, nationwide, international, and industry needs. These discussion points align with previous work that recommends studying brand image in terms of audience perceptions, thoughts and feelings, and associations (Hofstede et al., 2007). Furthermore, this instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts that specialize in Extension communications and qualitative research.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began by confirming transcripts matched audio recordings from the focus groups. Glaser's (1965) constant comparative method was used to analyze the data, which were managed using NVivo 12. Participant responses were coded by an independent coder who constantly compared the code at hand to previously established codes. Together, the research team triangulated the coded data into themes, which served as confirmability (Creswell, 2007). The audit trail of audio recordings and researcher notes lend dependability and validity to this study (Flick, 2009).

Researcher Subjectivity Statements

In qualitative research, it is important for members of the research team to disclose past experiences related to the research topic, which can taint or bias research perspectives when conducting and analyzing data. Research subjectivity statements serve as an important element to help the reader to determine the credibility and quality of the study (Preissle, 2008). The researcher who led the data analysis was a research assistant with a background in research work in Extension communications and is currently employed by the UF/IFAS. This research was funded by the UF/IFAS Extension, and the entire research team was employed by the UF/IFAS. Researchers acknowledged these biases and made an effort to consider alternative viewpoints that may not have been in support of the UF/IFAS Extension system.

Limitations

The main limitations of this study are those directly associated with qualitative research. Limitations included are that the results from this study are not generalizable but could provide guidance in other similar Extension structures. Another limiting factor to this study is that qualitative research is based on participants' ability to recall and relay information. Lastly, using online focus groups as a research method could potentially lead to more participant distractions and limit participant interaction through body language and facial expressions.

Results

To fulfill the purpose of this study, participants discussed the UF/IFAS Extension's brand image, specifically noting perceptions of brand awareness, audience focus, and future obstacles. As noted in the literature review, these are important components of an organization's brand. In summary, participants saw a knowledge gap of UF/IFAS Extension among the public, felt the current audience of UF/IFAS Extension was too broad, and felt the agricultural industry was becoming undesirable to the state; participants also perceived citizens as being disconnected from the industry.

RQ1: Stakeholder Perceptions Of UF/IFAS Extension Related to Brand Awareness

Public Knowledge Gap of UF/IFAS Extension

Participants felt a knowledge gap of UF/IFAS Extension exists, in both the general population and some segments of agricultural producers, meaning people are not informed about the state Extension service. This theme appeared in all six focus groups and was identified 41 times throughout all focus groups. Participants felt “UF/IFAS Extension has something to offer to everyone in the public and the agricultural and natural resources sector.” Additionally, many participants were aware of funding sources for Extension systems. They mentioned that “all people should be using UF/IFAS Extension more because the public’s tax dollars are helping fund UF/IFAS Extension.” One participant mentioned,

If you’re trying to set a goal for UF/IFAS Extension, I think that every refrigerator in the state of Florida needs to have UF/IFAS Extension [magnet] with a phone number to the county agent or the website and it becomes a household name. It needs to be the absolute number one resource for every citizen of the state of Florida, whether you are involved in production agriculture or 4-H or a consumer of any kind. UF/IFAS Extension touches everybody, and UF/IFAS Extension has to be seen as the resource for everybody. When we can get to that point, our lobbyist will not have such a battle trying to get money.

Some participants felt that because UF/IFAS Extension was related to agriculture, it gave people outside of the agricultural industry the perception that “UF/IFAS Extension was not useful to them.” Stemming from this discussion, participants noted issues regarding confusing acronyms and the misunderstanding of consumers’ role in the consumption and use of agricultural products. A participant stated, “They see agricultural, or they hear it, and they’re like, ‘Oh, that doesn’t apply to me ‘cause I’m not a farmer, rancher, whatever.’ In all reality, it does because they are a consumer of all things agriculture.”

Furthermore, participants noted that with many new people moving to Florida, UF/IFAS Extension should market itself better by “getting word out about what UF/IFAS Extension is, what UF/IFAS Extension does, and what UF/IFAS Extension resources are available.” Participants mentioned “getting the word out” about UF/IFAS Extension and “in front of the right eyeballs,” highlighting the issue of a knowledge gap among some populations. Also, on this topic, one participant said,

With so many new people moving to the state, the role of UF/IFAS Extension is more critical to each of us than it ever has been before. It’s about information, and as I said before, unbiased information. I think that UF/IFAS Extension, maybe this isn’t the right term to use, but almost needs to market itself a little bit better. Who are they? What can they do to help everyone? What resources are available? I think Extension, despite how wonderful it is, is probably a closely guarded secret.

RQ2: Audience Groups UF/IFAS Extension Should Focus On

UF/IFAS Extension's Broad Audience

When discussing which audiences UF/IFAS Extension should focus on, participants said UF/IFAS Extension was currently trying to reach a large target audience with broad interests. This theme was found in all six focus groups and was identified 14 times throughout all focus groups. Some felt it “impossible for UF/IFAS Extension to be everything to everyone.” One participant noted,

The slogan for UF/IFAS Extension a few years ago was “Solutions for Your Life.” I think that’s too broad. We can’t be everything to everybody. I think it’s important that we focus on things that we can do with excellence, and everything we do has to be done with excellence. In addition to just getting the name out there, I think it’s important to focus on the things that UF/IFAS Extension does with great excellence. It can’t just be a chicken in every pot and all things for all people. It has to be beyond that.

Moreover, a subset of participants thought it was important to reach “hard-to-reach,” non-traditional audiences moving forward into the future. This was mentioned in two focus groups identified 12 times in the analysis. Participants emphasized the fact that UF/IFAS Extension should “focus on those that are not exposed, that do not sit on those boards, and the other producers that maybe are not as connected and connecting with those [audiences].” These conversations entailed thoughts about how reaching non-traditional stakeholders of UF/IFAS Extension was important, as everyone can have a voice in public policy matters during voting periods. Related to this, one participant said, “As we look legislatively going forth, a lot of times it’s going to be those non-traditional stakeholders that have the ears of policy makers, and if they’re supportive of UF/IFAS Extension, that’ll go a long way.”

Within this theme, the topic of marketing and communication was also mentioned frequently because participants considered it difficult to reach “every person in the manner they want to be reached.” Many participants noted UF/IFAS Extension had broad audiences with broad interests that added to the difficulty of communicating and marketing about programs. Several felt it seemed impossible to continue down the path of reaching all audiences and thought UF/IFAS Extension should reflect on the purpose and mission of UF/IFAS Extension and land-grant institutions. A participant said,

It’s hard to see where UF/IFAS Extension needs to be. I think what I have heard is UF/IFAS Extension needs to be communicating in all of the possible ways, to reach all of the possible people, and delivering all of the possible programming to all of the possible clients and customers that may be in different counties. I don’t know how UF/IFAS Extension can do it all without waving some sort of magic wand, but I guess that’s where it boils down to the mission that it is research, education, and Extension.

RQ3: Obstacles For UF/IFAS Extension in The Future

In exploring obstacles that stakeholders saw for UF/IFAS Extension in the future, two main themes presented themselves: (1) agriculture perceived as becoming undesirable in Florida and (2) disconnect with agriculture. In the minds of the researchers, these themes were tangentially related to each other. Both themes were present in the majority of focus groups, and each theme was identified more than 20 times.

Agriculture Perceived as Becoming Undesirable in Florida

The first theme relating to obstacles was a perception that agriculture was becoming undesirable in Florida. Participants felt that Florida was shifting from a state that valued and wanted agricultural operations and rural areas to an urbanized state, where agriculture was considered undesirable by the state and consumers. This theme was identified 28 times throughout all focus groups. Some participant comments were related to the balance of “rural versus urban” within UF/IFAS Extension and within the state. One participant mentioned, “For the past two or three years, kind of in the background, I hear a little noise from rural Floridians about UF/IFAS Extension maybe changing its focus and not paying attention.” Another participant later echoed this feeling saying, “They may forget their roots sometimes ... I’ve heard that as well [out in the rural sector].” Participants felt UF/IFAS Extension may be shifting its focus away from traditional production agriculture and related stakeholders. Some felt this feeling specifically in relation to agricultural policy and the state industries. However, one participant, who works closely with UF/IFAS Extension, voiced dissent, saying UF/IFAS Extension continues to advocate for production agriculture, but stakeholders must see that as populations and counties shift and adapt, so must UF/IFAS Extension. Another participant commented on this transformation, saying, “When we go forth in Florida, which is very quickly becoming more urban than rural, how do we mesh all these industries to ensure the success of our agriculture, which keeps our waters clean, and our pastures green?”

Disconnect with Agriculture

The next theme identified within this research question was a disconnect from agriculture. Participants felt there was a disconnect from the industry in both the general public and government officials. This theme appeared in five out of six focus groups and was identified 22 times throughout all focus groups. In general, participants felt the public and government officials lacked an understanding of agricultural practices and their impacts. Some participants felt there needed to be a consumer education facet of UF/IFAS Extension. Specifically, one participant thought it would be important to spread educational messages to consumers about agriculture and related health and nutrition. “I think it’s important to spread the message, ‘Hey conventional ag isn’t bad. Animal protein isn’t bad.’ At least make sure they’re not just feeding off of the marketing they’re seeing on commercials.”

Moreover, participants felt general consumers thought UF/IFAS Extension was not for them because they do not understand their role in agriculture. This topic was brought up in five focus groups and identified 22 times. On this topic, a participant mentioned,

I don't usually like to speak up and give a complaint if I don't have a suggestion to go with it, but I don't have a suggestion at this point, and this is not just an UF/IFAS Extension problem. It's an agriculture, as a whole, problem that we are good about talking to people in agriculture and in our industry, but not so great at getting outside that, so if we can find a better way to reach outside. ... We're just talking ourselves, we're all nodding our heads, but we're not doing any good if we're not reaching the people that don't know.

Some participants also noted that agriculture is seemingly less represented through elected officials because people are further removed from agriculture. A suggestion on how to combat this came up during the discussion and was related to hosting tours that have producers share their stories and the challenges they face. As a result, consumers that attended would have a better understanding of agriculture. A quote from one participant related to this idea said,

A person who would attend that tour could be likely to strike up a conversation around their dinner table or next time they go out to eat with friends on what they learned, and that is such a critical part in today's world no matter what you do or what industry you are in.

Conclusions, Discussion, & Recommendations

Results from this study shed new light on a need for continued and revamped branding within UF/IFAS Extension. Stakeholders expressed concern that the core mission of UF/IFAS Extension was no longer clear to its traditional stakeholders, which is why branding cannot be a one-time event. As a brand changes and evolves, that brand connection with stakeholders must also grow and evolve to continue the organization's connection to its stakeholders (Kornberger, 2010). Additionally, stakeholders in this study indicated a need for stronger brand awareness of Extension and agriculture within the state by members of the general public and policymakers. This need directly aligns with branding literature in that increasing brand awareness is essential to create a greater shared meaning to communicate with stakeholders (de Chernatony et al., 2013). Moreover, stakeholders in this study had concerns that the focus of UF/IFAS Extension was too broad to allow for a deeper understanding of the brand to the public. This disconnect is concerning for the brand image of UF/IFAS Extension because support for Extension from stakeholders is not possible without a positive perception of the brand's image (Settle et al., 2019). The present study confirms the complexity of branding an organization when efforts need to highlight products, like programming, and services, like soil sampling and pest identification, while also embodying the unseen values and culture of a brand (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009). Additionally, results from this study confirm stakeholders see challenges in gaining public

backing for funding to support the work of agriculture and UF/IFAS Extension (Hoggett, 2006; Campbell, 1999).

The results from this study can be used to improve the brand image of UF/IFAS Extension. It is recommended that UF/IFAS Extension reflect on the focus of UF/IFAS Extension and what stakeholders feel may be too broad. If UF/IFAS Extension decides the mission should continue to be broad, the organization must communicate with stakeholders the need for this broad focus. By inviting stakeholders to engage in the process of planning for the future of UF/IFAS Extension, they are co-creators of the brand and will hold a more favorable attitude toward the brand and be loyal to the brand (Merrilees & Fry, 2002) if they believe their voices were heard in this process. It is recommended that the results of this study, and the brand development work after these results, be shared with stakeholders and communicated as a shared effort through all touchpoints in building a stronger UF/IFAS Extension brand image.

More broadly, it is recommended that Extension communicators and communication units understand the perspectives of UF/IFAS Extension stakeholders. Communicators should seek to develop marketing campaigns and strategies to communicate the value of agriculture to non-traditional audiences. Stakeholders in this study would feel seen and heard through this type of marketing campaign and would prove to be loyal to the brand in a new way (Merrilees & Fry, 2002). Large-scale efforts to market agriculture and, by extension, UF/IFAS Extension may have long-term benefits for legislative initiatives and increased funding for the UF/IFAS Extension organization (Campbell, 1999; Hoggett, 2006).

Implications from this work for other Extension systems and Extension communication, in general, are the need to prioritize marketing and branding for Extension and agriculture on a unified and national level. Seeking to help members of the public, legislators, and future stakeholders understand the value of agriculture and Extension is a large and extremely complex task. Budgets dedicated to marketing are typically low, and a unified effort would help share resources and provide better results.

For those teaching agricultural communications, it is important to teach branding strategies and continued measurement of branding efforts. Students need to understand the value of co-creating brands with stakeholders (Merrilees & Fry, 2002), communicating the values and culture of the organization (Franzen & Moriarty, 2009), and creating positive perceptions and general awareness of a brand (Settle et al., 2019). Instructors should use Extension systems as an example of how brands may have more than one product, service, or location to help students understand the complexity involved in branding a large-scale organization with stakeholders of diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Future research should investigate non-users of Extension and those from diverse audiences and backgrounds to determine the value of Extension beyond traditional stakeholders. Moreover, future work should use different methods of research to make sure all audience segments are

reached in a way that is most convenient to them. Additionally, in a post-pandemic time, research should be conducted in person with audiences, particularly those who may be technologically challenged.

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