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How to Have a Successful Educational Meeting on a Public Issue

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Citizens have the duty and opportunity to help make many group decisions about complex issues. Group decisions are those in which two or more people have a voice or vote. The decision may affect one or more persons individually or as a group. The group decision may be of a local nature such as a change in school tax, or a state problem such as water legislation, or a national issue such as commodity referendum.

Issues that relate to broad national programs such as energy, international trade or other complex subjects are becoming more common. For these types of issues, there must be broad public support before much can be accomplished by legislation.

To make wise decisions or to encourage and support elected representatives in their decision-making requires:

- Assembling facts and information not always available immediately.
- Disseminating this information to stimulate public discussion. Helping to assemble and disseminate information is the purpose of extension educational programs on policy.

The approach used is based upon the philosophy that the final decision on public issues must be left to the individual. Educational tasks preceding this decision are: identifying the real problems, pointing out alternative solutions, and exploring the consequences of each. Using this approach, educational programs can be carried out on controversial issues when adequate educational resources are available. The emphasis here is on the problems and issues affecting agriculture and rural people, but the ideas can be applied to other subjects and audiences.

Who is the audience?

Because not everyone is interested in policy questions, special effort must be given to identify those who are interested in a given topic. Participants should include those already interested and those who may become interested with additional information and insight.

Participants should be identified together with the topic or public issues selected for an extension education program.

Who are the people who have an interest in the topic or a stake in the outcome? Should the focus of educational effort be the town or the township, the county, the region or should it be a multi-regional endeavor?

These questions may have no easy answer. Often the answer is obvious and determined by the density and geographic distribution of those who will have an interest in the public issue. Consultation with other field staff, the regional director and state specialists may be appropriate. In every case, having a clear idea of the audience for which the meeting is planned is essential.

Large crowds are not necessarily the setting for an effective policy meeting. A group of 40 to 50 may be more desirable, especially if they are leaders.

Getting attendance — general long-run efforts

Some general tasks can and ought to be done whether a policy meeting is planned immediately or not:

- Compile a mailing list in each county of leaders who are likely to have an interest in topics considered for public issues programming. Get a list of all the recipients of the Department of Agricultural Economics *Economic and Marketing Information Newsletter* in your county. That can be a good nucleus list.
- Develop a list of all officers in the farm organizations plus their various committees who are concerned with policy issues and are probably looking for information.
- Go over these lists with other regional specialists who may have contacts you do not have. The community development specialist may be able to provide a list of leaders in the League of Women Voters, American Association of University Women, and the Missouri Planning Association. The extension specialist who serves as secretary for the Soil and Water District might help develop a list of leaders especially interested in natural resource policy. Your local government specialist can identify formal and informal leaders in local government and in education. The dairy specialist will know some of the leaders in the dairy industry. The livestock specialist will know the leaders in other animal agriculture.

Continue to compile and add to these lists. This is part of the task of maintaining a readily usable tool kit. The discipline of developing lists is useful as it forces one to know people well or to know those who do know the people. Either way, the result is becoming more knowledgeable about clientele groups with which we should be working.

Regardless of the approach used, the important point is to develop a list of people by county who are a potential audience for educational work in policy — like a mailing list of dairymen, pork producers or other special-interest groups.

Public issues are those resolved by some sort of group action. The immediate impact on an individual usually is limited. Public announcement may be sufficient for promoting a meeting to discuss new technology with immediate application and immediate implications for individual pocketbooks. But don't be surprised that a similar approach for a meeting on the "Public Issues in Agricultural Policy Development" results in an attendance flop. Such a topic is too general and most individuals cannot relate to it.

Planning the topic to mean more to the audience and raising issues in which the potential audience has a stake are key publicity approaches for any extension meeting. These are even more important in meetings dealing with policy issues. Public decisions do have significant impact on groups and individuals; the job is to help them see it.

Getting involvement — short-term efforts

Personal contact is the key to getting attendance. You can make use of mailing lists and write people, but you should personalize letters. Circular letters have limited use for this purpose.

Don't be afraid of repetition or reminders. An initial letter followed by a second letter or a telephone call from a specialist or from a secretary may be useful. Never miss the opportunity to remind your leaders of upcoming events. Do this when you see them in the course of other activities. Do not just tell them a meeting is scheduled, ask them if they are coming, or better still ask them, "You are coming to such and such a meeting, aren't you?" There is no substitute for knowing personally those individuals who naturally, or because of their position in some organization, have an interest in the complex problems facing society.

Another way to get leaders involved is to set up a steering committee in planning and conducting the program. This may be the extension council or another group organized for this special purpose. You also might consider joint sponsorship with some other appropriate organization. The more you can give others the feeling that what is happening is theirs and not just yours, the greater the success of the public issues educational effort will be. Work to get your meeting announced in other organizations' newsletters and at their meetings.

One way to increase the chances of success is to find a local group that will support the program and maybe provide a dinner or refreshments. Meetings where food is served generally seem to go better.

Mass media use

After you have made complete plans for the personalized contact necessary to ensure the involvement of the people, you can go the traditional public announcement and mass media route. Do this and do it well. A personal call on one or more editors may be needed. Mass media coverage can reinforce the personal contact and possibly bring out an additional few not contacted personally.

Do not depend on mass media alone as a way to get people out and involved in public issues educational efforts. You probably will be disappointed if you do.

Time and format

For public issues educational work, no single time of day or format fits all situations. In some settings, all-day meetings with lunch work very well. In others, a late afternoon and evening session with a meal in between seems more appropriate. The meal could be planned together or you could have people eat on their own.

Another approach is to piggyback public issues educational work onto other kinds of programs. For instance, when you have an agricultural technology meeting, perhaps you will also want to look at related agricultural policy and the issues involved.

On other occasions, credit courses are an appropriate way to encourage people to engage in public analysis and participation.

Multiply your efforts

Whatever format you use and however you choose to do it, you will want to multiply your efforts and extend the subject matter as far as possible. If you have visiting state specialists or other speakers assisting with the program, use them on radio and television spots. Make a radio tape to use in your own radio program. Make arrangements ahead of time for the visiting persons to speak to local clubs and organizations. Quite often the local editor welcomes an opportunity for an interview. Such activities will multiply your educational efforts.

Use follow-up news articles so people who were not involved will have a chance to know what went on and perhaps to become interested in participating the next time.

A reminder

Remember that public issues educational efforts are not promotions of a particular point of view. For more detail, review MU publication DM461, "*Defusing*" *Public Decision*. If you follow the approach outlined in this publication, you can make an educational contribution in very controversial areas. You can help people obtain data and better understand complex issues. In turn, they can evaluate proposed solutions made in legislatures or elsewhere. Our founding fathers were aware of the need for a well-informed citizenry. The need has not passed.

Coy G. McNabb, professor-emeritus of Agricultural Economics, helped write this publication.

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