

REACHING THE “ATTENTIVE PUBLIC” WITH DISCUSSION GROUP FACT SHEETS

Summary of Panel Discussion by

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Self-administered discussion groups, a relatively new approach for reaching the alert, active citizenry of a state, the “attentive public,” has been quite successful. The states of Arkansas, Iowa, Montana, New York, and Pennsylvania have completed the discussion phase and are studying the opinion ballots for implications regarding needed action in the state and possible changes in the extension program.

Ohio has completed all preparations and is ready to launch the discussion phase in October. Missouri, North Carolina, and Minnesota are in early stages of development of a similar effort.

Objective

The basic objective of the program is to create an awareness of fundamental public affairs problems and issues confronting the citizenry of the state. The fact sheets are designed to achieve some degree of comprehension of the nature of the economic, social, and political relationships which bear on the issues.

Approach

To be successful this effort must have strong administrative backing from Extension and the university. All organizations and influential groups in the state must know about the program and its objectives, and the ways in which they can contribute. The extension organization must plan the action phase, including organization, publicity, and involvement of organizations and groups.

Some of the activities of the administrative committee include:

1. Prepare a leader handbook for extension workers.
2. Publish a printed discussion leader’s guide.
3. Discuss the proposed activity with the state staff and hold seminars of extension, research, and teaching staffs on the issues.
4. Discuss the proposed activity with county extension personnel, explaining the approach and outlining their role. A whole day is needed for this at district agents conferences fairly early in the planning phase. This activity should be presented as

mainly a shift in program approach and audience rather than a new program.

5. Develop a very comprehensive mass media program—both to publicize the approaching series and to support the series during the actual discussions.
6. Maintain regular and frequent communication with agents for six months before the discussions to keep them informed of various details of the effort.
7. Contact all types of organizations and groups to explain the program and solicit their support and to obtain discussion leaders.

With this kind of preparation to provide momentum for the effort, final success depends on the adequacy of the subject matter. It should:

1. Excite the interest of the participants.
2. Be factual, clear, concise, and challenging.
3. Stimulate questions, a quest for further knowledge, and a desire for action.
4. Explain issues and consequences of alternatives clearly enough that no further explanation is needed by a resource person.

Most of the states tried to reach and involve the total citizenry.

Results

The states using this approach were highly gratified with the results. They learned that adequate organization, good subject matter, and timing are important. New York reached 800 leaders in five counties—their goal. Together Arkansas, Iowa, and Pennsylvania involved 130,000 to 140,000 people and those who have heard about the discussion series continue to request fact sheet kits.

In Arkansas and Pennsylvania, where the emphasis was on growth and adjustment, a summary of opinions on two judgment questions showed that “need of jobs” was regarded as the uppermost community problem. The following problems were rated as about equally important: “inadequate training and training facilities,” “inadequate community leadership,” “inadequate housing,” “loss of population,” and “local finances.”

A feeling of urgency to understand the problems and achieve satisfactory solutions is evident.

Follow-up

The panel expressed the opinion that follow-up to the series was important. Extension should be prepared to do an intensive educational job on specific issues with leaders perhaps through a workshop series. The issues to be treated will depend on problems pointed up in fact sheets. They might include: the process of economic growth, principles of taxation, school consolidation and reorganization alternatives, or approaches to the farm problem.

PART II

Economic Development

