

A BLUEPRINT FOR DESIGNING A SUCCESSFUL EXTENSION PROGRAM: ADVICE FROM SOME MASTER BUILDERS

Kim B. Anderson

The focus of the typical Ph.D. program in agricultural economics is on research. Little emphasis is placed on teaching, and, in most cases, there is no emphasis on extension, thus placing the new extension specialist in a difficult starting position. Even so, the current order or priorities may be appropriate, because an extension specialist must first understand economic theory and then be a capable researcher and teacher to work effectively in an extension program (Hildreth and Armbruster, p. 857).

An extension specialist must be able to communicate both with researchers and his clientele. He must be able to interpret clientele needs to the researcher and research results to the clientele. Thus, previous training in theory, research, and teaching is essential. However, the extension specialist normally learns the methodology for developing and implementing extension programs on the job. Consequently, many new extension specialists establish their programs through trial and error (Brown, p. 861).

This study involved a survey of extension specialists who had constructed and implemented successful agricultural economics programs. Gleaned from their responses were: (1) guidelines for constructing an extension program, (2) an approximate time frame for setting objectives, and (3) advice for achieving the objectives.

THE SURVEY

The survey was not designed to be a random sample of extension specialists. Rather, three extension specialists from three institutions selected 75 "Master" specialists. These Masters received questionnaires and 40 responded. The results might be thought of as a composite case study, based on established extension programs.

A questionnaire was to be answered as if the Master were advising a new extension specialist (agricultural economist). The Masters were asked what objectives should be accomplished in the first six months on the job, the first year, and the first five years. The next few questions probed for good general advice, as well as for

mistakes to avoid. The final questions asked whether research should be conducted by extension specialists and, if applicable, what type. Most Masters answered the questions with general replies.

SURVEY RESULTS

The responses were organized to reflect the thoughts of the respondents collectively rather than individually; however, individual responses that summarized broad concepts are quoted.

First Six Months

The first six months were described as a time of orientation and the beginning of a lifelong educational period. A novice extension specialist was advised to continue the learning process, not only economic theory and research techniques, but also about the clientele that would be the market for his educational programs. Survey results indicate that the major thrust of the first six months should be to learn to write for extension audiences, begin to learn about the potential clientele, begin to study the relationship of the subject matter area to state needs, learn how extension works, develop a filing system, and set up preliminary program objectives.

Forty-eight percent of the respondents indicated that effective writing is important in the first six months to aid in the dissemination of information and for professional advancement. They indicated that the individual's own dissertation might be a starting point. Research results from the dissertation need to be conveyed to potential users, and, in the process, the new specialist may become acquainted with extension outlets for research results including the local media. The Masters indicated that getting to know the local newspaper editors and radio and television news broadcasters was a high priority activity.

To serve and educate, the specialist must know the clientele. Seventy-eight percent of the Masters stressed the importance of meeting and

Kim B. Anderson is Extension Agricultural Economist, Department of Agricultural Economics, University of Kentucky, Lexington.

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learning about clientele, and 63 percent suggested traveling the state as the starting point. This orientation travel allows the beginning extension specialist to observe the people and their resources. One Master stated, "Getting to know the leaders in 'your' industry is worth making several detours." The process of concentrating on an industry's production and marketing techniques and delving into the industry's past and present problems aids in the development of a perspective for present and future needs. New extension specialists were advised to concentrate on discovering opportunities for applying their expertise and training to help the clientele make better decisions, because, while the clientele can assemble economic data, the specialist's contribution is derived from his economic training. The Masters emphasized the importance of economic theory in conducting extension programs.

Some Masters suggested that new extension specialists travel the state and present a productive initial program. The program should be simple, interesting, and potentially useful to the clientele. One Master explained, "Don't pretend to know a lot about a lot of things. Just let them know you have something they need."

Thirty-eight percent of the Masters advised learning about the workings of extension: Who makes the decisions? Who sets the priorities? On what is the professional and monetary reward system based? Quoting one Master, "Extension programs and organizations vary tremendously from state to state. To obtain answers to these questions, talk to the old hands."

Information is needed to develop, implement, and maintain an extension program. Moreover, extension specialists are required to make periodic reports to show program achievements. The Masters suggested organizing a comprehensive filing system, which should contain one's own publications, plan of work and work calendar, personal contacts, and a systematic record of reference material.

Near the end of the first six months, the beginning specialist was encouraged to outline a set of preliminary objectives, with emphasis on high payoff programs. The Masters indicated that these objectives should include, at a minimum, the extension program(s) to be developed and a publication schedule (the latter providing tangible evidence of progress).

First Year

Within the first year, the specialist was encouraged to be reacting to immediate clientele demands and needs as perceived by county agents and specific clientele, coordinating program activities with colleagues in the department and college, becoming involved in professional activities, developing long-range program objectives, and maintaining a record of accomplishments.

The Masters (43%) suggested that, while reacting to immediate clientele demands, a specialist should be establishing a sound liaison with intended audiences to determine their attitudes. These attitudes are useful in the selection of a teaching approach and the material to be presented.

A specialist was advised to pull together a solid theoretical base, conduct applied research to complement the extension program, and publish the results. If possible, he should coordinate his work with researchers, or prepare to complete the research himself. Said one Master: "Don't sit around and wait for researchers to do it—it may not get done."

Seventy-five percent of the Masters stressed the importance of a delivery system. The specialist was advised to be tops in some aspect of delivery, such as in-person, written, or through the media. Specialists were encouraged to visit with experienced colleagues relative to their philosophies and approaches to extension teaching and delivery. The Masters indicated that problems should be discussed with colleagues, program leaders, and administrators.

A specialist was advised to relate to the departments and colleges represented. Fifty-three percent of the Masters suggested meeting and working with other specialists. New specialists were encouraged to help other specialists with their programs, and to learn how to use their aid effectively. Other specialists have programs that need an economist's touch; always be generous with co-authorships; doing so will yield short-run payoffs in more joint publications and build long-term relationships. One Master advised "Be inconspicuously active."

Thirty-eight percent of the Masters recommended the development of individual long-range program objectives. Several Masters stressed that the key words are "your own." "Don't try to follow in somebody else's footsteps," another advised. New extension specialists were advised to determine the appropriate subject matter and teaching approach that suited them. Furthermore, the Masters recommended that specialists communicate their program priorities to relevant colleagues, secure moral and financial support from extension administrators, and develop a schedule of outlets for seasonal news articles and professional publications.

To maintain a working knowledge of extension activities in other states and organizations, 63 percent of the Masters recommended involvement in professional activities. A specialist should know what extension programs are being developed and what research is being conducted. The Masters felt that involvement in professional associations and regional committees facilitated the sharing of information and techniques.

The Masters emphasized the importance of

having a record of accomplishments. Tangible achievement records were rated as indispensable by most respondents.

First Five Years

During the first five years, the extension specialist should have developed and established an on-going program based on an assessment of real clientele needs and opportunities, have established a strong writing and mass media outlet program, and have provided expertise for problem solving.

One Master advised, "You should not specialize in more than two areas." "Become an authority. Know the problems and opportunities better than anyone else." It is also important to develop and hold administrative support; a minimum of specialized areas allows the establishment of leadership and support.

A communication system is needed to reach clientele quickly and easily. However, effective writing requires more than the mere ability to write. To reach the right audience, the specialist was advised to learn where to publish and who to contact; thus, there should be a relationship with television, radio, newspaper, and magazine professionals, as well as professional, extension, and mass media outlets. Fifty percent of the Masters indicated that the mass media is the most efficient method of disseminating important types of extension information.

Additional Advice; Mistakes to Avoid

The Masters were asked: If you had given a new extension specialist the above advice, what additional counsel would you give him? What mistakes have you made that the young specialist should avoid?

Additional advice was categorized as suggestions concerning the specialist's professional approach to developing an extension program; and the specialist's attitude toward himself, his family, and his clientele.

One Master quoted Peter F. Drucker: "Work from strengths, your own and those of your environment." Then he suggested: "If you are a good speaker, put yourself on the road. If you are good at feasibility studies, do some. If you are not a good speaker, don't worry about it; be a good organizer. Look for growth areas. The people need help."

Credibility with clientele must be maintained; never risk credibility on inaccurate, incomplete, or outdated information. "Be totally and completely honest in everything you do," warned one Master. Extension specialists become public figures, and any intellectual dishonesty will eventually surface; therefore, programs must be based on sound economic theory, logic, and data.

Extension specialists were admonished to always know who the audience is—the county agent, the farmer, the agribusinessman, and so on. Meet their needs and listen to them; not all wisdom is at the university; learn from the clientele.

The Masters warned the beginning extension specialist to have a strong belief in what he (she) was doing. Furthermore, they advised the extension economist to not underestimate the difficulty of a job, to maintain a positive attitude, and to "get back up, if conditions have gotten you down (i.e., negativism drags others down with you)." They indicated that the specialist's work should be enjoyable, challenging, or at a minimum, interesting.

Several Masters warned: "Don't become a suitcase specialist. You have a family and thus a responsibility to them." Another advised, "Remember to give your family first priority. An equitable division of time between job and family produces dividends for both."

The mistake listed most frequently—by one-fourth of the Masters—was not saying "no." Say "no" when there is not time to do a complete job. Time must be managed wisely. "Don't spread yourself too thin. Keep goals reasonable and don't try to move too fast as a professional extension specialist." Operate on a controlled schedule and establish time to maintain academic knowledge.

With regard to mistakes to avoid, one Master stated: "Unless it cannot be avoided, in maintaining your professional integrity, be careful not to offend people with whom you may have to work later." Others suggested: "Don't be too narrow in your initial thinking about future program directions." The respondents advised new extension specialists to not take their work too seriously. However, the specialist must feel the importance of his work; he should recognize strong and weak points, utilize his strengths, and work on his weaknesses.

The Masters indicated that another mistake consisted of trying to establish a program without adequate financial support. "Financial support enables you to operate your programs on a quicker, smoother, and more effective basis." It was suggested that a long-range program be taken to the clientele for financial support.

Research Requirements

The questionnaire referred to earlier contained two questions related to the extension specialist's conducting research: (1) Should the extension specialist be involved in or conduct research? and (2) What type of research programs should the extension specialist undertake?

Responses indicated that research should be conducted to complement an extension program, to maintain credentials and credibility in the dis-

cipline and expertise in the body of theory, and for professional rewards.

The Masters stated that research provides required materials, data, and analyses for answering questions and solving clientele problems; through research, the specialist may obtain a recognized expertise among his colleagues, and gain needed research and administrative support. The specialist-researcher will also be in a better position to evaluate the latest research and information.

"As you develop and conduct an extension program, you will find that some research results are unavailable." The Masters explained: "To get these results, you must obtain the cooperation of your research colleagues or conduct the research yourself." The latter had proven to be an area of frustration for the respondents. A Master stated: "The type of research needed by extension specialists does not always interest researchers nor will it always produce sufficient results for professional publication."

The necessity of conducting research was succinctly explained by one Master who said, "You can't sell out of an empty wagon—in the long run you must fill it yourself." Another stated: "A coordinated effort between extension and research professionals proves to be the most effective and efficient method in most cases. While a coordinated effort is not always possible, coop-

eration is definitely better than conflict between two well-motivated people."

Seventy-five percent of those answering specified that specialists should conduct applied research that enhances their program. Some specified short-term, pragmatic projects and research not carried on by others. Two Masters suggested that extension specialists not shy away from basic research.

SUMMARY

Advice to the novice extension specialist can be summarized with the following Master's statement:

"In relation to your objectives and related to professionalism, take those steps within the time periods indicated with which you feel comfortable in leading you toward being a professional. Opportunism is easy to detect and it inevitably detracts. Sincerity, a willingness to work, an obvious desire to help, a concern with objectivity, and insatiable desire for data and factual support of a position, a willingness to say 'I don't know' if that is the situation—all these attributes are easily detected. They go far in establishing a firm foundation for professionalism in extension."

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