Why Do Producers Attend or Do Not Attend Extension Meetings?

Johnnie R. Westbrook  
Virginia Tech Agricultural and Extension Education Graduate Research Assistant

Nancy K. Franz  
Virginia Tech Professor/Extension Specialist Program Development  
Agricultural and Extension Education

Fred Piercy  
Virginia Tech Associate Dean of Graduate Studies and Research  
College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences

Joseph Donaldson  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville Extension Specialist Program Planning and Evaluation

Robert Richard  
Seven Oaks Consulting

Why use Meetings to Teach/Educate

Extension meetings can be used to effectively educate clientele, disseminate information, determine educational needs, and solve problems. In addition, Extension meetings provide an opportunity for agents and specialists to meet agricultural producers, establish credibility, and learn with clients. Producers are more likely to attend meetings if they know and trust the agents and specialists facilitating the meetings (Tubene & Holder, 2001).

Extension agents and specialists should ask producers the ideal time for meetings. Timing is essential because producers will not attend meetings during planting and harvesting seasons. Producers are inclined to attend meetings if they believe the information presented will address specific needs, improve farm profitability and sustainability, or make farming easier (Torrell, Bruce, & Kvasnicka, 1999).

Recent Research on Producers: Meeting Attendance/Motivation

Twelve focus groups were held with 94 producers in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Virginia to discuss their preferred learning methods and what that means for Cooperative Extension program development and delivery. Each participant completed a questionnaire consisting of 25 learning methods. They were asked to check “prefer” or “do not prefer” for each learning method. In addition, producers were asked why they attend or do not attend Extension meetings.

Producers attend Extension meetings for various reasons. Those most often cited were:

- To learn about problems relevant to our situation.
- To learn new skills and production practices
- To benefit one or more segments of the farm enterprise
- A meal is served
The meeting is held in the winter to avoid planting and harvesting
Socialization with other producers and experts
Friends attend
To attain certification or licensing (e.g., pesticide license)
To learn from a knowledgeable and credible presenter
To develop a trusting relationship with the presenter
A meeting place located not too far from home
The opportunity for a hands-on demonstration of practices

Producers will not attend Extension meetings for the following reasons:
The meeting place is too far from home
The producer is too busy
Too much information is presented
The information presented is irrelevant to their farming operation
The information presented is too technical
The information is not presented with enough detail for adoption
The producer’s short attention span
Shy producers do not like group interaction
Competing family obligations
The meeting is not a top priority
The meeting includes only a non-interactive lecture or PowerPoint

How can Agents and Specialists Improve Extension Meetings?
Based on the findings, Extension agents and specialists should consider the following factors when planning and conducting meetings: (a) focus on producers’ needs, (b) present relevant information in a timely manner, (c) involve knowledgeable and credible presenters, (d) provide opportunities for socialization, (e) plan meetings that don’t interfere with planting and harvesting, (f) utilize diverse teaching methods, and (g) consider a central location to reduce travel for producers.

Conclusion
Many Extension agents and specialists prefer to disseminate information to farmers through meetings. Extension meetings are effective if agents and specialists select an appropriate time and location, consider the needs of the producers, and provide relevant and beneficial information to improve farm profitability and sustainability. Additionally, Extension agents and specialists should consider factors that prevent farmers from attending meetings (e.g., timing, location, technical information, and short attention span). Extension meetings are a viable means to reaching a large population but Extension agents and specialists need to invest time and effort into planning and conducting effective meetings.

References