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INTERNATIONAL TRADE EDUCATION: THE SOUTH CAROLINA EXPERIENCE

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The importance of international trade to U.S. agriculture has been well documented. Why then is the market for Extension education programs in international trade somewhat weak and variable?

Problem: Education programs in international trade are of two basic types: (1) Those aimed at providing a basic understanding of international trade concepts, and (2) those that are designed to provide insights and alternatives when a particular problem or issue arises.

Type I Programs

The Extension educator has two strikes against him in pursuing programs in international trade aimed at increasing basic understanding. True, education is good, a goal in itself, and contributes to a more rewarding life. But education is both a consumption good and an investment good, and we are in a very competitive market for information, particularly for consumption goods.

As an investment good, international trade education also runs into problems. The more traditional clientele such as farmers, producer groups, rural residents, local leaders, and often state leaders and policy makers, have a difficult time assessing the potential return on such an investment.

These groups can relate to and see potential returns from additional training in farm management, agricultural finance, marketing strategies, etc. They can use the information gained either directly or indirectly to enhance their economic position, improve business performance, or plan for future growth. However, they find difficulty applying the increased knowledge gained in international trade programs to their business or their economic status. They visualize even greater problems in making input into or influencing decisions about international trade. In a nutshell, international trade is viewed as beneficial and important to agriculture, but very aggregate, abstract, and somewhat untouchable.

The attitude that prevails for the traditional clientele is transferred to county Extension workers. County Extension programs tend to re-

flect the problems, attitudes, and needs of the traditional clientele. In turn, the demand for inservice training reflect these same factors. Where does that leave international trade education programs? In short, they are relegated to low priority status — not because of the unimportance of the area, but rather because of their abstract nature when compared to local needs and attitudes.

Type II Programs

In Type II programs, different clientele groups are seeking information concerning the potential impacts of a current or pending policy decision or situation on their economic well being or philosophical position. Frequently, they are also searching for alternatives and their differential impacts.

Clientele groups vary due to vested interests or political or philosophical positions. Thus, programs addressed to different groups must focus on the issue as perceived by the group in question. While there remains concern on the part of clientele groups as to how they input or influence the decision or situation, the level of concern is high enough to stimulate the search for understanding and information.

An example of Type II programs were those designed to explain the impacts of grain embargoes. These programs were issue oriented, developed and conducted at the teachable moment because people were concerned, and permitted instructors to explore alternatives and their impacts (free trade, protection, export subsidies, the relationship between domestic and trade policy, trade agreements, etc.).

Clientele: One of the most perplexing problems in international trade education is clientele discovery. Different groups are interested in different aspects of international trade often for different and sometimes conflicting reasons. Yet in most cases the clientele group is interested because they perceive that trade impacts upon them in some definable way, and they are searching to understand and to influence.

Both traditional and nontraditional Extension clientele groups are potential consumers of international trade education. In fact, we have discovered that the demand for programs by non-agricultural audiences is frequently greater than for agricultural audiences. This arises for two reasons: (1) non-agricultural audiences want to understand the contribution of agricultural trade to balance-of-trade problems, food prices, potential scarcities, international politics, etc., and (2) they more frequently seem to look for diverse programs in areas that have "sex appeal."

Clientele are also "recruited" by articles on trade issues in local and state media, short TV and radio programs that key on certain trade issues or facts (agriculture's balance of trade), and speeches to local groups on subjects in which international trade can be a part of the program. The key is to address issues or problems that appeal to al-

ternative audiences. Increased soybean production in Brazil may interest farmers and grain traders but has little appeal to the housewife. Many issues may appeal to several audiences albeit for different reasons.

Basic International Trade Education Programs

Almost all of the basic programs have been what we have termed "piggy back" programs. That is, we integrated international trade into: (1) outlook programs (both state and local) by relating the importance of the foreign component of the demand for commodities and the competition in world commodity markets from alternative suppliers; (2) programs designed to explore the farm problem by relating the importance of trade and its impacts; (3) agricultural policy programs by exploring the relationship between domestic policy and trade policy or market inability; (4) programs on food prices and inflation; and (5) commodity programs particularly for those commodities where the market is significantly influenced by foreign demand and/or competition, such as tobacco.

The most successful inservice training program dealing with international trade concepts was conducted as part of an inservice training program on "Marketing: Concepts and Strategies."

Another successful program was sponsored by the Southern Extension Public Affairs Committee. A conference, "International Trade and Southern Agriculture: Problems and Potentials," was conducted for agricultural leadership in the southern states. The program included sessions on "The Basic Economics of Trade" and the "Mechanics of Trade." Not surprisingly, the participants responded more enthusiastically to the latter session because it related better to business management practices with which they were familiar. While they were interested in the "why" of trade, the "how to" was both more familiar and represented more of an educational investment good.

Issue Oriented Programs

Probably the most stimulating, enthusiastic, and demanding audiences for international trade education result in programs designed to address specific issues. Such programs are conducted in response to a demand for information about some type of interference with trade in agricultural commodities.

The most successful programs were conducted in response to: trade embargoes, issues on wheat-for-oil (the food cartel to offset the power of the oil cartel), proposals by some farm organizations to restrict trade via high domestic price supports, the relationship between exports and food prices or inflation, use of agricultural exports as an international political tool, or a concern by groups about protecting "our markets from cheap imports."

In each case people have opinions and are interested. The news media has performed a service in establishing the "teachable moment" criteria for a successful program. By employing the "issue, alternative, consequence" policy education model, programs were developed that utilized education on basic concepts as a method to explore the issue of concern. Issues differed by clientele group, but the basic concept education remained an integral part of the program. While the possible consequences of certain alternatives, e.g. protectionism, were not frequently in keeping with the preconceived ideas of a clientele group, the ensuing discussion frequently served as an effective educational tool.

For example, during the height of the energy crisis, when the wheat-for-oil issue was being debated, we probably conducted as many programs, wrote as many articles and completed as many radio and TV programs on international trade as during any other period. We reached many different and concerned clientele groups with effective and well-received programs that addressed a current issue with sound economic reasoning.

Future Programs

While it was necessary to piggy back many international trade education programs during the past decade, the results have been positive. We currently have an Extension faculty position with a concentration in international trade. The position was created through the Agricultural Committee of the State Senate in response to a committee mandate to increase the educational effort in international trade.

It is my understanding that several other states in the Southeast have also added positions with a concentration in international trade education. Thus, it seems that past efforts have at least made people more aware of the need for expanded educational programs in this critical area. The result has been to legitimize international trade education work.

The individual who occupies our new position will be responsible for an expanded educational program with producers, producer groups, agribusiness, consumers, and policymakers. He or she also will work closely with the South Carolina Development Board, the South Carolina Ports Authority, farm organizations, consumer groups, and others. The individual will coordinate with other faculty on integrated program efforts as well as initiating both Type I and Type II programs in international trade.

Future programs, particularly for traditional clientele, need more emphasis on the mechanics of trade. While we do not feel as comfortable in this area, the clientele is seeking information, and we can serve as a catalyst.

Exporting products embedding non-renewable or partially renewable resources in return for import products that are based on labor, technology, or renewable resources is likely to become an issue for several clientele groups. This is an issue similar to that addressed by OPEC.

To be effective, future international trade programs must concentrate on critical issues or on concepts or methods from which the targeted clientele group can reasonably expect a return on their investment.