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Realizing Your Potential as an Agricultural Economist in Extension :

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MARKETING: THE GOOD

Discussion of a paper presented by
Roland D. Smith, Texas A&M University

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I consider the invitation to participate in this workshop a real privilege for two reasons. One, it is the first such workshop in the history of the AAEEA and is indicative of the growing recognition that Extension is achieving in the Association and in the profession. Two, it is a privilege to be involved in the marketing efforts of Extension, because better management and marketing is seen by many as the current economic savior of farmers.

Marketing receives high priority on lists of needed programs. For example, the National Extension Committee of the Joint Council on Food and Agricultural Sciences includes marketing as one of six "extremely important priorities." But, in spite of the increased talk about marketing, there is little increase in resources. Are our administrators prejudiced against marketing programs? After all many of them do not have backgrounds in economics. Or could it be that they are searching for some marketing programs that can really deliver a useful product. Given the rank of marketing in lists of priority programs for the 1980s, I think they're looking for good programs. That is one reason why this workshop is so important. We need to establish some models and guidelines for developing and conducting challenging marketing programs, and we need to do a better job of merchandising those programs.

I think Roland Smith has made an excellent start in identifying the characteristics of outstanding market programs. If I wrote the paper I probably would have organized his "critical program concepts" a little differently. Roland admits they are not "listed in any particular order of importance." Everyone in this room would probably have a different structure and we could spend a lot of time arguing over words. I think it would be more fruitful, however, if I provide some additional ideas. I will do that by highlighting his comments and adding some additional ones.

First, Roland notes that outstanding Extension marketing programs evolve from careful planning and innovative development. We've all heard this before: needs assessment; objectives; an educational strategy that takes advantage of "teachable moments"--we certainly have some of those moments today; clientele support; involvement of local Extension staff.

Second, good materials. An outstanding program translates complex concepts into useful tools. Roland notes that "most successful programs are known outside the originating state." I would amplify that idea by saying the materials are complete, enabling other Extension staff, even selected clientele, to effectively use the program. The materials may include background information, overheads, teaching suggestions, a list

of resources, student worksheets, examinations, etc. Why? One person or a select team can hold only a limited number of meetings. Well developed materials enable greater multiplication of their efforts. They enable a program to go on without its creators, so the creators can use their abilities elsewhere.

Third, and closely related, effective educational methods. A variety of methods can be used. As a guide, I still look to an act written in 1914 that established the Extension Service. Smith-Lever says Extension is "to aid in diffusing among the people of the United States useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture and home economics, and to encourage the application of the same." It's not enough that we be a fountain of knowledge. We must use methods that lead to application. We face increasing competition in the information dissemination market. Hence, we have to capitalize on our uniqueness. We have to seek effective decisionmaking. J. Paxton Marshall, Virginia Tech, says the product of Extension is "decisions." An outstanding Extension program, therefore, disseminates information in such a way that it causes people to make decisions--good decisions that improve the well-being of people. An outstanding Extension marketing program has to be more than a "one night stand." It usually takes time to lead people to make good decisions.

Fourth, an outstanding program is well targeted. It identifies the appropriate clientele and zeroes in on their opinion leaders. Roland notes how to make effective use of producer associations and other organizations for program planning and implementation.

Fifth, cooperation with other Extension staff. I agree that its important to have administration support and county agent support. It also is important to consult with other specialists. As I read between the lines of Roland's paper, however, I think he assumes a program is largely the work of an individual. I'm guilty of that too. It's a lot easier to crank out a program on my own than to coordinate with several others. As a result, producers are faced with a variety of specialists, each one knowing the intricate details of his subdiscipline but somewhat unaware of how it relates to other subjects. Extension personnel (and others) are bombarding producers with a growing array of specialized information, sometimes leading to conflicting recommendations. Producers need help integrating all that information so they can make good decisions. An outstanding Extension program exhibits genuine teamwork--joint program development and implementation, involving all levels of Extension and an interdisciplinary approach, not just consulting with a few people for ideas. But teamwork is foreign to agricultural economists. We are individuals by nature, by training, and by conditioning. The promotion of individualism is real but often very subtle. We work in a system that rewards individuals, not teams. In a team effort, the leader usually gets most of the credit. The lead author gets the credit in promotion reviews. Even in the AAEEA Distinguished Extension Programs no more than one of the two awards may go to a team. Teamwork is often talked about, but until we create a more favorable system of incentives, it will never amount to much.

Sixth, an outstanding individual. To be consistent with my last point, I will modify Roland's concept to say an outstanding Extension program has outstanding people. Roland has identified several excellent traits we would expect to find in these people; but in a team effort it is not necessary for all traits to be found in the one person.

While developing my thoughts for this paper, I asked other National Program Leaders for characteristics of outstanding Extension programs. Dixon Hubbard in Animal Science was quick to point out the real leaders are not apparent. They work behind the scenes, planning and scheming to create broad support or ownership of a program. Some examples he gave were the dairy herd and beef herd improvement programs, even the Soil Conservation Service. Programs with that kind of success take teamwork and time.

Seventh, Roland notes that the authors of outstanding programs demonstrate professionalism. They are up to date on research developments and know how to apply them. They are objective, even when working closely with producer organizations and others.

Finally, I must add one more category--results. An outstanding program must give evidence that an excellent Extension product has been delivered. There has to be evidence of good decision-making by producers and other clientele. True results are difficult to measure. Our old measures are inadequate: the number of meetings held, number of attendees, miles traveled, pounds of paper distributed. They do not give any clue about effective decision-making. The federal, state, and local governments that control our purse strings want to know how people benefit from our programs. We need to measure increased understanding and use of marketing alternatives, use and impact of market planning. Has income increased, or have risks been managed better? In other words, have our program objectives for clientele been accomplished?

Roland Smith has discussed a number of useful concepts for identifying outstanding Extension marketing programs. To his list I have added:

1. An emphasis on a complete teaching package so others can effectively use the program and multiply the efforts of the original authors.
2. An emphasis on the unique role of Extension to bring about decisionmaking rather than just disseminate information.
3. An emphasis on documented results of benefits to people.
4. An emphasis on genuine teamwork.

You now have two people's opinions. We look forward to your input into this important topic of establishing guidelines and models of outstanding Extension marketing programs.

