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Realizing Your Potential as an Agricultural Economist in Extension

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LESSONS FROM THE PAST
FOR
EXTENSION MARKETING PROGRAMS OF THE FUTURE

COMMENTS

by
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Dr. John Ikerd did a great job of sharing his view of both the good and the bad in his assignment to look at the ugly side of Extension. In general, I only add my "Amen."

John chose to focus on the agricultural producer and on marketing in particular. He readily admitted that there may well be a broader view. John also took a swipe at the misdirection of past Extension programs, particularly those of the 1950s and 1960s which were oriented toward the marketing channels beyond the farm gate. He indicated that allocation of resources toward the marketing channels may have been to the detriment of "producer oriented marketing." That is one point of view.

Another view may be much closer to that expounded by Dr. Ikerd--where he praised the current trend in Extension to jointly evaluate both the production and marketing management decisions faced by the producer. John implied that we can no longer isolate production from marketing.

I agree, but, I would add that the producer in today's world can also not ignore the economics concerning the processing and distribution of farm products beyond the farm gate. The structure and conduct within these marketing channels may well influence the farm level production and marketing decisions. In fact, most alternatives to cash marketing, such as forward contracting, basis contracting, or options, may well dictate the production practices necessary to meet contract specifications such as time, size, weight, and quality.

I'm reminded of a friend who raises potatoes in Southern Oregon. Before he plants, he needs to analyze the supply and demand situation for both fresh and processed potatoes. When evaluating the fresh market, he needs to consider returns via sales to potato packers versus selling direct to wholesalers or the hotel and restaurant institutional trade. If he decides to sell direct, should he sell bulk or packaged, and by what size. These are a large number of estimates--but many of these will affect the quantity of each variety that he plants. He cannot separate his marketing from his production decisions.

In the same vein--when one focuses on the microeconomic aspects of production and marketing, it is easy to overlook the macroeconomic issues that are becoming increasingly important. Since most agricultural products are traded in an international market, the current oil glut, the value of the dollar, the current level of interest rates, or a new "Russian grain deal," may offset or change the best microeconomic oriented plan.

Let me change gears--John indicated that market outlook can be viewed as a misdirection for Extension. This is the issue of service versus competing with private industry, and our record of accuracy. I'm sure Dr. Ikerd has used the same arguments that I am going to make concerning this issue, and that is the University or USDA may well be more objective than many private sources. Accuracy is one of those nebulous things that is often compared to an ideal, rather than to the next best alternative. In Oregon, Extension is responsible for coordination of market news within the state. Both outlook and market news, when accompanied with a responsible educational program, offers an excellent manner of "getting your educational program into the producer's door."

I want to congratulate John on moving from what I consider minor--ugly facts that Extension failed to face, to an issue often overlooked--the fact that Extension is education. John's synopsis of Malcolm Knowles's work defining adult education, with respect to life-centered and problem-centered characteristics, is important, and is an orientation we in academia sometimes forget. I have been guilty of taking my classroom notes, and with minor revisions conducted an "Extension program"--not considering the knowledge base of my audience or if my material met a felt need of the audience. John suggested that we consider both problem-centered programs and life-centered programs, and that we also should combine these programs with the current wealth of new and old program delivery systems. I only agree with John and fully support his position.

John--I think you had to dig for the ugly--and so would I. We can always do better, and we all want to do better or we wouldn't be here. Thank you John, for sharing what won't be ugly--but will be beautiful--if we only do as you suggest.