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Assessment of Program Delivery to Small Farmers: Fax Information Center System at Satellite Locations

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Abstract

Due to the many variables associated with small and part-time farmers, such as widely ranging educational levels and available time applied to farming, effectively providing extension information to this group of farmers can be quite difficult. The use of innovative, program delivery methods for reaching small and part-time farmers has been tried in several North Carolina counties with variable success. One means of reaching these special audiences is a satellite information center at agribusiness or other locations away from the extension office itself. A fax request system prominently placed directly in these satellite locations has produced widely variable results in level of use from the perspective of requests for information originating from the centers. Yet, where the centers have been used for both an information request system and an informational bulletin board with timely information sent to the centers from Cooperative Extension for posting on the bulletin boards, the results have been very favorable. While many factors have been found to affect the success of individual locations, the fax satellite centers appear to be able to provide a niche for innovative program delivery by extension and can have highly beneficial side effects of positively marketing the extension programs in the respective counties.

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Introduction

The Cooperative Extension Service is responsible for providing educational information to farmers as well as to other designated audiences. Over the years, the core farm population has diminished as a result of the consolidation of farms and other inherent changes such as technological developments. In addition to this reduction in numbers of farmers, economic necessities and other personal preferences have caused many smaller farmers and others to continue to farm on a part-time basis while holding employment in some off-farm capacity. These changing dynamics of the core farm audiences of extension have necessitated a shifting from the traditional face-to-face means of program delivery to other more innovative means for reaching many members of this audience.

In an effort to address these changing circumstances relating to small and part-time farmers, a special project was conceived in North Carolina three years ago to test a creative way to reach this audience segment. The project sought to test the usefulness of a fax-based, satellite, information request system. This system would allow the farmers to request via fax any information they may need relating to specific subjects. An initial grant was obtained from the United State Department of Agriculture (USDA) small farms program funds to implement this pilot project, and subsequent grants have been successful for continuing to test adequately and expand the project to determine its viability as a realistic means for reaching these special audiences.

Description of Project

The project was initially implemented in three North Carolina counties. Those counties are in the coastal, Piedmont, and mountain regions of the state. With this wide geographic dispersion, it was felt that any regional variations in preferences or use would be discovered as well. Three counties participated initially, while five were involved during the second year. In the third and final year of the project, seven counties were involved.

In each county, at least one cooperating agribusiness was enlisted as a cooperator for locating a fax information request center directly inside the business location. Generally, interest was shown by one or more potential sites, and cooperators were reasonably easy to recruit, with some even installing dedicated telephone lines to assure access at all times to their customers. Grant funds were used to purchase fax machines for each location that did not have a fax machine or for those who did not wish to use their business fax for

this purpose. Even some of the extension offices were provided with machines in those counties which had not previously installed a fax machine.

At each center, the extension agent developed a special request form that would be located directly adjacent to the fax machine itself. Also, at each location, a special backdrop was supplied that had Cooperative Extension's logo as well as the catchy title, "Fax'd Facts Fast." This supporting structure also had bold instructions on how to use the system. Special pockets were provided on the backdrop that contained instructions as well as the actual request forms. Results of the initial efforts demonstrated a need for more sturdy backdrops, and three different types were secured for this purpose. Ultimately, however, the quality and type of backdrop has appeared to have little if any effect on the use of the system.

Each of the cooperating agribusinesses provided prominent locations in its establishment for the fax center and agreed to be an information resource for giving customers instructions for making requests, in the event that they needed any. Also, for those counties who chose to develop the two-way communications mode for information posting, the cooperation was especially evident. Enthusiasm was initially high among both the extension agents and the cooperators relating to this innovative means of making extension information readily accessible in a satellite location which farmers frequented. However, in an expanded thrust during 1997, one county completely failed in being able to locate a single location, while another one nearby had the greatest success yet experienced with the project, reaching hundreds of the intended audience with very timely and critical information during the growing season by sending information to the satellite centers for posting.

Project Results

As indicated, the project has produced variable results. Some were pleasant surprises, while others were variable, or even disappointing.

Perhaps the most disappointing result was the total failure of one county to gain any interest among those locations that the agents felt would be appropriate locations. Also, another county that was in the initial study had continued to work behind the scenes to establish a county-government-supported location in a remote mountain village community center, and this center is now operating. Perhaps, most importantly, the fax machines were used at all established locations for requesting information from Cooperative Extension. However,

the average number of requests per location generally ranged from two to three per day during the growing season, to one or two per week at other periods of the year. Overall use of the request component was approximately one per day for all locations. For these request locations, the primary subject involved vegetable garden or lawn care questions.

As an added component of the system, Madison County, which joined the project in the final year, implemented its system essentially as a means for sending "hot topic" information, such as plant disease control, via fax to the satellite centers for posting on a bulletin board in the place of business. This means of delivery resulted in as many as 200 persons per week per location stopping in to review the latest information that they posted. Madison also offered the information request component as a feature of the system, but this component was of little value, in that it had almost no use. The transmission and posting of "hot topic" information to the satellite locations was an added dimension of the project in 1997, and was only tested in Madison County.

Among the pleasant aspects of this program was the continuing positive marketing of extension that the project provided. Both newspapers and radio stations saw this program delivery approach as novel, and continued to provide coverage in a highly positive light. Some of the locations were prominently published with captions such as "Something New: Garden fax," to "Satellite Center Opens: Fast fax extension office answers questions through satellite center."

A similar positive level of interest was described by site managers as being exhibited by their customers as well. Even though many customers did not use the system for making requests, they made many positive comments to the managers as to the efforts extension was making to serve their needs more effectively. Also, appreciation was expressed by the customers to the businesses hosting the sites. Thus, as a positive marketing tool, the centers were highly effective for both extension and the agribusinesses in creating positive public opinion toward extension and the cooperators. Perhaps the greatest testament to the success of the centers that posted incoming "hot topic" information from extension was the registering of complaints from the sites and clientele when the flow of such "hot topic" information slowed or was no longer needed.

Conclusion

The fax request system has been successful in that it opened avenues for new ways of requesting and receiving extension

information. There appears to be adequate dimension to the concept of satellite centers whereby local applications can be made that best fit the needs and wishes of those persons involved. They have shown that more than one center can be successful, even though rate of usage for making requests may be low. Also, the dimension provided by making the information flow in both directions seems to be especially valuable. The simple matter of taking the additional step of arranging for a bulletin board to be used for posting current information along with the commitment of the site managers to post incoming information are the only variables that are different from the original concept of only information being requested via fax from the site only.

One of the most important variables in making this endeavor successful from an information delivery perspective is the dedication of the satellite location personnel to encouraging its use and maintaining the location. Highly public locations, such as public libraries, may be valuable alternatives for increasing level of use but may be ineffective for reaching the originally targeted audience. In addition to the dedication of the satellite personnel, it is also clear that many variables impact the success of such locations, and the dedication and enthusiasm of the extension employees themselves appears to be a major factor in whether satellite locations can be established; whether they become functional even if established; and whether they are appropriately serviced to assure the location managers that the location is seen as important. In North Carolina counties, complete failure has been experienced whereas in others major success has occurred. All of the areas tested are primarily rural and would be expected to have similar results. However, this has not happened.

Ultimately, such fax satellite centers appear to be able to provide a niche for innovative program delivery by extension and can have highly beneficial side effects of positively marketing the extension programs in the respective counties.

Evaluative Comments by Extension Agents

The project leader requested input from each extension agent who was involved in the project each year following the end of the growing season. The initial four comments that follow were provided in the Fall of 1996.

1. I believe this project was beneficial in obtaining new/nontraditional clientele. The fax machine was an added delivery method that

enhanced programming efforts in all areas of agriculture.

2. The fax system seems to have more impact with the consumer public which is an enormous, hungry market desiring information. These clientele are more aggressive in getting information when they need it than the farmer group. A fax system allows another mode of delivery, which requires little demand on the agent but still delivers information to the busy lifestyle of the consumer.
3. Those that used it were very pleased with the quickness of turn-around time and the ability to access a wealth of information without having to drive to the county office.
4. The reactions of the users showed a great deal of interest, and a lot of questions were asked about the system by the farmers who visited the business. To me, strengths of this system tie the place of business to the extension office. Research-based information is available on a short turn-around.

Agent Comments for 1997

1. The Garden Fax at the three locations in Pamlico County has not had an increase in use over time as had been anticipated. Its use during the spring-summer season was about one fax per day with just a few during the rest of the year. One reason the Garden Fax may not be used more is the ready access to extension information by phone, news releases and drop-in office visits with each request given a rapid response.

I still think it is a good idea and that it could be another method for distributing extension information on a timely basis while saving

agents and secretaries time. Topics covered on the Pamlico County Garden Fax sheets are Home Gardens, Home Lawns, Pastures, Wildlife and Water Quality.

2. The project is going well at Southern States with three to four faxes per week. The other site is slow.

With all of the competitive, educational outlets for delivery of information to the public, the fax centers have enabled us to be more visible with a quicker response. We have advertised the fax centers on the local radio station every Friday on the "Gardeners Corner" (A one-hour extension talk show in which Person County citizens and area listeners call in questions about horticulture.) and in the news article in the Courier Times newspaper ("Extension Notes" column published every Wednesday). The fax centers have been another extension delivery method that targets mainly nontraditional, part-time farmers.

3. The Madison County Center participation in the Information Delivery Project during 1997 involved the transfer of information regarding Blue Mold, a disease potentially devastating to the county's most lucrative farm commodity, Burley tobacco. More than 50% of the more than 700 growers of Burley tobacco, farm part time. Two, Fax'd-Facts-Fast sites were established at P&E Grocery, near Mars Hill, and Ted's Farm Supply just outside Marshall. In addition to the two machines furnished by the project, two additional sites were established at Brush Creek Grocery, near the Walnut Community, and Trust General Store, in the Spring Creek Community. At the peak of the tobacco-growing season, and high likelihood of Blue Mold infestation from air-borne spores, the Blue Mold Hotline Report was faxed from

our office to the distant sites (4), two(2) times a week, for a period of six weeks from mid June to about August 1. Some comments from the store-keepers indicated that the bulletin boards rapidly became a high-interest stop by the farmers who visited the stores. It is estimated that at least 80 different people per site saw the Blue Mold Hot Line Reports within 24 hours of its being posted on the web. (One lady told me that there was significant interest demonstrated, even by people traveling through the community but who had no personal interest in tobacco.)

Generally, this information was needed and very well received by farmers. The site-keepers are also very supportive, and have expressed interest in wanting to continue this program as a way to deliver information of broad interest in a timely way. At the same time information was being sent out via fax, monthly newsletters helped to provide detailed information about crop management. The combination of the newsletters and Fax'd Facts are believed to be contributing factors to a significant reduction in the number of phone calls from farmers inquiring about Blue Mold status, treatment, and preventive measures. Extending this information by these methods proved to be very cost efficient, requiring much less time and reducing the time required to answer about twenty phone calls per day individually. Just the time savings alone may have amounted to as much as two hours/day for calls successfully handled by phone, not including secretarial time to receive the original call. Although Fax'd Facts forms were provided at each site to be used for clients to send questions to us, this phase of the project was not as successful. Participation in this phase was nearly zero. Hopefully as we prepare for another crop year this method of delivery will improve some.

4. I tried to get the fax machine into a farm supply store. I went to the four, main, farm supply stores in the county (Valley Ag supply, Fletcher Feed and Seed, Southern States, and Southern Ag. Chemical). All of these places of business informed me they already had fax machines and would be glad to let the public use them. However, they are not out in public view and neither is there a sign that has any information about the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service. Store managers and owners said they could not justify putting in another phone line for a fax machine. I asked about extension being able to fax timely information to be displayed at their store, and they said that would be fine. However they were not interested in a display board—too much space required.

After being turned down with these attempts I decided to go to the library and explore this opportunity. Since the clients would primarily be home owners, I invited another agent to go along. We asked the library director, and he “politely” told us he already had a fax machine available to the public; however, he would allow us to put out hand-outs, but not a display board. I feel like I failed at this task.

Implications

Even though this project had variable results, the positive aspects of the program make this approach potentially appealing to many audiences. While farmers themselves used the fax request system only sparingly, most users were people who did not usually contact extension on a frequent basis for information. However, when implemented as an information delivery system to include posting of latest recommendations to meet local needs, it seems to be very successful. Therefore, while the designated audience for which the project was funded may not have used the system in one manner, others did, and the designated audience used it in a different way. Also, the publicity generated through the news media resulted in one county library contacting extension and requesting their own center as well.

Such positive marketing is difficult to gain without a demonstration of creativity and program excellence, which these centers demonstrated to the public.

As with all program delivery methods used in Cooperative Extension, knowledge of the user group, their characteristics, needs, and demonstrated preferences and tendencies can provide excellent clues as to the potential success of the method for providing information. Perhaps the best indicator is to have information available in a convenient manner that meets immediate needs of targeted clientele, and is used by those clientele. As newer delivery technologies continue to emerge, familiarity with those technologies and assessment of their utility for specific program delivery purposes will continue to need to be made. However, perhaps the greatest test of any delivery strategy is that it effectively meets the needs of those it is intended to serve.

For the project described, this means of program delivery will continue to operate at those locations where it has been used on a sustained basis and deemed a success. Those locations that had very few users have been discontinued as points of information delivery. Sustainability of either the client request system via fax centers, or the simple posting of extension information at satellite fax centers appears to be directly related to many local factors that can only be assessed at the locations where they are established. Yet, this means of information delivery can be effective when implemented in the right locations, circumstances, and conditions, and is worthy of consideration as a viable means of delivering extension information.