

Preferred Communication Channels of Homemakers

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Preferred Communication Channels of Homemakers

Abstract

The roles and information needs of homemakers, a traditional audience of the Extension Service, have changed in recent decades. However, research has not determined what those needs are and how Extension can best address them. To determine the family and consumer issues important to homemakers and communication channels preferred by them, six focus groups were conducted throughout Kansas. Participants were asked about their most important family and consumer issues, current use of and attitudes toward mass media, and current use of and attitudes toward Extension. Results indicate that homemakers are concerned about having strong families and relationships and developing consumer skills. Most participants were users of mass media but did not consider much of it trustworthy. Extension users think its information is reliable and accurate but saw a need for increased publicity of and convenience in accessing Extension. Many participants were unaware of Extension and its services. These results can be used to develop communication methods that will effectively deliver important family and consumer information to homemakers.

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Introduction

Homemakers are not a new audience for Extension, but the homemaker has changed greatly during the past three decades. Research has not kept pace with these changes. Thirty years have passed since research has been conducted to determine how Extension can best meet the needs of homemakers. Kiser (1968) studied the information needs of young homemakers and their preferred channels of receiving information in Florida and found that, in the late 1960s, special interest courses were the preferred channel for receiving information about family and consumer issues. Families' hectic schedules today make it hard to attend courses and meetings. Other research with consumer audiences indicates that, regardless of the hosting organization, meetings are rated lower than other channels of information delivery (Boone & Miller, submitted for publication; Boone, Penner, & Zenger, 2001).

Numerous studies have researched communication preferences of other Extension audiences, especially farmers. Obahayujie and Hillison (1988) determined that Virginia beef farmers rated clinics near the lowest among information dissemination methods. Other studies asking specifically about farmers' information sources for environmental issues found on-farm demonstrations, tours, and meetings as the most preferred information sources (Bruening, T.H., Radhakrishna, R.B., & Rollins, T.J., 1992; Bruening, 1991). A study of North Carolina farmers found that they prefer self-directed delivery methods and view these methods as convenient, complete, and timely (Caldwell & Richardson, 1995).

Similar studies are lacking for homemakers. However, Obahayujie and Hillison (1988) stated their study could have implications for other Extension programs. "The clientele served and its unique characteristics must be kept in mind. The methods used must coincide with the maturity, education level, background, and objective of the audience being served. When agents use methods compatible with their clientele, they'll be both more effective and efficient" (p. 2). Richardson and Mustian (1994) also discovered the importance of targeting information specifically to the audience and subject matter. "Perhaps the strongest message that clientele gave for preferring certain delivery methods was the importance of its relevancy and specificity to their individual needs" (p. 31). While

Extension produces vast quantities of information relevant to homemakers, the traditional channels of delivery may not be meeting their needs today.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the information dissemination methods most preferred by Kansas homemakers. The objectives for this project included the following:

1. To identify and evaluate sources and channels of information preferred by Kansas homemakers.
2. To identify and evaluate family and consumer issues that concern Kansas homemakers.
3. To determine methods to improve effectiveness of reaching Kansas homemakers.

Methods

The paucity of literature in this area elevated the need for grounded theory developed with homemakers (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The study used qualitative methods to provide rich data (Patton, 1990). Focus groups were the qualitative method selected because they allow for group interaction. Focus groups allow for the social construction of decisions and can mirror how decisions are made in actuality. Further they can provide insight into why opinions are developed and held (Krueger, 1994).

During the fall of 1998, six focus groups were facilitated in four geographical locations in Kansas and encompassed both rural and urban communities. Participants were identified with the assistance of county Family and Consumer Science Extension Agents, other Kansas State University personnel, community leaders, and included both users and non-users of Extension to provide insight into a variety of views toward the service. The focus groups were facilitated using techniques identified by Krueger (1994). The focus group question route was field tested and revised prior to data collection. Each group was recorded with a cassette tape recorder and then transcribed. Data were analyzed using conceptual matrices, a technique identified by Miles and Huberman (1994). Each focus group included seven to 10 participants. The focus groups were held in southeast, northeast, south central, and western Kansas and lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. No

compensation was provided to the participants. Participants were nominated by community representatives.

Our definition of homemaker was primary grocery purchaser and child-care provider in the home. Two of the groups were specifically targeted toward senior citizens, while another consisted of participants in a literacy class that included programming through the Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program (EFNEP). Another group was formed with stay-at-home mothers. The two remaining focus groups consisted of women representing a mix of ages and most of whom worked outside of the home. Each group expressed excitement about being "heard" regarding their informational needs.

Findings

Family and other relationship issues often were mentioned as the issues most important to the participants. Many of the participants were concerned about balancing their outside-the-home responsibilities and finding time for family. One participant said, "(I need) Time for me to do justice to my career, to do justice to my children and (still) manage to be in community service. I'm, every day, having to choose between one or the other of those things."

Other issues important to the participants included consumer skills and being able to buy quality items at reasonable prices. While many concerns were shared across groups, differences were found among younger and older audiences and middle-income and low-income groups. Younger homemakers were more focused on having time with their families, while older ones were concerned with general lack of domestic skills in society. Low-income groups expressed concerns about determining the value of information they received. Stay-at-home mothers also had concerns that differed from the other groups. These included finding personal fulfillment, understanding their roles as homemakers, and dealing with how society viewed them as stay-at-home mothers.

Mass media, including television, radio, magazines, and newspapers, were used regularly by all groups. However, most participants said they used these sources only as awareness tools and turned to other resources for in-depth information. Most participants trusted written material from sources other than mass media. Participants who used Extension mentioned

its materials and meetings when asked how they would prefer to receive information. Newsletters were a trusted source of information, but most participants did not read mail they had not asked to receive. Table 1 (pg.28) illustrates these data.

The EFNEP group varied from the other groups in information sources used. They mentioned using the telephone directory and making telephone calls to find information. They also relied more heavily on mass media, particularly television. This group emphasized trying to learn the "system" or how to access information from a variety of public sources. The EFNEP participants said learning from someone (friends, neighbors, community leaders) who knew about information sources was very important. One participant stated, "Because most of the time newspaper and radio or TV won't give it to you. I asked a lady I knew who'd been through the system. She had to hand-feed me."

Previous literature has noted that mass media are used at a knowledge stage or as an awareness tool (Rogers, 1983; Lionberger & Gwin, 1982; Fett, Shinnery-Gray, Schlitz, Duffy, & Doyle, 1991). In general, this was true among Kansas homemakers as well, although the EFNEP participants placed more value on mass media. While they used mass media frequently, Kansas homemakers did not consider media trustworthy, which is similar to other recent findings of citizens' ratings of media trustworthiness (Nicholson, 1998). Responses about trust of mass media included: "I don't really think I trust any of them;" and "I think it's a matter of educating yourself from all those sources. I just take everything with a grain of salt and make my own presumptions." Table 2 (pg. 30) illustrates the data regarding mass media use.

Most participants, other than the EFNEP group members and the stay-at-home mothers, were familiar with Extension, although most were not familiar with the breadth of subjects covered by the agency. All who were familiar with it viewed Extension as a reliable source of family and consumer information. Those who had the most interaction with Extension were most likely to consider its information to be accurate. One participant said, "If I want something that's trustworthy and that I think is factual, I go to the Extension Service and ask for it."

Among Extension users, the service is viewed as delivering a wide variety of reliable information. One participant stated,

"They've got a wealth of ideas, and you can check out so many things from them and use it. I probably haven't even tapped the mountain of it from what I used." Another said, "When you talk trust, I've always trusted the information that I've gotten from K-State, from Manhattan through Extension, because I knew it'd been researched. It was tested and could be trusted." Table 3 (pg. 33) contains data related to Extension use and suggestions.

Most participants did not contact the Extension Service more than once a month, and many mentioned they used it much more when they had children who were involved with 4-H. Many of the senior citizens were involved with Family and Community Education (FCE) Units. However, several did not think the units were as effective as they used to be. "Extension used to have a good vehicle for women in Extension units. But they messed those up when they started charging to belong." "Right now it seems like our lessons in the unit haven't been that interesting."

The EFNEP group was not familiar with Extension and had not been in contact with the service except through the EFNEP agent who met with them weekly through a general education class. In fact, this group was unaware of the EFNEP educator's tie to Extension.

Even though most of the stay-at-home mothers were aware of the Extension service, they were not familiar with how to access its resources and primarily associated it with agriculture and horticulture. Neither the stay-at-home mothers nor the EFNEP group knew how to contact Extension. In order for them to use its services, they said they must be able to reach Extension quickly and conveniently.

Print media were the preferred format for Extension information among all groups. Participants said print sources are simple to receive and easy to keep and refer to later. They also like being able to call or visit the Extension Office and ask for specific information. Most participants said they would use a toll-free telephone helpline. Information topics desired from Extension ranged from information about food preparation to family communications.

The participants also had several suggestions for improvement of Extension services. They thought more people in their community should be made aware of Extension. One partici-

pant said, "In other words, if you know about Extension, you know about Extension. But then you've got the other 80 percent that has no clue what KSU Extension is." Participants also said extending office hours into evenings or Saturdays would make Extension more convenient, and Extension should continue to utilize technological advances such as the Internet. The senior citizen groups noted that Extension had eroded its program by eliminating material for traditional homemaker arts, such as cooking and crafts. They attributed this to society and legislators placing less and less value on homemaking.

Conclusions and Discussion

This study examined an audience, homemakers, that has not been studied recently. As demonstrated by the participants' eagerness to be involved, they value family and consumer information.

These findings can be used to improve communication with homemakers. Home Economic Units (also called Family and Community Education units) are one of the traditional methods Extension used to present information to homemakers. However, these units are aging and not attracting younger members. Alternative methods to present information to this audience must be found. Extension services can evolve and utilize various communication methods and media to meet the homemaker's need for reliable and trustworthy information. In general, meetings are not going to attract this audience, with the exception of stay-at-home mothers. Thus, mix of communications channels should be used. Certainly a mix of mass media would be useful as would direct mail and facilitating more face-to-face contact through extended office hours in the local Extension office, which may be an unpopular suggestion.

The differences exhibited by stay-at-home mothers and low-income participants demonstrate the need to target information to specific groups using a variety of channels. Also the type of information should be targeted to a specific audience. These audiences have different reasons for seeking or needing information. As we become more knowledgeable about them, we will be better meet their informational needs.

It should be noted that the group of stay-at-home mothers were middle-income. Broader income groups of stay-at-home mothers could provide different perspectives.

Further study of both stay-at-home mothers and low-income participants should be conducted, especially as little information has been collected on these participants and their needs differed discernibly from other groups studied. Also, a quantitative study of homemakers would be useful to determine how generalizable these findings are. Qualitative and quantitative studies beyond Kansas borders would be valuable.

Homemakers were one of the first audiences Extension served. They continue to need information, and Extension continues to produce the information in which they are interested. However, there is a disconnect. Perhaps it occurred as the audience moved from the rural areas to the urban and suburban or lost its ties to agriculture or 4-H. Regardless, Extension has vital, useful information for these audiences. It needs to reconnect with these audiences and continue to market its services to these potential and current clientele.

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Table 1. *Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Major Information Channels and Preference*

Topic	Group	Summary of Comments	Illustrations
Current Channels Used	Across all groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newspaper • Magazines • Television • Radio • Library • Other people 	<p>"I get most of my information from magazines and newspapers."</p> <p>"I have my kitchen and dining room set up so I can watch TV while preparing meals."</p> <p>"I like to get information on a one-to-one basis. I get a lot of information visiting with my friends and neighbors."</p>
	Low-income group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Phone book 	"I have no family and people have problems understanding me because of my accent. So I found the telephone directory, copied addresses and found help."
Attitude Toward Current Channels	Across all groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of information • Difficult to find information 	"Sometimes I wonder if some of the places we're sent to, it's like you hit road blocks a lot. It's supposedly there. (But) I wonder from the responses that we get sometimes."
	Low-income group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Important to find someone who knows where to find information 	"Because most of the time newspaper and radio or TV won't give it to you. I asked a lady I knew who'd been through the system."
	Stay-at-home mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Issues for family and stay-at-home mothers are not reported 	"Not too many places talk about the stay-at-home mom. In those magazines I read, it's all about how to juggle work and family. Never anything about stay-at-home moms."

Table 1. *Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Major Information Channels and Preference (cont.)*

Topic	Group	Summary of Comments	Illustrations
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Media are often critical of mothers • Difficult to find knowledgeable source 	<p>"(Media say) if you make one mistake (your children are) going to be in therapy when they're older. And those are things I don't need to hear because they work at my self-esteem, chipping it away."</p> <p>"If someone is actually out there working, telling me about my life, well what do they know about my life? They work."</p>
Preferred Information Channels	Across all groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extension • Library • Television • Computers • Books • Magazines • Newspapers 	<p>"I think we're going to have to plug into all the technological things."</p>
Trust of Mass Media	Across all groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some distrust of all media • Form own opinions from various media • Consider source of information • Trust Extension if familiar with service 	<p>"I don't really think I trust any of them."</p> <p>"I just take everything with a grain of salt and make my own presumptions."</p> <p>"So I think many times it's the author of the article or the sources from which they gain their information that we need to look at."</p> <p>"Mine would have to be the TV because that's all I watch. News on TV and stuff like that."</p>

Topic	Summary of Comments	Illustrations
Magazines: Use of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Women's magazines • Home, garden ,and food • Country/rural home and garden • Special interests • Farm/livestock • News 	<i>Women's Day, Ladies Home Journal, Good Housekeeping, Better Homes and Gardens, Bon Appetit, Country Living, Taste of Home, Country Woman, Readers' Digest, Parents, sewing magazines, craft magazines, Time, Newsweek</i>
Magazines: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good sources of family and consumer information • Parenting magazines are not good sources of information • Not much use in low-income group 	<p>"If you want to talk about finding out about new products and new services for families, that's about the only place."</p> <p>"Used to [read <i>Parents</i>] with the first child. After that I decided that I knew more than they did."</p>
Newspapers: Use of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most subscribe to local daily or weekly paper, except for low-income group 	"I get the local daily because really that's one of our only sources for local news."

Newspapers: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Source of local news and current events • Not a source of family and consumer information 	<p>"I usually read the paper to find out what's going on."</p> <p>"For (family information), I don't read the newspaper."</p>
Television: Use of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Newsmagazines, local news • Morning television • Public television • Talk shows 	<p>"I like the newsmagazine programs, too."</p> <p>"I mainly watch the news or channel 11 [PBS]."</p> <p>"When the kids are not around, I watch Oprah."</p>
Television: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background noise • Easy to watch and do something else at same time 	<p>"I just turn it on. I don't even know what shows are on."</p> <p>"The good thing about TV is it's passive. You can be doing something else and half-way watching it."</p>
Radio: Use of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk shows • National Public Radio 	<p>Paul Harvey, Dr. Laura Schlessinger, Mike Murphy, Saturday morning call-in shows</p>
Radio: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varies from major news source to not a source at all 	<p>"My major source of information is the radio — AM talk station."</p> <p>"If I'm in the car, I'll listen to it. Not at home though."</p>

Table 2. Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Mass Media Use (Cont.)		
Topic	Summary of Comments	Illustrations
Unwanted Mail: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look at it and throw away or throw away without looking 	"I throw it away without reading it."
Internet: Use of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Few have access • Source of research or consumer information 	"If I have a very specific question, I'll go and try to research it."
Internet: Attitude toward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't use regularly or extensively • Has a wide variety of information • Will be a source in future • Difficult to use with children 	<p>"I like to use it as a research spot."</p> <p>"If you want to sit down at the computer, and you've got anywhere from a 2- to a 6-year-old, and you start typing or playing with the mouse, they're right there. And you just turn it off and walk away. It just isn't possible."</p>

Table 3. Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Extension Use and Suggestions for Improvement

Topic	Summary of Comment	Illustrations
Awareness: Stay-at-home mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not familiar with the Extension service • Few used the service 	<p>"Where is the county Extension office?"</p> <p>"I don't really know all the information they have. I only know they deal with food and there are plant people on the radio."</p>
Awareness: Low-income group	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not aware of Extension at all 	<p>"I don't know what EFNEP is."</p> <p>"How does it work?"</p>
Frequency of use among other groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied from weekly to several times a year • Some used more when children were in 4-H • Read agent's news columns 	<p>"I use it on a constant weekly basis."</p> <p>"If there's a need I do call, but I don't think I call once a month."</p> <p>"I can't say that I do at all anymore unless something comes up because my kids are grown and not in 4-H."</p>
Type of information received	<p>§ Topics include gardening, preserving, health issues</p>	<p>"It's also nice when you're gardening They'll usually have a good answer."</p> <p>"Last summer I had a great-granddaughter visit that was diabetic. I went to Extension to get information about that."</p>

Table 3. <i>Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Extension Use and Suggestions for Improvement (Cont.)</i>		
Topic	Summary of Comment	Illustrations
Attitudes Toward Extension: Stay-at-home mothers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An agricultural service • A source of clear and reliable information 	<p>"When I think of Extension, I think of a grain elevator."</p> <p>"Everything I've gotten from them has been in layman's terms, short and to the point."</p>
Attitudes toward Extension: Current users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can trust Extension • Has wide variety of information 	<p>"I've always trusted the information that I've gotten from K-State ... because I knew it'd been researched. It was tested and could be trusted."</p>
Problems: FCE users	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagree with changes made in program • Programs aren't as convenient or interesting as they used to be 	<p>"We used to be the Extension Homemakers Unit, and they changed our names. There again, it was changed because they felt like homemakers don't do anything."</p> <p>"Right now it seems like our lessons in the unit haven't been that interesting."</p>

Table 3. Clustered Summary of Participants' Responses on Extension Use and Suggestions for Improvement (Cont.)

<p>Problems: All groups</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inconvenient hours • Contact information hard to find 	<p>"I send a lot of people over there, but the one problem I find with the people is the hours. Most of them are working people, and there's no way for them to get in there." "Trying to find them in the phone book is a real challenge."</p>
<p>Information Formats: Print</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer newsletters and other publications • Read articles in local papers 	<p>"Newsletters and articles in the paper are the best source in this geographic area." "If it comes in a newsletter I'm more apt to read it."</p>
<p>Information Formats: Video</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed opinions on effectiveness of videos 	<p>"I don't have time to sit down and pay strict attention to a video." "If I can check out a video and take it home and put it in the VCR, I don't have to do a thing. I just watch it."</p>
<p>Information Formats: Other</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Want to ask for specific information • Might use a 1-800 helpline 	<p>"I like to be able to go down there and say I have a topic that I need some information." "I've seen the time when I wished I had one (800 helpline)."</p>