

Identifying Extension Opinion Leaders

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The authors report the results of research aimed at determining who adopts home practices from published information and to what extent these practices are passed on to others. The study used a published series of leaflets entitled "Facts About Fabrics," and tried to identify early, majority, and late adopters as well as opinion leaders of home sewing practices. The study helps explain who uses our published material and suggests where limited publication resources might best be used.

Is there some pattern to the distribution of Extension home economics printed materials? What kind of people first adopt the practices suggested in the educational publications? How can the Extension home economist be sure she's initially distributing her materials to people who will pass this information on to others. Who are these others she's apt to pass this information on to?

This article will help answer some of these questions.

Adopter Classifications

Rural sociologists have classified individuals according to when they actually adopt a particular practice.¹ Individuals classified as early adopters are more likely

to have a higher income, be younger, participate in more organizations, seek new ideas, and take risks. These early adopters are more likely to choose scientifically based sources of information. They also take less time to adopt a new idea or practice. Late adopters tend to have the opposite characteristics.

New Ideas Exchange

Generally, the mass media are effective in bringing new ideas to the attention of individuals. However, face-to-face contacts and personal experience are necessary if an individual is to adopt or reject a practice eventually.² Opinion leaders affect the flow of information to the

potential adopter of a new practice. Lazarsfeld found that women under 45 with 2 or more children were more likely to be opinion leaders because they had "everyday experience."³ Arndt found that the conversations were more an exchange of opinion than attempts at persuasion.⁴

The Study

Purposes

The purposes of this study were: (1) to trace the distribution of Extension Service sewing instruction leaflets among Extension cooperators and homemakers who weren't Extension cooperators, (2) to identify and categorize these individuals as early adopters or late adopters of sewing practices published in Extension Service leaflets, (3) to compare these groups on various socioeconomic and sewing experience variables, and (4) to identify the ways these groups communicate the ideas in the leaflets to others.

Procedures

This study was done in Kane County, Illinois, population 251,055, located at the western edge of the Chicago Standard Metropolitan Area. The county has two daily newspapers, eight weekly newspapers, and five radio stations.

Sample

The sample was composed of people who regularly partici-

pated in Extension Service educational programs (cooperators) and people who didn't (non-cooperators). Extension cooperators for this study were identified as women who had been attending Extension unit meetings for at least a year and whose names were on Kane County Extension mailing lists.

Both categories had requested the "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets. Procedures included publicizing the leaflets, sending a questionnaire to those individuals requesting the leaflets, and analyzing the responses to the questionnaire.

Leaflet Content

The "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets were prepared by University of Illinois Extension clothing specialists to provide information about selecting, cutting, sewing, and pressing specific kinds of fabrics. Each leaflet in the series recommended sewing machine adjustment and selection of compatible findings for each kind of fabric. The "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets were publicized through newspapers, radio, and a monthly circular letter prepared by the county Extension Center.

Publicity Results

Figure 1 shows the number of "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets

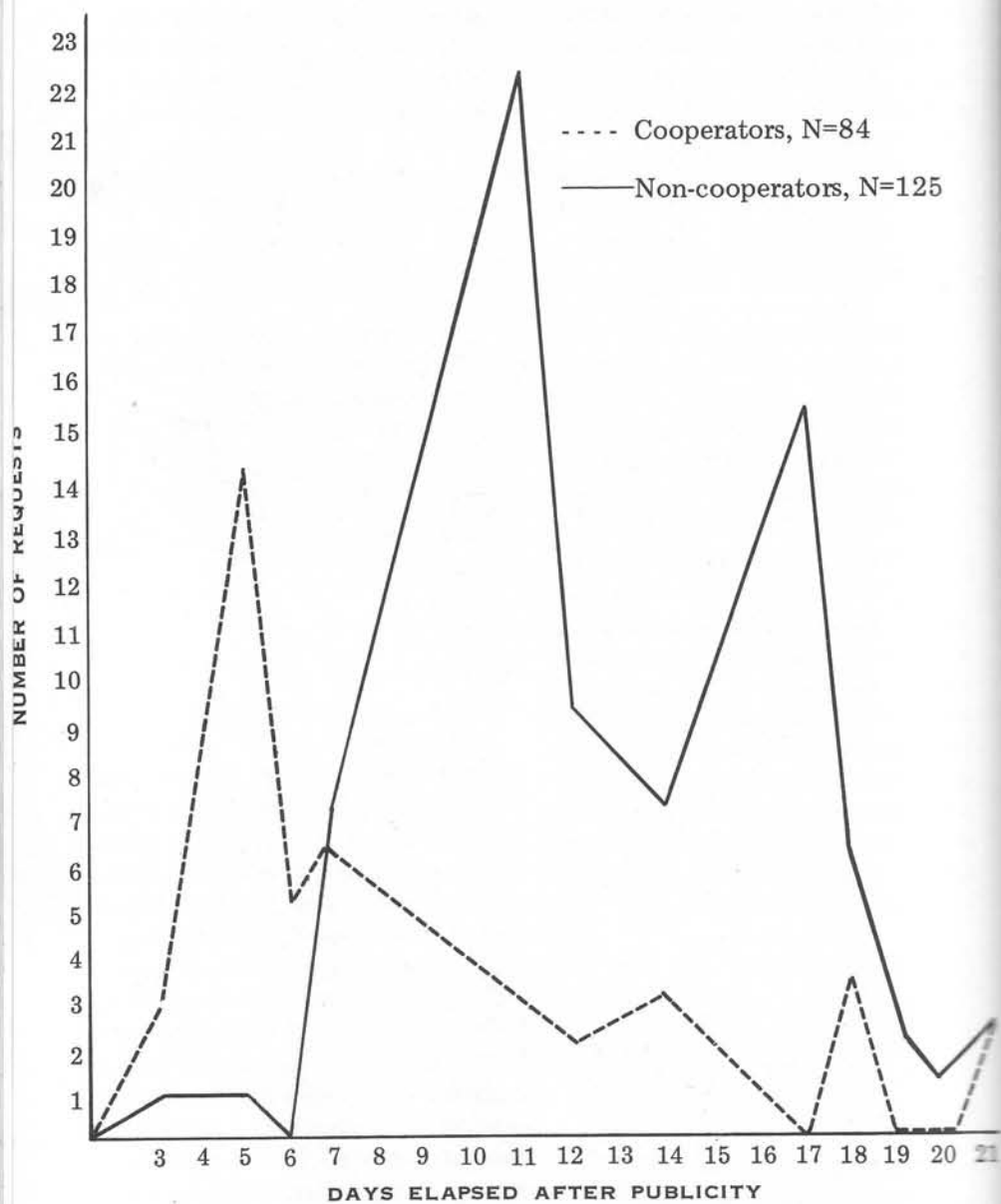


Figure 1. Number of "Facts about Fabrics" leaflet requests by Extension cooperators and non-cooperators for each day after publicity.

requested before the determined period. Direct mail fliers sent to cooperators and news releases sent to radio stations and newspapers were all mailed the same day.

The requests of the non-cooperators peak at a later period than that of the cooperators because of the time needed by the newspapers to receive, edit, and publish news releases. The second high point in non-cooperators requests was due to delayed processing caused by a holiday.

A total of 247 requests were received in the 21-day period established for the study. The request records were kept for 112 days after the publicity was released. During that time, 345 requests were received at the Extension Center. Requests came from individuals in four states outside Illinois. Of the requests received, 69 percent came from residents of urban areas, 18 percent from rural areas, and 13 percent from outside Kane County.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was designed to determine the following information about respondents:

1. Socioeconomic status.
2. Sewing experience.
3. Early or late adoption characteristics (including idea seeking and risk taking characteristics).
4. Opinion leadership.

5. Use of the sewing instruction leaflets.
6. Telling other people about information in the leaflets.

A follow-up questionnaire, designed to discover what information from the sewing leaflets the respondents used and what information they told someone else, was mailed at two intervals (four weeks and six months) after the first questionnaire.

Frequency distributions were prepared and mean scores were calculated for each of the scales. Numerical values were assigned for high, middle, and low scores. Significant differences between group means were indicated by t-tests.

Findings

Of the 125 respondents, 20 were identified as early adopters, 83 as majority adopters, and 22 as late adopters of sewing practices. The late adopter category had a larger proportion of subjects over age 50 and with lower incomes. Table 1 compares the mean values of each adopter category on variables of age, socioeconomic status, income, level of education, place of residence, and number of children.

The early adopters were significantly younger, had a significantly higher income, and had significantly more children than the late adopters. These results agree with previous studies mentioned earlier. The majority

Table 1. Difference in mean scores of selected variables according to adopter category.

Scale variable	Adopter category			Adopter category			Adopter category		
	Early	Late	t	Early	Majority	t	Majority	Late	t
	mean	mean		mean	mean		mean	mean	
Age	2.65	1.46	5.552**	2.65	2.30	2.189*	2.30	1.46	4.385**
Socio-economic status	2.40	2.35	0.178	2.40	2.35	0.245	2.35	2.35	0.014
Income	2.32	1.47	3.996**	2.32	1.95	2.363*	1.95	1.47	2.630*
Level of education	2.95	2.41	2.015	2.95	2.61	1.560	2.61	2.41	0.990
Place of residence	2.10	1.80	0.704	2.10	1.49	1.869	1.49	1.80	-0.985
Number of children	2.40	1.20	3.410**	2.40	2.18	0.659	2.18	1.20	3.661**

*.05 level of confidence.

** .01 level of confidence.

adopters were significantly different from the late adopters in regard to the same variables.

Individuals identified as early adopters were compared on their opinion leadership qualities. Those with high opinion leadership qualities scored significantly higher on the sewing experience scale and risk taking scale, but significantly lower on the socioeconomic status scale. Thirty percent of the early adopters scored in the high category of the idea seeking scale. Late adopters compared on high and low opinion leadership scores showed no significant differences on these variables. (see Table 2).

When comparing early and late adopters on their scores of

the opinion leadership, sewing experience, and idea seeking and risk taking scales, the early adopters scored significantly higher on the opinion leadership and sewing experience scales. The majority adopters had scores that were significantly higher than late adopters on the opinion leadership, sewing experience, and idea seeking scales. The early adopters and high opinion leaders identified in this study were younger and had more children (see Table 3).

Comparing Extension cooperators with non-cooperators, it was found that cooperators were significantly higher in idea seeking and opinion leadership characteristics.

Table 2. Comparison of early adopters according to opinion leadership score categories on selected variables.

Early adopters N=20	High opinion leadership score mean	Low opinion leadership score mean	t
Sewing experience	2.63	2.00	3.416**
Idea seeking	2.50	1.67	2.175
Risk taking	2.50	1.33	3.045*
Socioeconomic status	2.00	3.00	-3.055*

* Statistically significant at .05 level.

** Statistically significant at .01 level.

Table 3. Differences in mean scores of selected scale variables according to adopter category.

Scale variable	Adopter category			Adopter category			Adopter category		
	Early	Late	t	Early	Majority	t	Majority	Late	t
Opinion leadership	2.25	1.68	2.408*	2.25	2.17	0.441	2.17	1.68	2.634**
Sewing experience	2.20	1.68	2.377*	2.20	2.05	0.876	2.05	1.68	2.145*
Idea seeking	2.20	1.81	2.003	2.20	2.11	0.611	2.11	1.81	1.994*
Risk taking	2.30	1.80	2.015	2.30	2.17	0.605	2.17	1.80	1.758

*Statistically significant at .01 level.

**Statistically significant at .05 level.

The early and majority adopters were more likely to tell other people about the educational leaflets. Almost two-thirds (63%) of the late adopters had told no one about the sewing leaflets. The kinds of individuals most frequently told about the

sewing leaflets were neighbors, friends, and relatives. Individuals told about the "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets most often lived within a block of the subject, but 40 percent of the early adopters had told individuals living outside Kane County.

About two-thirds of the subjects returning the follow-up questionnaire indicated that they hadn't used the "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets yet. Early adopters were most likely to pass on information from the leaflets after four weeks. After six months had elapsed, majority adopters were about equal in passing on information from the leaflets to other individuals. The early adopters reported adopting practices described in the "Facts About Fabrics" leaflets more often than the other adopter categories.

Conclusions and Implications

Early adopters are likely to be the opinion leaders in their communities. They enjoy taking risks, trying out new products, and experimenting with new ways of accomplishing tasks. These individuals should be identified so all educational material can be directed to them first. These early adopters also are more likely to pass this information on to their neighbors and friends.

The task of identifying these individuals is made easier because more of them request Extension materials than late adopters and are younger homemakers with children at home (regardless of whether they are Extension co-operators or not). Thus, some method of recording these characteristics of early adopters for future mailing lists and promotion of educational programs is needed.

Extension personnel probably will exclaim, "This is all very good, but it takes time to set up such a system. Are the results worth the effort it takes?"

Our answer would be to ask them to evaluate their present efforts objectively. How often do they repeat the same information? Are they using their talents to the fullest degree? Or are they spending their time repeating details that these early adopters and opinion leaders could relate while they spend more time developing more accurate educational materials and communicating these through the county? Perhaps by taking time to develop an identifying system they would eventually have more time for other aspects of their jobs.

Data collected on people who contact Extension over a period of time can be classified, coded, and cross-indexed according to:

1. Income range; level of education; and age of husband, wife, and children.
2. Specific information requested.
3. Time gap between date Extension material is publicized and date it's requested.
4. Previous knowledge and experience and/or skill relating to a particular subject, such as various homemaking skills, communication skills in family life, child development, gardening, tractor operations, variety of classifications under agribusiness, etc.

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5. Number of leadership positions in more than one phase of Extension organization (that is, Extension unit officer, 4-H leader, etc.).

Data processing could be used to identify early adopters for any specific product or practice. Mailing lists could then be prepared. If data processing isn't available, cross-filing systems would be needed to quickly pull out the early adopters needed for the appropriate mailing lists.

Prepared literature to be mailed, such as a "What's New" circular letter and leaflets on any topic, could include more technical information because these early adopters generally have higher educations than people in the other adopter categories. Complimentary copies of new publications, depending on subject matter, could also be sent to these early adopters.

Because these individuals also use radio, television, and newspapers as sources of information, Extension must consistently use these media to attract increasing numbers of the early adopters of improved consumer, homemaking, and related skills and practices.

This system of identifying early adopters and opinion leaders in any community could be used for the current Extension programs with:

1. Disadvantaged families.
2. Young homemakers.

3. Consumers.
4. Senior citizens.
5. Working women.

Summary

The results of this study supported previous research by rural sociologists and marketing specialists. Opinion leaders and early adopters can be identified according to their interest in home practices, specifically home sewing practices. If these people could be identified by Extension home economists or other professionals wanting to spread educational information, the distribution of these materials could be done more efficiently.

These may seem like very complex systems to establish, but would valuable information reach more people more quickly than through Extension agents, who many times try to be all things to all people?

Footnotes

1. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York, New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1962); Joe M. Bohlen and others, *Adopters of New Farm Ideas: Characteristics and Communications Behavior*, North Central Regional Research Bulletin 186 (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Agricultural Experiment Station, 1961); and Herbert F. Lionberger, *Adoption of New Ideas and Practices* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1960).

2. George M. Beale and Everett M. Rogers, "Information in the Adoption Process of New Fabrics," *Journal of Home Economics*, VII (February, 1970), 43-50.
3. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Who Are the Marketing Leaders?" in *Dimensions of Consumer Behavior*, James U. McNeal, ed. (New York, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1969).
4. John Arndt, "Role of Product-Related Conversations in the Diffusion of a New Product," *Journal of Marketing Research*, IV (August, 1971), 291-95.

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