

# farmers' attitudes toward extension

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John G. Gross

Do you ever wonder how people feel about your programs? What do the people whose contact is through mass media think of us? We can gauge the feeling of those with whom we're in direct contact—but what about others? What really is the reputation of Agricultural Extension in a farming community? Do the people have a favorable, neutral, or unfavorable attitude toward Extension and the programs Extension implements?

One way to answer these questions is to measure the attitudes of the farmers using the instrument we used in Clinton County, Missouri, in 1975. The following tells what we did and what we found out.

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**Extension professionals can do a better job when they know how people feel about their programs. . . .**

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## The Instrument

The attitude scale consisted of a number of statements made about the Agricultural Extension Service and staff. The statements were selected to represent degrees of attitude from favorable to unfavorable. A group of 60 people rated the statements as to the degree of favorableness on a scale from 1 to 11. A score of 1 represented an unfavorable statement and a score of 11 represented an exceedingly favorable statement.

The average of the ratings represent the favorableness score for each statement. Statements were selected that had score or scale values to represent the unfavorable/favorable continuum.<sup>1</sup>

The farmer was asked to check the statements with which he agrees—marking no more than five. The median of

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the statement scale values becomes his attitude score. The attitude scores of individual farmers were looked at by age, education, farm organization membership, participation in Extension, etc.

The attitude scale we used is shown in Table 1. The numbers in parentheses beside the statements represent the scale value of the statement. These values weren't on the instrument when it was used, but are included for your information.

**Table 1. Items used in Clinton County, Missouri, attitude study.**

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Below are several statements that have been made about the Agricultural Extension Service or Agricultural Extension personnel. Place a mark (+) before the statements with which you agree (no more than 5 please). [The number in parentheses represents the scale value of the statement in the 1 to 11 range used.]

- (9.6) Information that comes from the Agricultural Extension Office is honest and can be trusted to be as accurate as possible.
- (2.7) The Agricultural Extension Program, as a part of the University's College of Agriculture, does not fit well with folks around here.
- (9.0) The County Extension Office is a source of unbiased information about agriculture and farming.
- (8.7) The Agricultural Extension Specialists do an excellent job of working impartially with competing agricultural interests.
- (5.5) The Agricultural Extension Specialists don't get around to visit farms like they should.
- (8.9) On the whole, the Extension Service does a pretty good job of presenting information to me.
- (2.8) Agricultural Extension Specialists are difficult people to understand.
- (3.8) The Extension Service bombards farmers with so much information that it is hard to sort out what is and what is not useful for my operation.
- (4.3) The Agricultural Extension Specialists waste a lot of time driving about the area when they should be in the office answering questions and solving problems.
- (7.9) The Extension Office employs an efficient secretary.
- (9.2) I believe that a lot of information that comes from the College of Agriculture through Extension is of practical use to me.
- (9.3) The Agricultural Extension Specialist uses newsletters, radio programs, and newspaper articles to do a good job of keeping me posted on things I need to know.
- (3.3) Our Agricultural Extension Specialist spends too much time going to meetings to be of any real help to me.
- (8.1) The Agricultural Extension Specialists are consistent in their recommendations to all people.
- (4.8) Extension's programs seem to be the same from year to year.
- (6.2) I have already heard or read about most of the information that our Agricultural Extension Specialists put out.
- (4.5) The Agricultural Extension Specialists do not stay long enough in the area to get acquainted and win people's confidence.
- (3.5) It is hard to tell whether the tax money spent on the Extension Service is doing any good or not.
- (5.0) I have difficulty contacting our Agricultural Extension Specialist.
- (8.5) The Agricultural Extension Specialist's judgment is respected on agricultural matters.

## Procedure

The attitude scale was administered by mail. The instrument contained 20 attitude statements and demographic data questions.

A list of all farm owners and operators in Clinton County was obtained from the County Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. After out-of-county addresses were eliminated, 1,265 farmers were left to sample. Every fifth name on the list was chosen to total 253.

## Returns

A total of 130 (49.4%) out of 253 schedules was returned. Of this number, 116 (44.1%) were usable responses. Several returned the form with comments, but didn't complete the scale.

## Findings and Discussion

Written comments added and enlarged the scope of information obtained. Comments included:

We need you people, your expertise, more than ever.

I cannot answer any of these questions as I have not had any dealing with the Extension Service.

We work in town, and farm evenings and weekends. The Extension program can be improved by reaching the "city farmers." Extension almost never had weekend demonstrations. They are always scheduled for weekdays—consequently you lose the "city farmer." Only the full-time farmers can attend.

The mean score was averaged or calculated by age, educational level, farm organization membership, and frequency and type of contact they had with Extension. Here are the results.

### Age

Age of clientele is a characteristic of interest and concern to Extension professionals as their audiences contain all age groups. Is there any difference in the way different age groups of farmers feel about Extension? (See Table 2).

The younger farmers (26-35) and the older farmers (56 and over) had higher attitude scores. Middle-aged farmers (36-55) had lower scores. It could have been possible that Extension programming wasn't reaching the middle-aged farmer as well as other age groups.

No doubt there are other factors beyond the scope of this study that might help explain this. One of these might be that in March, 1971, Clinton County became a part of the ABCD Extension Program Planning Area and was served by area assigned Extension specialists instead of county assigned Extension staff. Some farmers

have expressed disagreement with area staffing and this may partially explain some of the lower attitude scores.

Investigation in other Extension areas of Missouri with a similar instrument found that farmers in the 66 and over age bracket had lower attitude scores.<sup>2</sup> In any event, this finding is an indicator to the Extension staff implementing programs in Clinton County to make a special effort to consider these needs and to direct programming to this important and active age group of farmers.

**Table 2. Attitude by age group.**

Age	Attitude score	N
26-35	8.46	13
36-45	7.87	21
46-55	8.04	28
56-65	8.68	36
66 or over	8.66	17

*Educational Level*

The Extension function is educational and consequently the formal educational level is an important consideration. College and grade school level had the lower scores! Why? Was there something about the program implementation in Clinton County that caused college graduates to agree with the low-scoring statements? Post-graduate farmers had a much higher attitude score. However, this group was very small. (See Table 3).

A similar finding was made of attitudes by educational level in a study of the Kaysinger Program Planning Area,<sup>3</sup> but not in the Lake's Country Program Planning Area.<sup>4</sup> The differences between high school and college educational level were much smaller than in this study and may be due to variables other than educational level.

**Table 3. Attitude by educational level.**

Highest educational level	Attitude score	N
Grade school	8.05	15
High school	8.38	56
College	8.13	35
Post graduate	8.91	7
Other	9.10	1

*Farm Organization*

The relationship of farm organization membership and attitude toward Extension was studied. Farm organizations take public positions in regard to Extension. It was of interest

to see how a sample of farmers would score regarding farm organization membership.

As Table 4 shows, there were only slight differences in attitude scores between farmers reporting membership in the Farm Bureau, Missouri Farmers Association, and other farm organizations.<sup>5</sup>

The most important fact emerging from the analysis of attitude score by farm organization membership is the difference between the attitude score of those who hold membership in a farm organization and those who don't report membership in any farm organization. This difference was rather large and does have some implication for Extension.

**Table 4. Attitude by farm organization membership.**

Farm organization	Attitude score	N
Farm Bureau	8.54	34
National Farmers Organization	8.95	4
Missouri Farmers Association	8.76	21
Other farm organizations	8.69	14
No farm organization reported	7.91	56

Farmers who belong to or participate in a farm organization are more likely to have a favorable attitude toward Extension than farmers who don't belong to any farm organization. This may serve as a valuable clue for Extension professionals when programming with new audience groups or with new programs. The fact that farmers belonged to a farm organization appeared to be a more important factor in their favorable attitudes than the particular farm organization to which they belonged.

*Contact  
with Extension*

Attitude scores of those farmers who had reported contact with Extension were examined to see if any relationship existed between attitude scores and the type and frequency of contact with Extension. As might be expected, the more frequent the contact with Extension, the higher the attitude score.

**Table 5. Attitude by frequency of contact.**

Frequency of contact	Attitude score	N
None	7.61	29
Seldom	8.27	26
Occasional	8.61	34
Frequent	8.81	22
Regular	9.10	2

Of those farmers who reported contact with Extension, was there any relationship between the type of contact they had and their attitude score? Take a look at Table 6.

**Table 6. Attitude by type of contact.**

Type of contact	Attitude score	N
Meeting, etc.	8.77	20
Office visit	8.43	58
Mail	8.74	37
Telephone	8.54	26
Mass media	8.77	32

The data in Table 6 were summarized by computing the average or mean attitude score for all farmers reporting each kind of contact. Farmers checked the kinds of contact they had during the past year. One of the most interesting facts was slightly higher scores were made by farmers reporting meetings, mass media, and mail as the type of contact. Attitude scores for farmers reporting office visits and telephone contact were lower. Why were farmers with the more personal type of contacts scoring lower on the attitude scale?

One possible explanation for the higher attitude scores for the meetings, mass media, and mail contacts is the farmer knows he will get the information. If a meeting is announced, the Extension person will be there and the announced topic will be treated. In mass media, the staff member's news column or radio broadcast is regular and can be counted on. Mail is also certain. Written requests are answered.

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However, on office visits or telephone calls, quite often the staff member is out of the office and a delay is encountered in answering the request or inquiry. This is quite possible since several of the area agricultural staff work in more than one county. Follow-up on these personal types of contact may not be as sure or certain as in the more general types of contact. This could perhaps account for some of the lower attitude scores for those farmers reporting the more personal kinds of contact.

The attitude scores are in the favorable range so this indicates that the farmers are satisfied with the quality of the information they receive, but that some minor dissatisfaction may account for the differences in attitude scores between methods of contact.

## Summary

Extension professionals can do a better job when they know how people feel about their programs. Information backed up by data is of benefit not only to Extension professionals, but also to the groups they're accountable to.

The findings of this study in Clinton County enabled the area director to positively inform the County Court and the Extension Council that farmers have a favorable attitude toward Extension and its agricultural programs. The findings were well received by the members and resulted in an improved image of Extension by both groups.

## Footnotes

1. Allen L. Edwards, *Techniques of Attitude Scale Construction* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1957), pp. 83-119.
2. John G. Gross, "Evaluation of Extension in the Kaysinger Program Planning Area" (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1975), p. 9 and John G. Gross, "Evaluation of Extension in the Lake's Country Program Planning Area" (Columbia: University of Missouri, 1975).
3. Gross, "Evaluation of Extension in Kaysinger Program Planning Area," p. 10.
4. Gross, "Evaluation of Extension in Lake's Country Program Planning Area," p. 8.
5. Other farm organizations included Mid-America Dairymen, United Cooperatives, Livestock Association, etc.