

public relations— what, why, and wow!

LaVern A. Freeh

Public relations in Extension represents a growing need, a real opportunity, and a professional obligation for all Extension personnel in the years ahead.

Good Public Relations

Good public relations is critically important to Extension for any number of reasons. Let me cite a few.

More Institutions Involved

We live in a time when increasingly greater numbers of institutions, agencies, and organizations—public and private—are developing Extension-type programs—and Extension-like organizations. Adult and continuing education areas that once were almost exclusively the domain of the Cooperative Extension Service are becoming increasingly more attractive to other organizations and institutions, until it seems that everyone and everybody is getting into the act.

Unfortunately, some of these institutions are motivated more by the growing need to provide employment for instructors who are being displaced by declining enrollment than by well-developed educational objectives. But whatever their motivation, the fact is more and more institutions and organizations are getting into the continuing education business.

Funding's Difficult

Even as more institutions are getting involved in Extension education, there are signs that funds for educational programs—Extension or otherwise—are becoming more difficult to come by. As we look ahead, it's quite probable that this could well be the case for some time to come.

In such an environment, Extension will increasingly be called on to justify its programs, its motives, and itself.

Some people have already made up their minds about Extension in a highly negative fashion—and we need to be concerned. I'd call your attention to a "forum" in the July/August, 1975, *Journal of Extension* entitled "A

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Jaundiced View of Agricultural Extension” as an example of the kinds of uncomplimentary things some people are writing and saying about Extension.

Here’s a quote from that forum: “Extension has deteriorated to the point that it is not much good to anybody, except maybe the 15,000 Extension agents who otherwise would have to look for work.” There are other jaundiced statements in this jaundiced article—and unfortunately some people think they’re true.

We need to counteract this kind of negative thinking with positive examples of effective Extension programming.

Clientele Want Information

Abraham Lincoln once said, “Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment behind you, nothing can fail; without it—nothing can succeed. Those who mold public opinion have more impact on people than those who enact laws.” Lincoln was probably overstating the case for public relations at a time when public sentiment wasn’t in his favor. But certainly there’s no denying the fact that favorable public support is becoming increasingly important to the success and survival of our programs and organization.

In today’s environment, it’s critically important that we keep our clientele and our many publics adequately informed about our programs and appropriately involved in the process of clientele identification, needs assessment, program development, program implementation, and program evaluation. *That’s public relations.*

Extension’s Proud Record

We’ve built an outstanding Extension organization in America in less than 70 years—and all in Extension can be proud. But, it’s only a passing moment in terms of the future. None of us can afford to rest on past accomplishments. In the years ahead, we’ll need to do even better than we have in the past or we stand the risk of losing it all.

Each past success, and each facet of our current support, needs to be used to build an even better organization and more effective and responsive Extension education programs in the years ahead. Public relations will play a key role in our efforts.

Setting the Record Straight

Public relations is like the weather—it’s a term that’s often maligned and rather widely misunderstood.

Some people see it primarily as our interactions with the public, the people we come in contact with daily. Others see it as a hard-sell effort, often with questionable methods to gain public favor that’s probably not deserved. But to relegate

public relations to these two things, to our interactions with people and to unethical practices, would indeed be unfortunate.

Public relations, as I use the term, is the art and science of winning public acceptance and support for our programs, our organization, and ourselves as Extension educators. It's something we'll need more of in Extension in the years ahead as people become more discriminating in their expenditure of funds and support of programs.

The practice of public relations dates back nearly 2,000 years before Christ—and has always been aimed at influencing public opinion. But I like to think of it as *more than that*. To me, it also involves adjusting our own actions, attitudes, and programs, as the need arises—and continually communicating those adjustments back to the public.

We need to do more of that to gain public and legislative support for our organization and for our programs as the *competition for dollars and public support increases*. We need to do it effectively to enlist and involve a broad spectrum of people in program determination, development, and participation. We need to develop good public relations to establish a two-way communications flow that will keep people informed of our programs and keep us informed of the changing needs, concerns, and problems of people.

We need good public relations to create an environment of understanding, cooperation, and interaction that's necessary and indispensable for the successful growth and development of people-centered programs and organizations such as ours. We need good public relations to achieve our full potential as professional educators.

Public relations is a continual process—and needs to be a continuing goal for those who are striving for success in their programs and in their relationships with people.

Using Public Relations

So how do we use public relations as professional Extension educators? Four approaches come quickly to mind, three of which will ultimately fail. Let me briefly describe each approach—and ask you which method you use most often.

The *first approach* is the route of many amateurs—and far too many professionals. It involves *publicity for publicity's sake*—public relations without planning or regard for audience, purpose, or effectiveness. At worst, this approach creates as much bad public relations as good relations. And at best, it offers no assurance of accomplishing anything.

The *second approach* is based on the premise that good motives and good programs will produce a favorable public opinion environment. Those who follow this approach do very little in public relations because they feel that virtue earns its own reward. It's nice in theory, but it's simply not true. Maybe you're doing an outstanding job as an Extension educator, but if you're not letting people know about it, you're missing a real opportunity to do even better—for your programs, your organization, and yourself.

The *third approach* represents a public-be-damned attitude and is built on the crass and unfortunate assumption that it doesn't make any difference what the public thinks, as long as you're doing what you think is right. This method, too often used, severely handicaps any organization, its programs, and its people.

The *fourth approach*, and the only one worth pursuing in my estimation, involves good programs and good performance coupled with continual and well-planned efforts to keep the public informed about them. What we continually need to strive for is *good performance publicly understood and appreciated*.

Objective, Not Method

The methods for public relations, like the reasons for doing them, are numerous and many sided. They include all of the devices and communications media that are readily available to us—news stories, letters, brochures, speeches, meetings, booklets, open houses, and what have you. All are designed to help us tell the public about our programs and our organizations, if we'll take the time and exert the effort to use them.

Whatever the method, it's critically important that we tailor it to our audience—and that means using a variety of efforts to reach the broad variety of groups and individuals that make up our clientele. And we can't forget the general public either. Each effort needs to be different, and the message needs to be shaped to accomplish the primary objective of public relations—public acceptance and public support for our programs and organization.

Think of public relations as a circle—that begins and ends with integrity and understanding. First, there has to be integrity on our part and understanding. Understanding of our organization, our programs, our clientele groups, the methods and devices available to us for communicating our story, and an understanding of what it is we want to say, to whom we want to say it—and why.

Using this understanding as a base, we need to apply our judgment—making sure that what we’re planning to do is ethical, honest, acceptable, and will further our public relations’ purpose.

Then we prepare our message, putting it into the appropriate form for the public we’ve selected as our target—either general or specific.

Now we’re ready to deliver our message to our public and if we’ve planned well we should be able to do it with confidence, pride, and enthusiasm.

Once delivered, it’s back to understanding—trying to understand how well our message was understood, the effect it had, and the nature of the public’s reaction.

This, of course, lays the foundation for our next public relations effort and the cycle continues. *Public relations is a continual process—and needs to be a continuing goal for those who are striving for success in their programs and in their relationships with people.*

Enthusiasm’s Role

Effective public relations involves each of us thinking enough about our clientele and the public to keep them informed.

Effective public relations involves each of us thinking enough about our programs and our organization to tell the public about them.

Effective public relations involves each of us making our public feel they’re as important to us and our goals as we’d like our programs to be to them and their lives.

Effective public relations involves each of us helping our public to understand the character and importance of our programs to them—and the importance of their support to us.

In today’s inflationary environment, we face the challenge of making our communciations as good as our organization, our public relations efforts as good as our educational programs, our relationships with the American public as good as our goals and aspirations.

Good public relations based on acceptance, mutual trust, and enthusiasm is where it’s at in the years ahead.

And let me emphasize the word “enthusiasm,” because it’s the catalyst that fuels our efforts and makes us truly productive and creative. I call it our “WOW” factor.

- It’s our imagination coming up with new ideas, programs, and plans.
- It’s involving others in our program planning and implementation.

- It's feeling good when our programs accomplish something of significance and letting the public know about it.
- It's being positive and encouraging and sharing that feeling with others.
- It's taking the lead in something that needs to be done.
- It's the opposite of being against things—and doing nothing.
- It's letting people know that we appreciate their efforts and need their support.

Summary

The art of public relations isn't easy. It's not a some time thing. It requires continual attention and a great deal of effort, but the pay-offs are tremendous.

Given the nature of Extension education, and its high dependency on the support and involvement of people at all levels, it's obvious that our success and effectiveness will be determined to a great extent by our ability to relate our programs and our organization to our public—in a favorable light. That's public relations.

The character, success, and progress of Extension as an organization and each of our Extension programs 10 years from now—compared to today—will be a reflection of our ability, our efforts, and our enthusiasm for planning and coordinating good Extension education programs and effective public relations.

We've done well in the past. In the future, we have a tremendous opportunity and a professional obligation to do even better.