apples, oranges, and extension methods

K. Robert Kern

You can't compare apples and oranges.

You've heard that a thousand times. It's the conventional wisdom. But, like a lot of conventional wisdom, it's wrong.

You can compare apples and oranges! Just find the common factor between them—like nutritive value. Then you *can* compare the orange and the apple.

The conventional wisdom is that you can't compare a meeting with a news release as Extension methods. That comparison is like apples and oranges: find the common factor between them, and you *can* compare the two.

The problem is finding the common factor.

Here's a suggestion of a common factor that lets us compare any Extension method to another. That's simply *interaction:* interaction involving a subject concept and a member of a target audience.

We derive that factor from the Smith-Lever Act preamble. We're told to disseminate and encourage application of information on the subjects under the mandate. We've felt successful if the audience member became aware of, thought about, and made a decision whether to adopt or not to adopt. (That's what we mean by interaction.)

Quantitative Aspects

Tradition has encouraged us to measure quantity in judging our success. Fifty people at a meeting please us more than a turnout of 15. We can compare methods on a quantitative basis. We count noses. We ask TV stations for their ratings on our program. We look into newspaper circulation figures. We count the names on the newsletter mailing list.

But quantity isn't enough. If it were, who would hold a meeting? Who would sit still while one person comes to the office to talk for an hour?

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We need quality of interaction. We need substance in the interaction to help our audience get down and wrestle with the idea.

We've equated quality with first-hand evidence—the feedback during (and sometimes after) the interaction. On that basis, the mass or impersonal media haven't fared well. You have trouble seeing the human feedback when you're not there as an audience member explores concepts dealt with in an Extension feature on the home and family page. If we can't see it, we're likely to doubt there's much quality in the interaction.

Quality of Interaction

As the years have passed, we haven't been funded to dig deeply into this quality factor on an objective basis. Thus, we have no "linear program" to guide our decision processes when choosing methods.

But each of us has our own personalized "program" for choosing which methods to use.

This is a biased program. Not biased by intent, but biased by inattention, by the inherent difficulty in dealing with subjective data in an institution that takes pride in hard data— such as numerical measurements.

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Objectify the Subjective

An Extension professional with just a few years' experience has a storehouse of subjective data about methods. Most data were learned by self-evaluation. It's there and it guides behavior—largely at a subconscious level. Pull it out of the hidden shadows, learn from failures or successes.

It's possible—and defensible—to use this subjective data objectively. Do it on the basis of comparison—not in absolutes.

A Method

Here's the way it works. Begin with the Extension method that most experienced workers believe produces the greatest interaction between concept and audience member. That's where one person who has interest in a subject interacts one-to-one with a knowledgeable source on that subject.

Give that one-to-one consultation the highest comparative rating—a value of 1.0. It has the essentials for the highest quality of interaction: a person who wants knowledge, a

source who shares expertise, and the two in a situation of two-way communication—each party can transmit, read feedback, test response, restate, question, clarify, etc.

Audience Viewpoint

The equation we're building here is framed from the viewpoint of the audience member. Through his/her eyes, the best way to get the desired interaction with the available subject expert is by one-to-one consultation.

Now a comparison. Let's say the subject expert isn't available for one-to-one consultation. But, he/she is doing an evening meeting on the general topic. Our audience member can go to that meeting and may have a chance to ask a question or two when the program's over. From the audience member *viewpoint, how closely does that compare to one-to-one consultation? If the meeting will be half as useful to the* individual audience member, the meeting is valued at 0.5 on a scale with a top value of 1.0 for the consultation.

If our audience member doesn't like meetings and can't get a personal consultation, maybe he/she can read a publication prepared by the same expert source. How will that compare to a consultation? Maybe the publication can be one-tenth as useful as a consultation, one-fifth as useful as going to a meeting.

And you go on and on. You could apply this approach to every subject and perhaps every audience. It might become hopelessly confusing. Yet, the same kind of coefficients are hidden as feelings in each of us. We have no way to share these feelings objectively and no way to build a data base to evaluate methods without field research that would be too extensive and expensive.

To Classify Experience

This approach can be used by an individual Extension professional to examine and classify his/her own experience with methods. Using 1.0—the consultation—as the base, compare other methods.

A useful data base could be built by combining a large number of coefficients from random samplings of Extension staff. Establish mean coefficients for methods in much the same way that average nutritive values of oranges and apples are calculated.

Enlarging the Decision Model

If we had this "linear program" of methods, we could optimize our selection of Extension methods. Even without a computer, we could enlarge the scope of how we choose

Table 1. Putting the equation to work.

	Method productivity equation:							
	audience reached	X	method coefficient	=	interaction points	÷	time spent	=	method productivity[1]
Consultation	8		1.0		8.0		1.0 day(s)		8.0/day
Meeting	40		0.5		20.0		3.0		6.7/day
Workshop	15		0.75		11.25		2.0		5.6/day
Publication	400		0.1		40.0		4.0		10.0/day
Newsletter	400		0.15		60.0		2.0		30.0/day
News article	1,000		0.03		30.0		0.5		60.0/day
Radio talk	1,000		0.02		20.0		0.5		40.0/day
Television short	5,000		0.03		150.0		3.0		50.0/day
Television spot	20,000		0.002		40.0		1.0		40.0/day

[1] Expressed in interaction points per unit of time.

methods by using the coefficients to determine high-return methods.

Here's how it might work. Asssume that a program calls for emphasis on family budgeting for young marrieds. There are 20 days of work planned on this program during the year. How can we achieve the most for and with our audience from that time commitment?

By using the coefficients for this decision, we can eliminate making choices on the basis of what we, individually, like to do or are most comfortable doing. Look at it from the criterion of value to the potential audience. We can set up an equation to evaluate different methods (see Table 1). You need not agree with my coefficients—you can work out your own.

Feedback Desired

That's my case for comparing apples and oranges. And I have a hidden agenda. I'd like to test the idea with the relevant clientele—practicing Extension staff.

I invite you to make two kinds of feedback: (1) your own personal list of general coefficients—those that apply generally to the role you play in the Extension system and (2) on a continuum from "support" to "outraged," your own reaction to this kind of mechanistic treatment of a highly personalized and highly prized part of one's professional role.