# agricultural extension: who uses it?

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## Introduction

The last several decades have seen many changes in the structure of American agriculture. If current U.S. trends continue, a relatively few large commercial farm operations will produce a high proportion of the nation's farm output, and a parallel system of smaller operations which, while contributing relatively little to "production" will constitute the majority of farms. Some have called this a dualistic agricultural structure.

For Extension, two questions are relevant. First, what's the current situation regarding the use of Extension services by the different segments of the agricultural community? Second, what client groups should Extension be working with if the current trends continue? The first question is one that can be researched and will be the primary focus of this article. However, by analyzing current patterns of contact with Extension among a broad cross-section of farm operators, some conclusions about the second question can be drawn, even though they're basically value judgments.

**. . . In the light of the trends in agricultural structure and the current content of Extension programming, the absence of a decision on program alternatives is in effect a decision—namely to keep doing business as usual. . . .**

## Background

Inquiries into the pattern of use of Extension services aren't new. During the 1950s, there were a number of studies done on this topic. A comprehensive summary can be found in an article by Slocum.[1] In reviewing the research on the characteristics of low contact people, he found evidence that

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these people tended to be younger, less educated, only partially dependent on farming, smaller in terms of farm size, and lower in socioeconomic status, level of living, and social participation. Later, Straus found that Extension participants tended to be higher in managerial ability, education (agricultural education in particular), and size of operation.[2]

Fuguitt, in looking specifically at part-time farmers, found that Extension contact was higher among those who had been full-time farmers than it was for former nonfarmers.[3] He concluded that the order of work experience was important in explaining the pattern of use of Extension services.

The popularity of this research topic has declined since 1960.[4] However, agriculture has continued to undergo many changes. Thus, it's important to look at current agricultural Extension usage patterns to see if they've undergone change.

## Methodology

The data for this study were collected as a part of the Spring, 1978, Missouri Agricultural Poll. A sample of 3,000 farmers was drawn from the list of 115,000 farmers maintained by the Missouri Crop and Livestock Reporting Service. While the 115,000 figure doesn't include *all* the farmers in the state, it includes nearly 90% of them.

Each of the 3,000 individuals in the sample received a mailed questionnaire and 770 were returned. Of these 691 were usable. While the response rate wasn't as high as we'd hoped, the characteristics of this sample closely resembled those of previous polls and compared favorably with the secondary data available on Missouri farm operators.

We assessed the extent and nature of contact with Extension through the use of four questions:

1. Frequency of use of bulletins or other printed information designed to help with the farm operation.
2. Frequency of seeking information from the county Extension office.
3. Frequency of attendance at Extension meetings where agricultural information was presented.
4. Frequency of visits of Extension specialists to respondent's farm operation.

Each of these was measured on a four-point scale: 1=not at all; 2=once or twice; 3=three to five times; 4=more than five times. To simplify the presentation of the data, we've summarized the scale and presented our results in terms of means. However, to amplify certain results, we'll occasionally report in percentages.

To examine differences in frequency of contact, we focused our attention on five variables: age of the farm operator, size of farm operation, type of operation, percentage of family income derived from the farm operation, and whether the farm operator worked off the farm. Table 1 shows the categories used to measure these variables.

**Table 1. Relationship of independent variables to degree and nature of contact with agricultural Extension.**

| Independent variables | Use of agricultural Extension publications | Visits to Extension office | Attendance at meetings | Specialist's farm visits |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean annual contact score[a] | | | |
| Age | | | | |
| 18-34 | 2.47 (83)[b] | 2.26 | 1.81 | 1.44 |
| 35-49 | 2.18 (186) | 1.92 | 1.71 | 1.46 |
| 50-64 | 2.06 (229) | 1.73 | 1.63 | 1.26 |
| 65 and over | 1.97 (162) p<.02[c] | 1.63 p<.01 | 1.39 p<.01 | 1.17 p<.01 |
| Farm size (acres) | | | | |
| 127 or less | 1.92 (151) | 1.64 | 1.35 | 1.14 |
| 128-262 | 2.10 (164) | 1.75 | 1.46 | 1.33 |
| 263-540 | 2.15 (168) | 1.87 | 1.64 | 1.28 |
| 541-2,700 | 2.49 (130) p<.01 | 2.20 p<.01 | 2.16 p<.01 | 1.59 p<.01 |
| Type of operation | | | | |
| Cash grain | 2.21 ( 81) | 1.95 | 1.77 | 1.31 |
| Beef | 1.97 (178) | 1.64 | 1.41 | 1.17 |
| Hogs | 2.50 (130) | 2.18 | 1.93 | 1.67 |
| Dairy | 1.92 ( 25) | 1.68 | 1.60 | 1.52 |
| Combination | 2.20 (331) p<.02 | 1.89 p<.01 | 1.66 p<.01 | 1.36 p<.01 |
| Percent of total family income from farm operation | | | | |
| Less than 24% | 1.95 (153) | 1.73 | 1.36 | 1.20 |
| 25%-49% | 2.32 ( 78) | 1.91 | 1.58 | 1.38 |
| 50%-89% | 2.15 (150) | 1.84 | 1.58 | 1.31 |
| 90% or more | 2.21 (251) p<.05 | 1.89 p<.05 | 1.84 p<.01 | 1.39 p<.05 |
| Work off farm | | | | |
| Yes—full-time | 2.07 (174) | 1.82 | 1.45 | 1.29 |
| Yes—part-time | 2.14 ( 91) | 1.80 | 1.56 | 1.27 |
| No | 2.14 (340) p<.05 | 1.86 p<.05 | 1.73 p<.01 | 1.34 p<.05 |

[a] Annual contact scores were: 1=not at all, 2=once or twice, 3=three to five times, 4=more than five times.

[b] Figures in parentheses are number of cases.

[c] Differences between means were tested via analysis of variance.

## Results

*Publications*

The use of agricultural Extension publications was quite varied. Thirty-five percent of the respondents hadn't read any of these publications at all, 33% had read them once or twice, and 32% had read them more than 3 times. The heavier users of this source of information tended to be younger farmers, those with a relatively large amount of land, and pork producers. Dependence on farming and the part-time/full-time distinction weren't strongly related to use of Extension publications.

*Office Visits*

When asked about visits to their county Extension office, 45% of the farmers indicated they hadn't been to the office during the past year, 35% said they'd gone in once or twice, and 20% went in 3 or more times. Again, it was the younger and larger farmers and the pork producers who'd made the most trips.

*Meetings*

Extension meetings were a less frequent source of information than either publications or visits to the county Extension office. The majority of farmers (56%) indicated they hadn't been to any meetings during the past year, 30% reported they had been to 1 or 2, and 14% had attended 3 or more.

The characteristic most strongly related to attendance at meetings was farm size . . . larger farmers reported a higher frequency of attendance than smaller farmers. For example, 35% of the large farmers attended 3 or more meetings as compared with 6% of the small farmers. At the other extreme, only 29% of the large farmers attended *no* meetings versus 71% of the small farmers.

In addition, the percentage of family-income-from-farm variable and the part-time/full-time distinction produced somewhat stronger effects than they did in the two previous cases. As you might expect, increasing dependence on farming as a source of family income was positively related to attendance at meetings, and part-time farmers were less likely to attend such activities (two-thirds of the farmers who worked off the farm attended no meetings compared with 48% who farmed full-time).

*Farm Visits*

The last item concerned visits by Extension specialists to an individual farmer's operation. This proved to be the least frequent source of contact as 77% of the farmers indicated that no such visits had occurred during the past year. Sixteen percent said they'd been visited once or twice and only seven

percent were visited three or more times. Those visited most often were the large farmers.

Pork producers also reported a higher number of visits than any other farm type. In percentage terms, only 10% of those in the small farm size category were visited compared with 42% of the large farmers. Likewise, only 15% of the beef farmers reported they had been visited compared with 35% of the other 4 types combined. Interestingly, pork producers were most likely to have been visited three or more times.

## Implications

There's evidence that the distribution of Extension resources isn't uniform across all categories of farmers. The criticism that Extension programs are directed at "large, successful" farmers is at least partially supported by the data, although not to the extent that some would have us believe.

The unanswered question, of course, is one of causal ordering. What is the pattern of influence between farmer characteristics and frequency of contact with Extension? For example, do smaller farmers have less contact with Extension because of some systematic bias on the part of either Extension personnel, publications, or programs, or do the individual characteristics that may contribute to their being "small" in the first place also make them less likely to seek out such help? Unfortunately, the answer can't be determined from our data.

If the trends in U.S. agriculture mentioned earlier in this article continue (declining number of "family farms," more part-time farmers, etc.), the implications for Extension are considerable. Extension has traditionally assumed, for programming purposes, that its audience is relatively homogeneous. In the early decades of its existence, that was a reasonable and responsible course of action, as most farms were relatively small and largely self-sufficient.

However, the last three decades have witnessed a marked change in the social structure of rural America. Our concern is that Extension's programming hasn't seen a corresponding adjustment. This has resulted in a substantial erosion of political support directly proportioned to Extension's declining clientele base.

Two decades ago, W. L. Slocum commented:

> The fact that part-time farmers are increasing in numbers, however, raises questions about the defensibility of programs, policies and methods which apparently favor those who depend primarily on farming; many of the latter probably have less need for agricultural education services than the former.[5]

*The question that Extension personnel must address* themselves to is: Who should be the beneficiaries of Extension programming?

If Extension takes as its principal concern the production of food and fiber, then working exclusively with large-scale commercial farms might be an appropriate choice. On the other hand, Extension could choose to focus its efforts on farmers, regardless of their contribution to the total production of food and fiber.

As we've already noted, a large proportion of farmers contribute relatively little to overall production figures. Nonetheless, they constitute a significant segment of the rural population. The goals for programs directed at *farmers,* contrasted with those directed at *farms,* wouldn't necessarily include production as the first priority, but might more properly focus on human or natural resource development.

It could be argued that programs focusing on production and human resource development aren't mutually exclusive. However, in practice, it seems that they're rarely integrated. With the exception of projects such as the Missouri Small Farm Program, there have been few attempts to serve the needs of small farmers. Even the Missouri program was an "add-on" in the sense that it involved new funds rather than a reallocation of existing resources.

Our call to Extension personnel, whether at the state or local level, is to explicitly address these questions now. It's imperative that Extension programming recognize the changes that have occurred in the structure of U.S. agriculture, particularly at the local level. No single approach will be adequate. Extension will need to employ a variety of approaches designed to best meet local needs.

Expertise should be marshaled to adequately address the problems of large *and* small producers. To date, this knowledge has clearly been slanted toward the former. In a similiar vein, the administrators of state Extension organizations should develop a broadened system of evaluative criteria that would encourage local specialists to assess their situation and make programmatic adjustments.

## A Final Point

Before closing, one final point must be made. In the light of the trends in agricultural structure and the current content of Extension programming, the absence of a decision on program alternatives is in effect a decision—namely to keep doing business as usual. That choice, even if made unconsciously, could prove in the long-term to have devastating consequences for Extension's already weakened base of

support. Extension leadership may have to be prepared to suffer short-term losses of support for long-term gains. In any event, the time for discussion and decision has arrived.

## Footnotes

1. W. L. Slocum, "Attributes of Farm Families with Low Frequency of Contact with Agricultural Extension," *Rural Sociology,* XXII (September, 1957), 281-84. It should be noted that Slocum's review looked at both farmers and homemakers, but we've only summarized his findings for farmers.
2. M. A. Straus, "Marginal Selectivity of Intensive Extension Work," *Rural Sociology,* XXIV (June, 1959), 150-61.
3. G. Fuguitt, "Career Patterns of Part-Time Farmers and Their Contact with the Agricultural Extension Service," *Rural Sociology,* XXX (March, 1965), 49-62.
4. In reviewing the *Journal of Extension* for the past 10 years, we couldn't find any articles concerned with the characteristics of audiences. There were reports on program awareness, but nothing relating to the types of audiences programs were reaching. Our paper speaks to this gap.
5. Slocum, *Attributes of Farm Families,* 283.