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# **Does the General Public Know the Extension Service? A Survey of Ohio Residents**

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**Abstract:** This article presents results of an assessment of the familiarity of the general public of Ohio with OSU Extension and the means of contact with OSU Extension. One-fifth of respondents were familiar with programs and services OSU Extension provides. Agriculture and Natural Resources area programs were most popular among those Ohio residents familiar with OSU Extension. Reading a publication was the most likely way of knowing about OSU Extension. Ohio residents reported a positive, above-average value for their satisfaction with OSU Extension's programs and services, and indicated that they would recommend OSU Extension to others.

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## **Introduction**

Ohio State University Extension (OSU Extension) has a long and rich history. The Ohio State University has been involved in outreach and engagement for more than 100 years, even before the Smith-Lever act of 1914 created the Extension Service. Since its creation, OSU Extension has been an important force in Ohio for rural education and technology transfer.

There have been many changes in OSU Extension's audiences over time. Initially, OSU Extension's primary focus was on education and technology transfer for farm businesses (Adolfson, 1947). Over time, its audiences have expanded to focus on rural society more broadly, and in recent years, to focus on the needs of all Ohio citizens and communities (Peters, O'Connell, Alter, & Jack, 2006). This expanded focus has required the addition of educators and researchers with the expertise to meet the needs of this broader

clientele.

OSU Extension has also seen major changes in its funding model over time. Initially, the bulk of funding was from federal sources. Over time, this has evolved, with funding now coming from four primary sources: federal, state, local, and extramural (Martin, 2002). The future may hold still further changes, with increased pressure that federal funding will be issued on a more competitive basis and less through formula funds. Extramural funding and competitive federal funding are likely to create pressure for continued changes in the content and focus of Extension education programs (King & Boehlje, 2000).

OSU Extension, like most other state Cooperative Extension Services, faces the challenges of meeting an increasing number of demands with a dwindling and more restrictive budget (Ahearn, Yee, & Bottum, 2003). The number of potential client groups and topic areas continues to grow, and combined with the current model of an OSU Extension office in each county, strains the organization's budget. This raises a series of interrelated and vexing questions concerning which services to offer and with what organizational structure in order to maximize client utility given fixed or declining OSU Extension budgets (McDowell, 2001).

The study reported here was conducted at a time when OSU Extension was completing an organization-wide strategic planning process. The intent of this process was to carefully consider the educational programs of the organization and the methods used to deliver these educational programs to ensure that OSU Extension is able to complete its mission in an effective and efficient manner. Key information needed for this planning exercise included an assessment of the demand for various types of information and educational programming by the general public of Ohio and objective information about how best to deliver this information to its people. The data collected to provide this critical information is summarized in this article.

## Sample Characteristics

A total of 3,000 questionnaires were mailed to randomly selected Ohio residents in May and June 2007 following best survey practices (Dillman, 2006). In order to guarantee sufficient representation of respondents in rural areas, we used a sampling procedure that drew an equal number of addresses from rural and urban areas of Ohio. A weighting procedure was applied in the calculation of all statistics so that estimates are representative of the population of all Ohio residents. A total of 943 surveys were received, for an overall response rate of 32%. The number of usable surveys for data analysis was 787.

The most noticeable characteristic of the respondents was their age distribution, from very young (18 years) to very old (105 years) residents, with a large group of Baby Boomer respondents. Almost naturally, the sample fell into three generations.

1. *Generation X*: These respondents were born in 1965 or later. They are also considered the post-baby boomer generation. This group of respondents comprised 15% of the sample (N=117).
2. *Baby Boomer generation*: These respondents were born between 1946 and 1964. It was the largest group of our sample consisting of 47% of respondents (N=371).
3. *World War generation*: These respondents were born before 1946. They are also called the pre-baby boomer generation. It was the second-largest group of respondents comprising 38% of the sample (N=299).

## Results

### Familiarity with OSU Extension

About one-quarter of respondents answered "yes" to the question of whether they "know about the programs and services OSU Extension provides". This response rate varied among the three age groups as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Familiarity With OSU Extension

	<b>All (N, %)</b>	<b>Generation X (N, %)</b>	<b>Baby Boomers (N, %)</b>	<b>World War Generation (N, %)</b>
Respondents (N = 787)	165 (21.0%)	21 (18.3%)	67 (18.0%)	77 (25.7%)
Note: ANOVA F=3.273, p=.038				

### Participation in OSU Extension Programs

Of the 165 survey respondents who were familiar with OSU Extension, the largest group had participated (during the past 3 years) in programs provided by the Agriculture and Natural Resources program area of OSU Extension. About one-third had participated in 4-H Youth Development programs and about one-fifth in Family and Consumer Sciences and Community Development programs during the past 3 years. Table 2 shows that program participation among the three age groups differed for Agriculture and Natural Resources and Community Development programs. In both program areas, Generation X respondents were most likely and Baby Boomers were least likely to have participated in these programs.

**Table 2.**  
Participation in OSU Extension Programs in the Past Three Years (N=165; OSUE-Familiar Sample)

	<b>Range</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>World War Generation</b>
		<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
Agriculture and Natural Resources (F=2.8375, p=.061)	0-1	.41 (.493)	.58 (.505)	.31 (.467)	.44 (.500)
4-H Youth Development (F=1.725, n.s.)	0-1	.23 (.422)	.40 (.502)	.20 (.400)	.21 (.411)
	0-1		.33 (.481)	.16 (.372)	.17 (.374)

Family and Consumer Sciences (F=.229, n.s.)		.19 (.390)			
Community Development (F=3.143, p=.045)	0-1	.17 (.379)	.29 (.467)	.13 (.335)	.18 (.385)
N		165	21	67	77
Note: Responses were 1=yes, 0=no, n.s. = no significant difference among the three age groups					

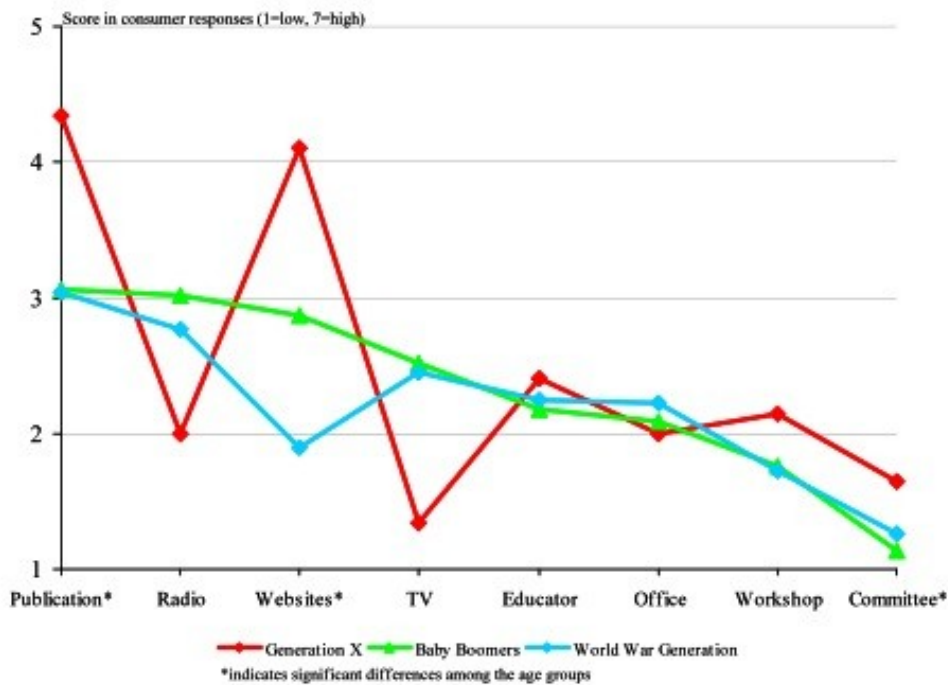
## Means of Contact With OSU Extension

To examine the question of how often respondents had contact with OSU Extension in the recent past, respondents were presented with a list of eight means of contact with OSU Extension (Schnitkey, Batte, Jones, & Botomogno, 1992):

- Read a publication
- Listened to a report on the radio
- Watched a report on TV
- Visited one of its Websites
- Visited a county office
- Called or spoke with an educator
- Attended a meeting or workshop
- Served on a planning or advisory committee

Respondents were asked to rate each means of contact on a scale from 1=never to 7=every week and to limit their response to contacts in the past 3 years. Overall, contact by "reading a publication" was the most likely means of getting in touch with OSU Extension. "Listened to a report on the radio" and "visited one of its Websites" ranked second and third on this list. Less frequently reported was direct contact with an educator, participation in meetings, or on advisory committees. Figure 1 illustrates that the responses of the three age groups were similar except for the use of OSU Extension's Website (its use decreased with increasing age of respondents), reading a publication (increased with increasing age of respondents), and serving on a committee (decreased with increasing age of respondents).

**Figure 1.**  
Means of Contact with OSU Extension (N=165; OSUE-familiar sample)



## Criteria for Participation in Workshops

Because educational workshops and classes are one of the major avenues of OSU Extension's programming efforts (Roe, Haab, & Sohngen, 2004), we inquired about the characteristic of workshops that were of particular value to Ohio residents. Respondents could choose among nine statements to indicate their workshop preferences:

- The workshop is scheduled at convenient hours
- The workshop is located close by you
- The presenters have the knowledge to do their job well
- The workshop answers your questions
- The presenters are professionally dressed and neat in appearance
- The workshop is held in a modern-looking space
- The workshop gives you personal attention

- The workshop is geared to your interests
- The workshop is offered at low or no cost

Responses to each statement were made on a scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly agree. Table 3 shows that the most important workshop feature was the presenters having the knowledge to do their job well. The statements about "having answered one's questions" and "having the workshop geared to one's interests" followed next. Less important features of workshops were convenient hours, personal attention, and a modern-looking space. The answers differed significantly for the three age groups. Overall, Generation X respondents had higher demands on workshop features, while the World War generation cared less about the workshop qualities described in the nine statements.

**Table 3.**  
Criteria for Participation in Workshop or Classes

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>All</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>World War Generation</b>
		<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
Presenters have the knowledge to do their job well (F=26.294, p<.000)	1-7	5.95 (1.430)	6.27 (.915)	6.22 (1.141)	5.49 (1.763)
Workshop answers one's questions (F=25.189, p<.000)	1-7	5.82 (1.458)	6.20 (.914)	6.06 (1.181)	5.37 (1.792)
Workshop is geared to one's interests (F=19.716, p<.000)	1-7	5.74 (1.446)	6.12 (.959)	5.94 (1.211)	5.35 (1.753)
Workshop is located close by (F=33.275, p<.000)	1-7	5.53 (1.527)	6.02 (.999)	5.81 (1.283)	4.99 (1.799)
Workshop is offered at low or no cost (F=10.736, p<.000)	1-7	5.53 (1.524)	5.97 (1.153)	5.61 (1.365)	5.25 (1.771)
Workshop is scheduled at convenient hours (F=48.624, p<.000)	1-7	5.52 (1.567)	6.15 (1.007)	5.84 (1.322)	4.86 (1.788)
Workshop gives you personal attention (F=3.850, p=.022)	1-7	4.78 (1.584)	5.09 (1.491)	4.81 (1.461)	4.62 (1.744)

Presenters are professionally dressed and neat in appearance (F=4.049, p=.018)	1-7	4.55 (1.667)	4.91 (1.615)	4.41 (1.594)	4.59 (1.756)
Workshop is held in a modern-looking space (F=.909, n.s.)	1-7	3.91 (1.571)	3.87 (1.705)	3.85 (1.455)	4.01 (1.653)
N (= 787)		787	117	371	299
Note: Responses ranged from 1=completely disagree to 7=completely agree, n.s. = no significant difference among the three age groups					

### Satisfaction and Recommendation of OSU Extension Programs

The final set of questions inquired about the satisfaction with programs and services provided by OSU Extension and the likelihood of recommending them to others. With respect to respondents' satisfaction with OSU Extension's programs and services, respondents were asked to indicate their satisfaction on a scale from 1=very dissatisfied to 7=very satisfied. Table 4 shows that OSU Extension received a mean score of 5.64 on this scale, indicating satisfactory programs and services.

With respect to recommending OSU Extension to others, respondents could again choose their response on a single scale ranging from 1=not likely to 7=very likely. Table 4 shows that OSU Extension received a mean score of 5.72 on this scale, indicating that Ohio residents familiar with its programs and services would recommend them to others. There were no significant differences in the answers among the three age groups for both measures of satisfaction and recommendation.

**Table 4.**

Satisfaction and Recommendation of OSU Extension by Ohio Residents Familiar with Extension

	Range	All	Generation X	Baby Boomers	World War Generation
		Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Satisfaction with the programs and services provided by OSU Extension (F=1.465, n.s.)	1-7	5.64 (1.330)	5.30 (1.206)	5.59 (1.157)	5.79 (1.490)
Likelihood to recommend OSU Extension to others (F=.780, n.s.)	1-7	5.72 (1.347)	5.56 (1.301)	5.73 (1.058)	5.76 (1.578)
N		165	21	67	77

Note: Responses ranged from 1=completely disagree to 7=completely agree; n.s. = no significant difference among the three age groups

## Conclusions

The survey results lead to the following conclusions that may guide Extension program content and targeting for the future.

1. Only one-fifth of Ohio residents are familiar with Extension's programs. On average, the two younger generations differed from the older generation by 7 percentage points. The divide is greater still in urban and suburban counties. It indicates a great potential for Extension to expand its reach by targeting these groups with appropriate information.
2. We observed major differences in preferences for both the four Extension disciplines and delivery methods across groups. This is most apparent by age group, but differences were also observed by rural or urban location. This suggests significant potential for OSU Extension to better target its programs and delivery methods to best fit the needs of its various clientele. This has the potential to expand OSU Extension's audiences, to better serve these groups, and thus to increase customer satisfaction with OSU Extension. Better targeting of delivery methods cannot only increase program effectiveness, but also may increase organizational efficiency.
3. Although the residents familiar with OSU Extension tended to give it high-satisfaction scores, we observed differences among residents, particularly by age group and for rural versus urban county location. *Customer satisfaction* is a key measure of organizational effectiveness for any service organization. Educators will benefit from a better understanding of key factors associated with client satisfaction. For instance, many of these factors are associated with key consumer demographics, such as age, and thus are likely to change over time.
4. Private consumer information and service providers offer information to citizens on a fee or subscription basis. These sources may substitute for OSU Extension's services for some residents, but may be a complement for others. Extension educators may consider how to use partnerships with complementary sources (e.g., local businesses, general interest magazines) to extend the reach and recognition of OSU Extension. Extension should also reconsider its branding of products so that information released to other media outlets will continue to bear its identity.

What are the questions that need to be answered to respond to the study finding? Marketing literature (Keller, 2000; Sandberg, 2001) suggests the following list.

- *Extension clients*. Have studies been conducted on a regular basis at the local and state level to identify unmet client needs and wants? Have quantitative, methodologically sound methods been chosen for this task? Has the collective expertise of college and university been utilized? What are the steps taken to continuously improve clients' experience with Extension products and services? Is a system in place for collecting feedback from clients and for sharing this feedback with administrative teams?



- *Extension products and services.* Have investments in educator training and outreach projects been made that relentlessly increase the value for clients? Do educators know about client preferences and experiences? Do they know about new trends and the changes in demographic and socio-economic situations in their counties? Are new communication technologies embraced? Are administrative decisions based on that knowledge?
- *Product and service delivery.* Have staffing, educational offerings, and service quality been optimized to meet or exceed client expectations? Is a system in place that monitors client perceptions of product quality and service delivery? Is Extension marketing on the state level consistent with the messages on the local level? Are local programs adjusted to keep current with statewide efforts and vice versa?
- *The Extension brand.* Do Extension educators and administrators know what clients like and don't like about Extension products and services? Are decision makers aware of the core associations people make with Extension, whether intended by Extension or unintended? Have detailed, research-based profiles of the target clients been created? Have these profiles been used to guide Extension products, educational services, and marketing programs?

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