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Lessons from Outstanding County Agents

Shanna Smith

Former Graduate Student
College of Agriculture, IRM

Dana Hoag

Professor
Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics
dhoag@colostate.edu

Kraig Peel

Department of Animal Science
kraig.peel@colostate.edu

Colorado State University
Fort Collins, Colorado

Abstract: This article examines outstanding agents, based on a qualitative survey of 10 successful agents from Colorado, Idaho, Wyoming, and Oregon. Interviewees completed a four-question survey about their perceptions about why they are successful, including their own behavior, their clientele, and the resources available to them from the county and state. Extension leadership can make agents more successful if they are mentored by successful agents, are provided resources, including research, and given flexibility. Agents can help their cause if they have a strong work ethic, are knowledgeable, build strong relationships in their territory, and deliver information in a timely manner.

Introduction

The current economic condition in the U.S. is driving an uncertain future for Extension. Threats extend beyond financial; Extension is also threatened by competing government factions, competitive advantages in privatization (e.g., the Internet), and a negative political climate (Hoag, 2005; King & Boehlje, 2000; Boehlje, 1998). The most obvious course of action might be to demonstrate to the public that Extension is invaluable and should be maintained.

Proving that Extension has been valuable is not difficult. Extension has an impressive history of serving up valuable returns. Total agricultural productivity increased almost 2% per year in the last half of the 20th century. Output increased by 150% over this 50-year period, without increasing inputs (Hoag, 2005). This productivity was financed with tax dollars, but the rate of return on those tax dollars was higher than what could have been earned if the money had been invested in the stock market instead. The authors of *A Meta-Analysis of Rates of Return to Agricultural R&D* (Alston, Chan-Kang, Marra, &, Pardey, 2000) found a high rate of return to investments in both Extension and research.

Another strategy is to simply make Extension more effective. The *Journal of Extension* is an exemplary forum for exchanging ideas and information to lead this effort. Arguably, agents are a key to Extension's effectiveness and consequently its public image. They are the eyes, ears, and face of Extension. Of course they receive a lot of education and training, but not all agents are equally effective. Some argue that "Extension needs to do a better job of preparing and developing individuals to be future leaders within the organization" (Strong & Harder, 2009, p. 5).

So, what makes some agents more effective than others? Successful agents probably can be found in every state; those agents who are struggling to succeed might benefit from learning what these agents do, which might prevent further erosion of the Extension system. All agents could benefit from knowledge about how experienced agents have become and continue to be successful and what is required from the environment around them to cultivate success. It would be good to know what leaders do to become successful. What does the county do to help? What does the state do? How does the nature of the clientele help or hurt their success?

Our objective in this article is to examine how county agents can be most effective. We used a qualitative survey to ask a select group of agents with outstanding reputations why they are effective. We then extracted and synthesized lessons to make available to other agents. We begin with a short review of what published research has shown about agent effectiveness.

Previous Studies About Extension Agents

Two earlier studies provide precedent for this qualitative study. A 1991 article in the *Journal of Extension*, "Critical Factors for Successful Programs" (Casey & Krueger), summarized interviews with 20 agricultural agents; 10 of these were identified as exemplary program planners. A content analysis was used to extract information from the 10 exemplary agents. Based on this analysis, the authors identified areas common to successful agents. Successful agents' searched for program ideas from a broad and "eclectic" range of sources. These agents promoted and created interest in their ideas. They were forward looking but did not ignore lessons from the past, and they set priorities. Finally, these agents did not measure success in numbers.

The second study came 10 years later in the form of a survey of Extension agents (Cooper & Graham, 2001). Respondents in that survey identified 57 core competencies of outstanding Extension agents. Interestingly, character traits rated at the top. The authors recommend that agents receive training in all areas identified as "very important," which included public relations and developing good work habits.

Another published area of interest is agent retention studies, which reveal what agent's prioritize for job retention. Riggs and Beus (1993) identified six factors for high job satisfaction: the job itself, salary, fringe benefits, authority to run programs, supervisors, and opportunity for growth. Strong & Harder (2009) recommend that mentoring programs be created for beginning agents to reduce turnover. Having an experienced agent to call and ask questions of was greatly appreciated by the agents whom they interviewed.

Methods

We chose to interview 10 outstanding agents by phone, e-mail, or personal interviews, using a qualitative survey, and then to analyze that survey information with content analysis. Normally, more interviews would be desired, but we limited our survey to assure that our stratum only included exceptional agents with similar job responsibilities and focused on asking each respondent to provide a lot of information. We also limited ourselves to livestock-oriented agents in western mountain states, to reduce any confounding variations that

may exist across regions or responsibilities.

Five agents were chosen initially by asking Extension administrators and campus program coordinators to list agents whom they felt were exceptionally effective. There was very high agreement about the five initial names chosen. The agents originally chosen were from Colorado, Oregon, Wyoming, and Idaho. The remaining five agents were recommended by the initial agents we interviewed. Each of the agents interviewed has a reputation of being highly effective and therefore qualified to contribute to documenting the requirements of success.

There is vast literature on qualitative research techniques. Qualitative research is more subjective than quantitative research. Creswell (2003) notes that 19 complete qualitative procedures have been outlined in the sociological literature alone. Qualitative research generally relies on individual, in-depth interviews or focus groups. The method and questions are open ended in order to explore people's perceptions without any priors being introduced by the researchers. The technique can provide more depth and accuracy when researchers have limited knowledge about the scope of the answers to expect, or the questions and information are not easily compartmentalized. In this case, the objective was to uncover what makes agents excel, which is more effectively elicited from a qualitative survey because it inquires about attributes that are not fully known or understood by the researcher. A quantitative survey, or qualitative survey with an expanded scope in content and demographics, would be appropriate as a follow-up to the survey reported here.

We developed four basic questions based on the literature review and discussion with Extension specialists and administrators.

1. What are some qualities that help make you a good Extension agent?
2. What is it about your county that helps you be a successful Extension agent?
3. What does the Extension system do to make you a good Extension agent?
4. What can young agents do early in their career to set themselves up to be successful?

These questions were designed to disentangle the impact of personal attributes from resources and supervision. The responses were recorded in abbreviated themes for each question using content analysis (Krippendorff & Bock, 2008), which is a method commonly used in social sciences to make "inferences by objectively and systematically identifying specified characteristics of messages" (Holsti, 1969). An example of the response themes systematically collected from the interview responses to Question 1 is provided in Table 1. We then determined the frequency for the number of agents who made each comment and the number of times the comment was made, because some agents made the same comment multiple times.

The resulting answers and frequency of times each was mentioned are reported and discussed below for each of the four questions.

Results

Example responses for four agents show that these agents share many common views about what makes them successful (Table 1). For example, six major themes were identified for the first question: work ethic, relationships, detailed knowledge and communication, access to resources, time frame, and local research. All four of these agents mentioned relationships with clientele/community leaders, and all four mentioned that it is important have detailed knowledge about their subject matter and ability to communicate it. Only one mentioned access to resources.

Table 1.
What Are Some Qualities That Help Make You a Good Extension Agent?

Agent A	Agent B	Agent C	Agent D
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work hard • Get along with people • You need to develop a level of expertise that people appreciate • Be a team player, as generally good teams produce strong programs • Regionalization is big; having the resources across the region makes it more feasible to have larger programs with more available and specialized focus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work ethic that is evident on every project. • Make up for knowledge with HARD WORK to get ahead. • You need the relationships with those around you, you don't come in with raw knowledge; you need the ability to work with a variety of different people. • Trusting those you work with is hard 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work ethic evident on every project • Connected to the community • Clientele doesn't need basic information, need detailed • Provide research information in a form that is understandable; real and practical • Do on-the-ground research to answer problems at the local level • Be available when clientele need answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be real • Realize you will never know everything • It is all about relationships. • Producers; adults take longer to build relationships with, but it makes it easier for them to be able to pick up the phone and have a 2 way conversation. • Always try and answer questions within 24 hours. • They are more likely to use the agent as a source if they already have a relationship.

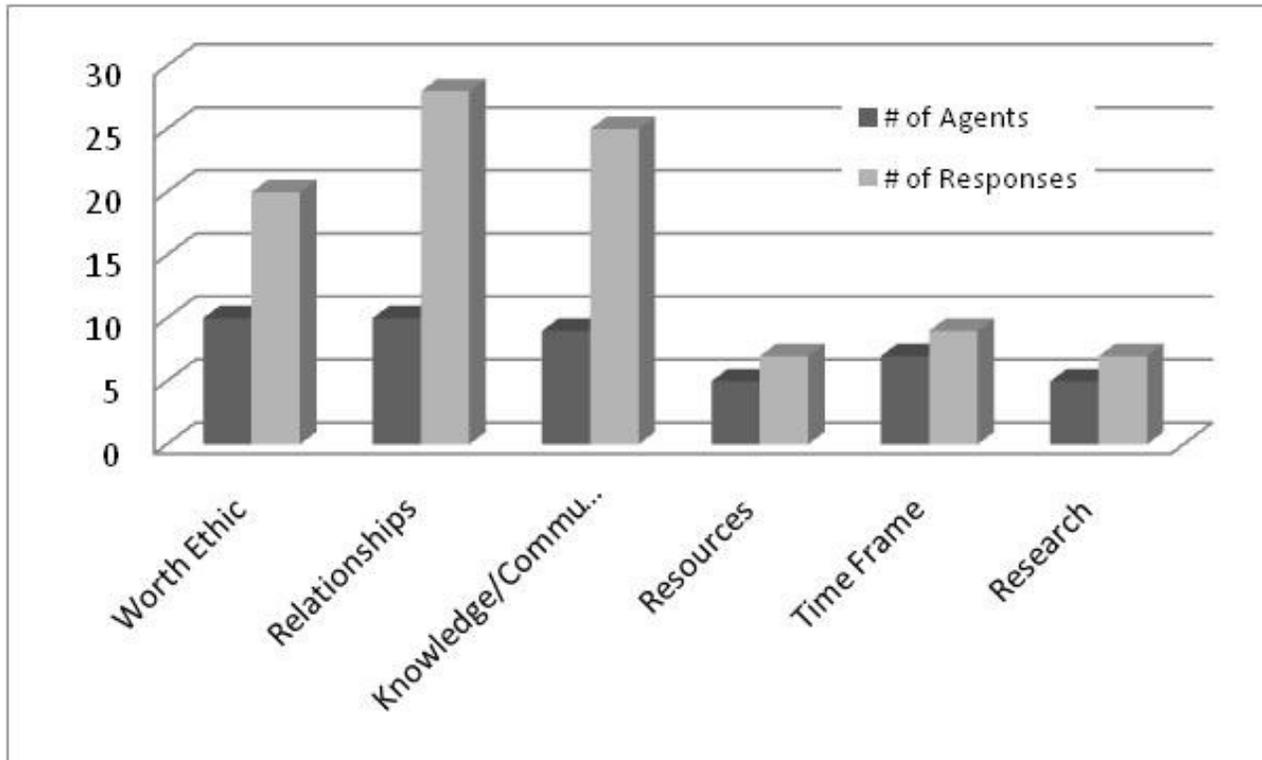
	<p>but you must do it anyway.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ok to say you don't know; just get back to them with the info. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Technical expert • Communicate the full body of knowledge on a subject • Tackle the hard issues that need science and a level of understanding that may not be immediately present • Take on campus when needed. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know the Co. Commissioners, politics are huge and you need that positive relationship with them. • The media to further the Extension livelihood.
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The results for all 10 agents also have been summarized in four figures, one for each question. Responses are grouped into categories and reported by the number of agents who made each comment (A) and the total number of times the comment was made (B). Category B was needed because several agents made the same comment multiple times. The results for each question are discussed in order below.

Figure 1 summarizes the responses to the first question: "What are some qualities that help make you a good Extension agent?" Six themes emerged. The first was that an agent needs a strong work ethic. The second was that it is important to have strong relationships with stakeholders and county leaders. The third involved having the knowledge about your subject and about how to communicate what you know. The fourth was having the resources available when they are needed, whether volunteers or county commissioners. The fifth theme was time frame, getting things done in a timely matter, considering when you were asked to do them and when you said you would have them done. The sixth and final theme was research, having all the facts and knowledge to make educated decisions and being able to back up those decisions with research based information.

Three general themes were evident: strong work ethic, secure and stable relationships, and having detailed knowledge about one's county/community. These are the personal characteristics to which these agents attribute their success. Within detailed knowledge were communication aspects with commissioners, co-workers, clientele, and political leaders within Extension. One thing that each agent agreed upon was that it is important to have strong relationships with constituents and coworkers. Detailed knowledge and communication within the county was also very important. It is important to be able to answer clientele questions even if the agent needs to solicit outside advice. An extremely important piece of information from the agents was "Make up for lack of knowledge with hard work to get ahead" (Identity hidden to protect anonymity). About half of the agents mentioned the other three traits, having good resources, getting to issues in a timely manner, and having good research to back your claims.

Figure 1.
Question 1: Qualities of a Successful Agent*

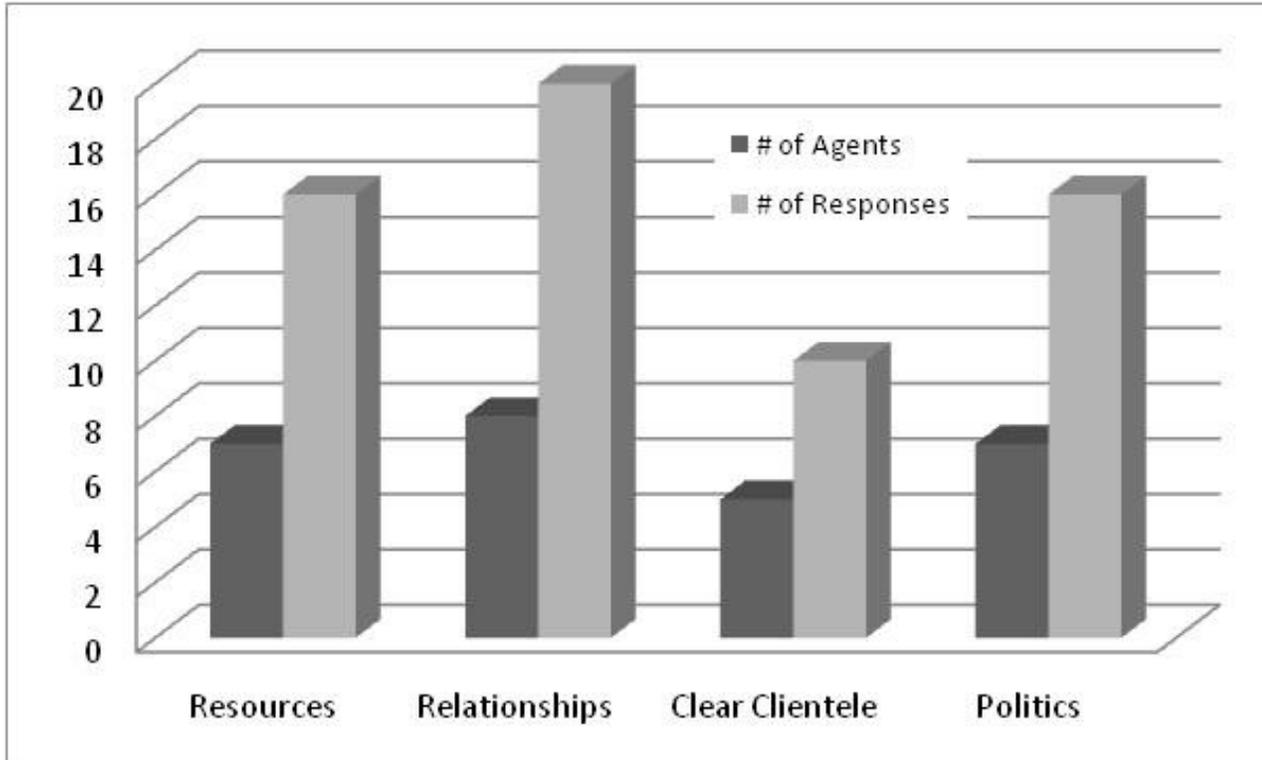


* Relationships refers to having good rapport with county clientele and community leaders. Knowledge/Community refers to knowing the county, its stakeholders and leaders. Resources refers to having enough resources to do the job. Time Frame refers to getting back to clientele in a timely manner. Research refers to backing of information provided.

The responses to question two, "What is it about your county that helps you be a successful Extension agent," are summarized in Figure 2. Four themes emerged. The first was that a county can help an agent be more successful by providing plentiful resources, in both research and volunteers. The second is relationships. Keeping open communications through the Extension's county system provides more relationships that can help agents find answers and deliver information more effectively. The third theme is having a clear clientele, meaning the agent needs to know who the audience is, 4-H, FFA, board members, county commissioners, for example. The remaining theme is politics; know where you stand and who is working to support you as well as those who might make your job harder. Know who needs to be "pampered" more than others.

Having a clear clientele base had the least support. One agent stated that you need "progressive clientele that are willing to adopt new ideas and new technology." The other three attributes were listed by six or seven agents each. Interviewee's were in agreement that maintaining relationships are a key factor in Extension work. Relationships were mentioned the most in repeat answers. Resources were also mentioned many times. The resources that were most evident within the interviewee's responses were dealing with pooling expertise, technology support systems, budgeting, and coworker support. Support of the Extension program from county staff and Extension administration was mentioned as a relationship theme and also a resource theme. It is interesting, too, that resources and relationships appeared important in both question 1 and 2.

Figure 2.
Question 2: County Influence on Success of Agents*

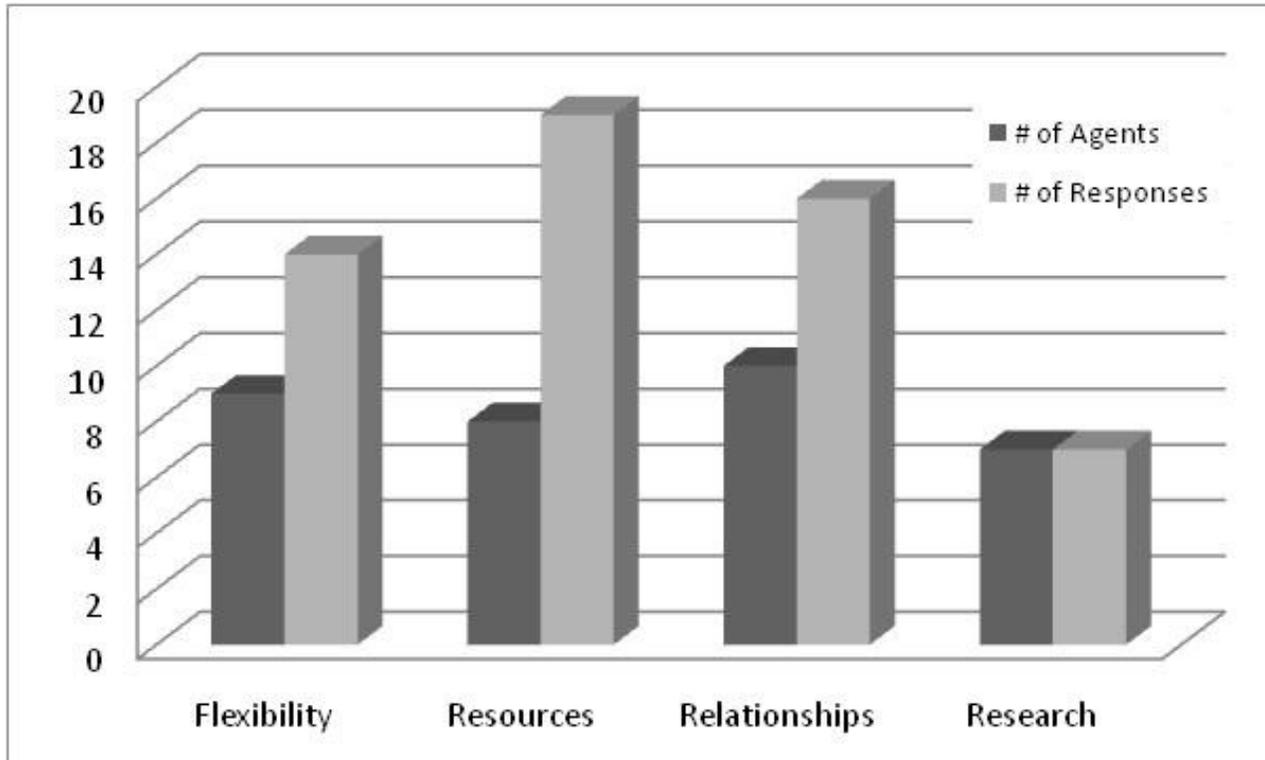


* Resources and Relationships are defined in Table 1. Clear clientele means to know who your working for and who will affect your performance. Politics deals with playing the part; know who opposes you and who supports you.

Question three is summarized in Figure 3: "What does the Extension system do to make you a good Extension agent?" Except for flexibility, the main themes are the same as in Figure 1 and Figure 2. Flexibility refers to having the means to be flexible with hours, time, and self. Know how much you can/can't do. Be flexible in how you spend time at work. It had a large presence among most responders; the majority of those interviewed had a positive comment about how flexible their administrator and support team were within the Extension program. For example, "freedom to direct your own program" was a great tool for the agent from Oregon. Resources within this question involved additional people with expertise both in their counties and outside counties as an additional resource. Money for programs was also a factor in resources, as well the opportunity for professional development, i.e., statewide trainings.

Relationships once again held firm in how the Extension system influences a successful agent. In this question networking was a large part of relationships and working with other programs and counties to strengthen those relationships. Among these themes, research was only mentioned half the time; as one agent mentioned, it was having the "latitude to do applied research projects" that made him involved in research, or as another said, "get out and try to figure it out on your own." This might not be direct research for an applied project, but in the long run it is research within the Extension system.

Figure 3.
Question 3: Extension System Influence on Success of Agents*

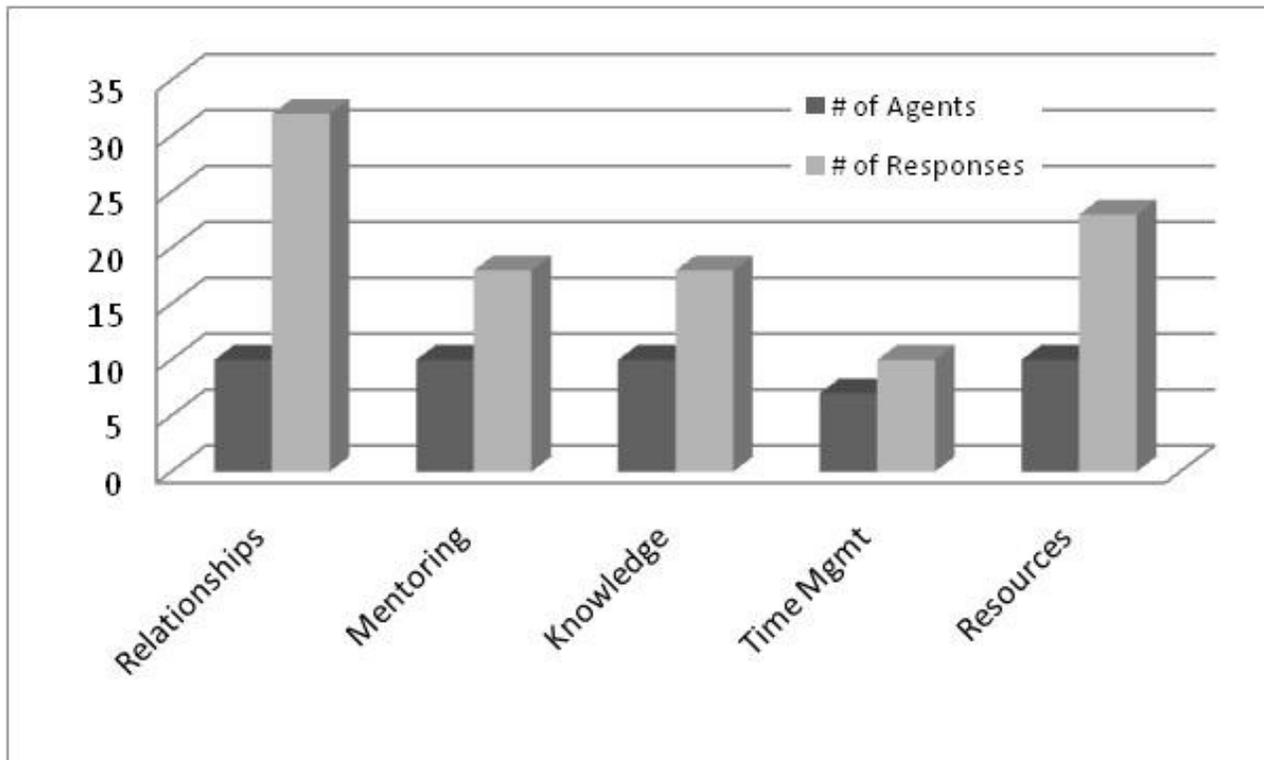


* â Resources, Relationships and Research are defined in Figure 1. Flexibility means having the ability to do tasks that agent deems important. The ability to put one item down and go to the next if it is called for; e.g. having to drop everything to go help a 4-H kid that lost an animal.

Finally, the results for question four are summarized in Figure 4: "What can young agents do early in their career to set themselves up to be successful?" Once again, two themes reoccur, resources and relationships. Time management is added, as is having good mentoring and also having knowledge of your county.

Question four seemed to bring forth a consensus across categories throughout the interviewees' responses. It seemed as though there were concepts like relationships, knowledge, and resources that stood out, but then mentoring programs and time management were still on board, with the majority of people mentioning them as themes. Knowledge had many aspects, from hard work and answering questions from community members, to research within the county, all of which were mentioned by each interviewee. Resources was also a theme that had sub-categories such as funding, marketing, using media to the advantage of Extension, utilizing teams and other programs, and also networking, inside and outside the county and community.

Figure 4.
Question 4: Advice to Become a Successful Agent*



* Relationships and Resources are defined in Figure 1. Mentoring means to find a mentor that you can rely on, someone that has been there for a while and can aid you in furthering your career. Knowledge refers to knowing the region you work in and knowing the people who can help you increase your reputation. Time Management means not to overdue it, and remember it will still be there for you the next day.

Summary and Conclusions

Successful agents thrive by setting priorities, looking ahead, and engaging in reflection. Being successful is about more than just numbers. We found that quality is being measured before quantity by most of the successful agents who were interviewed. There are convincing themes that continually surfaced during the interviews. Success came from the individual— an individual with strong work ethic and outstanding people skills. But it was helpful to have resources, including financial and physical, but also including a mentor for guidance who will light the path of future success. In talking with the agents, we learned that a formal university mentoring program has been less beneficial than having a one-on-one mentor from a similar Extension background. Finally, we heard many times that it is important to be knowledgeable and on time when working with clients. As one Colorado Extension agent stated, "under promise, but always over deliver."

We also found that agents try utilizing campus resources but seem to feel it's a Catch 22; sometimes it is helpful, and sometimes it is not. One Colorado agent told us that she uses the system of "take to campus when needed . . . but stay off the computer and on the ground." Even being close to campus is not always going to be helpful. An adult Extension agent in Colorado said, "when I started, the location of the county I cover being close to campus I thought was positive, to be able to interact with campus specialists to help teach classes (bring real-world examples to the classroom) and do research projects." But this has not been the case. Helpful, yes; however, with classroom teaching and more research it tends to spread an agent past

available resources.

In summary, Extension leadership can make agents more successful if they are mentored by successful agents, are provided resources, including research, and allowed flexibility. Agents will be more successful if they have a strong work ethic, are knowledgeable, build strong relationships in their territory, and deliver information in a timely manner.

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