Tea Time: Raising Awareness and Support for Extension

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Abstract: In a time of reliance on electronic media for information, chaotic programming environments, and declining public resources, Extension workers need to find unique ways to connect with stakeholders to maintain and increase support for programming. To address this need, we developed, conducted, and evaluated a series of stakeholder teas. We found this method of communicating with stakeholders builds social, political, and fiscal support for Extension programming.

Extension workers are bombarded by a plethora of methods to communicate with stakeholders to build and maintain program support. However, research and practice continue to show the importance of face-to-face interaction in building deep and committed relationships (Redmore & Tynon, 2010; Simeral, 2001). With declining staff numbers, Extension workers are challenged to create and sustain face-to-face social networks in favor of online venues and large group delivery to realize efficiencies (Ricketts, Hoelscher-Day, Begeman, & Houtkooper; Simeral, 2001). A balance between face-to-face and masss contact for effectiveness should be more fully explored.

Social, political, and fiscal support for Extension has shifted over the years from a focus on rural white families to a much more diverse group of stakeholders (Schauber, 2001). This shift requires that Extension workers use more diverse and innovative communication methods taylored to specific audiences to capture their attention. A wider variety of partners, including Extension communications and marketing staff, lobbyists, and program partners, should be more deeply involved in helping develop, deliver, and evaluate program-support messages and methods. Integrating development staff into these efforts is especially critical for enhancing philanthropic support for Extension (Calhoun, 2006).

The Stakeholder Tea

The use of stakeholder teas for enhancing Extension support was first documented by Calhoun (2006). He found this venue worked well for women, who increasingly control philanthropic resources in the United States, to learn about a topic, share their ideas about programming, build networks, and deepen their support for Extension, especially 4-H. With this research in mind, we developed a series of six teas an hour and a half to two hours in length with mostly female Extension supporters and land-grant university alumni. Our intent was threefold: (1) to introduce a new Extension worker to key stakeholders, (2) to conduct focus groups on current Extension programming and seek participants wisdom on that programming, and (3) to request continued and increased support for Extension. The process for developing the teas included the following.

- The Extension worker and Extension development officer designed the tea process and

agenda.

- The development officer, long time Extension staff, and the college alumni officer suggested potential tea hostesses.

- The Extension worker and development officer secured hostesses, provided tea invitations, and sent a list of potential invitees to the hostess.

- The hostess arranged a location and refreshments for the tea and invited participants to attend.

- At the tea, the hostess welcomed participants, served refreshments, introduced the guest Extension worker, assisted with the flow of the tea conversation, and thanked participants for attending.

- At the tea, the guest Extension worker mingled with participants, facilitated introductions, provided a program overview, facilitated a focus group on programming, sought advice on current and future programming, and asked for fiscal, social, and political support for Extension.

- At the tea, the development officer observed the event and mingled with the participants.

- At select teas, the college alumni officer observed the event and interacted with participants.

- Follow up was conducted with each hostess after the tea by phone, face-to-face, or email by Extension or development staff.

- The Extension worker provided additional follow-up with select tea participants.

What We Learned

Philanthropy and the tea format were new for our Extension organization so we documented this approach for building stakeholder support. Through personal observation we learned the following.

- The selection of the hostess is critical for a successful tea. A hostess must model philanthropic behavior and social and political support for Extension, have a deep network of similar-minded individuals, and create a welcoming and stimulating environment for good discussion.

- Inviting a variety of key stakeholders, not just Extension retirees, college alumni, or past program participants, provided the most useful insights and suggestions for Extension programming.

- Participants were extremely pleased that a campus-based Extension worker visited them and sought their advice.

- The college alumni officer found the teas enhanced alumni relations and networking, and took the place of alumni events lost through budget cuts.

- The initial round of teas set the stage for building basic programming and fiscal support. Future teas will focus specifically on building support for issues programming (e.g., community leadership development, aging, healthy living).

- Philanthropic support was enhanced by conducting individual donors visits before and after the tea.

- Realizing philanthropic support takes multiple interactions over time with donors. The teas in some instances helped catalyze or maintain this support. At a minimum, the teas expanded our database of potential Extension donors.

After the teas, a phone or email survey was conducted with each hostess by an Extension staff member. The six hostesses indicated the following.

- The tea participants enjoyed meeting the Extension campus staff, learned about Extension programs, and learned how to continue to support Extension.

- There were social, political, and fiscal benefits from the teas, including participants calling legislators to support Extension during the budget process.

- Other benefits of the teas included connecting with people, learning about Extension programming, and learning about Extension's use of social media.

- What they liked best about the teas was spending time with each other and the new Extension worker and the informality and briefness of the event.

- Suggestions for improving the teas included getting more decision-makers and supporters to attend the event.

Summary

In a time of reliance on electronic media for information, chaotic programming environments, and declining public resources, Extension workers need to find unique ways to connect with stakeholders to maintain and increase support for programming. To address this need, we developed, conducted, and evaluated a series of stakeholder teas. We found this method of communicating with stakeholders builds social, political, and fiscal support for Extension programming.

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