

Expanding Cooperative Extension's Audience: Establishing a Relationship with Cowboy Church Members

Abstract

The study reported here provided a descriptive report on cowboy churches, while identifying the potential for Extension-cowboy church collaborations and examining the direct implications to Extension. The diffusion of innovations conceptualized the qualitative study. Semi-structured, face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with 10 adults from cowboy churches. Findings revealed relative advantages for Extension-cowboy church collaborations, areas of compatibility, and ample opportunities for trialability. Disseminating nutrition, animal science, and youth development information to cowboy church members may establish a relationship between the two groups. Extension could gain positive advocates in local communities through educating and establishing relationships with cowboy church members.

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Introduction

Societal changes of the 21st century have brought about many criticisms of Extension and its effectiveness to diffuse research-based information to the public (Kellogg Commission, 1999; McDowell, 2004; West, Drake, & Lando, 2009). The study reported here explored and evaluated the potential of utilizing the audience of cowboy churches to aid in the diffusion of research-based information.

Cowboy churches are contemporary churches that have emerged across the U.S. during the past decade. Most commonly found in Texas, the cowboy church movement also has a growing presence in parts of Alabama, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Wyoming. These churches are specifically designed to attract the working cowboy and other individuals who share an affinity to the cowboy and/or country western lifestyle (Williams, 2011).

Extension has adopted the utilization of churches and faith-based communities to diffuse educational programs to communities. Prins and Ewert (2002) claimed Extension and churches were once common partners, with agents and ministers collaborating to rebuild rural communities. Today, these partnerships are most commonly found among the African-American faith-based communities. Researchers and Extension agents have discovered the value of health ministries in promoting

educational programs focused toward health, exercise, and nutrition (Hardison-Moody et al., 2011; Jones, Lynch, & Schnepf, 2007).

At the time of the study, there was no known relationship between cowboy churches and Extension. The study reported here evaluated the potential of establishing such relationships.

Theoretical Framework

The study explored the potential of an innovation, prior to diffusion; thus, Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations was used to conceptualize and frame the implications of the study. Using an acceptability research perspective, a forward-looking investigation designed to position an innovation to facilitate a more rapid rate of adoption, the innovation of Extension-cowboy church collaborations was evaluated prior to diffusion. Rogers' (2003) five perceived attributes of an innovation aid in determining an innovation's rate of adoption and were used to evaluate the acceptability for potential Extension-cowboy church collaborations. Relative advantage is the extent an innovation is more advantageous compared to another. Compatibility is the consistency of the innovation to the potential adopter's values, experiences, and needs. Complexity is the extent of difficulty in comprehending and implementing the innovation. Trialability allows the potential adopter to test the innovation. Observability is the visibility of results.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of the study was to examine if Extension has the potential to establish a relationship with cowboy churches and address the community-based needs of cowboy church members. More specifically, the study sought to:

1. Describe the communication channels used by cowboy churches to diffuse information to members;
2. Describe participant awareness of Extension; and
3. Describe potential opportunities to collaborate with cowboy churches.

Methods

The study followed a basic qualitative research design (Merriam, 2009). A purposive, snowball sampling technique was employed to identify key informants of the American Fellowship of Cowboy Churches (AFCC), a non-profit organization designed to resource and develop cowboy churches. As of June 2012, there were approximately 198 AFCC affiliate churches, 152 located in Texas. Using a top-down approach, 13 informants were identified, and 10 ($N = 10$) subjects participated in the study. Each subject represented a different cowboy church. Subjects included nine male ($n = 9$) pastors and one ($n = 1$) female administrative assistant. Seven ($n = 7$) subjects represented the AFCC in an organizational leadership position as an officer, board member, and/or field representative. The remaining three ($n = 3$) held no leadership position at the organizational level. All names have been changed to secure confidentiality.

Semi-structured, face-to-face and phone interviews were conducted with participants. Questions

asked pertained to the AFCC, recruitment and retention of members, church activities, communication channels, community interaction, and Extension awareness. Written consent was obtained in person and via text messaging. Interview transcripts were analyzed for recurring patterns and themes (Dooley, 2007). Multiple measures were taken to secure trustworthiness. When applicable, findings were triangulated using interviews, observation, and church documents and/or website analysis. An audit trail detailed these findings. Interview summaries were emailed to subjects for input and feedback, and a researcher journal was kept, allowing continual reflection on researcher biases, assumptions, and limitations (Merriam, 2009).

Findings

The first objective was to describe the communication channels used by cowboy churches. The following themes emerged from subject interviews.

Interpersonal Communication

The very nature of cowboy church was described as interpersonal. With a come-as-you-are and non-judgmental atmosphere, these churches strive "to make a big deal about being real even though real isn't always pretty," says Issac Kine. Subjects described the rodeo arena as their most significant form of interpersonal communication. Considered the heartbeat of cowboy church ministry and the equivalent of an inner-city church's family life center, the arena enables the Gospel to be shared outside the four walls of a church building. Adam Keel explained, "the reality of it is, these guys are gonna rodeo. They're gonna be doing it on the secular side. Why not use it as a tool in order to share the Gospel?" Kine stated, "Some cowboys and cowgirls won't come to the service but they'll come to the arena events." Overall, the arena is considered a non-threatening way to reach out to the entire community. Not all churches in the study had an arena, but it was never nevertheless described as an important tool, one that churches strive to obtain.

Mass Media Communication

In addition to the utilization of the rodeo arena as a communication channel, subjects described a variety of mass media channels. The Internet, text messaging, flyers, posters, and local media are all used to inform church and community members of news and events. Approximately seven of the 10 churches had a functional and accessible website, six of which also utilized Facebook. Text messaging was most commonly used for rodeo practice scheduling and reminders, as well as used by the researcher to obtain written consent from phone interviews. Flyers and posters, hung in culturally relevant locations (sale barns, western stores, and feed stores), are frequently used to attract the community to church events and activities. Seven subjects also used local radio and newspapers.

The second and third objectives were to describe subject awareness of Extension and opportunities for potential collaborations. Participants were asked a series of questions to ascertain their familiarity with the brand name of Texas AgriLife Extension, their interest in potential programs, and their willingness to collaborate with non-church entities. The following themes were identified.

County Agents & 4-H

Four of the 10 subjects were unfamiliar with the brand name of Texas AgriLife Extension. When probed further, nine of the 10 subjects recognized the term "county agents," with one subject indicating immediate preference for local high school agriculture teachers. While no church had a 4-H group, all subjects recognized the organization and expressed church youth involvement in 4-H and/or FFA. The extent of subject familiarity with Extension varied from agents attending cowboy churches, to one subject being married to an agent, while three others indicated working with agents in response to state wildfires, and one subject working with agents through a third party organization.

Cooking, Livestock, & Meetings

Ephraim Boise specifically indicated the culture of his church is very compatible to Extension programming. "From show animals to training horses, plant ID to pasture management. That's who our people are," said Boise. Gideon Tamblyn described his church as highly involved with Extension because Tamblyn's wife is a county agent. His wife offers culturally relevant programming at the church through the chuckwagon ministry (i.e., mobile kitchens historically used in the American West in mid/late 1800s) to conduct cooking and nutrition education as well as sewing in context to western attire. Five subjects identified horse as an area of interest with needs pertaining to shot clinics, horse health regulations, and/or horsemanship. Daniel Platt specifically expressed interest in having his church host the county Extension horsemanship clinic. Churches with appropriate facilities sometimes host livestock shows that draw attendance from 4-H and FFA youth. In a non-Extension related context, churches indicated allowing their local communities to use church facilities for meetings and gatherings, because some cowboy churches are the largest meeting facilities in their county.

Respect & Cooperation

When working with non-church entities, cowboy churches of the study requested respect for their mission and consideration for the cowboy and western culture of people attending their churches. Not all subject expressed an interest in working with Extension, Benjamin Richard's church being one. Richards did, however, understand the importance in diffusing information to his congregation and encouraged agents to come by and talk to him anyway. If information needs go out to the public, Richards is willing to "find a way to tie it into the message."

Conclusions

Limitations of the study reported here make it difficult to generalize beyond Extension in Texas; however, the results do offer insights on the potential of meeting cowboy church members' needs. Cowboy churches offer methods of interpersonal and mass media communication for Extension to disseminate information. The majority of participants were unfamiliar with the brand of Extension and its services. Church members were open to potential collaborative programming opportunities with Texas AgriLife Extension. Churches in the study openly seek collaborations with other

community institutions but require that the outside organization and message be culturally relevant.

Implications

Rogers' (2003) diffusion of innovations was used to conceptualize and frame the implications of the study reported here. The implications are outlined according to Rogers' five perceived attributes of an innovation.

- **Relative Advantage:** As Extension is challenged to modernize and expand beyond the realm of agriculture (McDowell, 2004), research suggests agricultural clientele reinforce the strengths of county agents (Telg, Irani, Hurst, & Kistler, 2007). Cowboy churches embrace a culture revolving around agriculture and livestock, areas that currently maximize agent strengths.
- **Compatibility:** Findings suggested cowboy churches encompass a culture of agriculture, family, and youth, a framework similar to the structure of Extension and current programming.
- **Complexity:** The need for churches to share their beliefs is a common attribute among previous Extension collaborations with the African American faith-based community (Corbie-Smith et al., 2010; Goldman & Roberson, 2004; Woodson & Braxton-Calhoun, 2006). Findings indicate complexity will be dependent on the community, varying from location to location, and the relevancy of any proposed Extension programming.
- **Trialability:** Not all county Extension services can test this innovation because cowboy churches are not yet present in every county in the U.S. In addition, fear of violating separation of church and state could also impede trialability of collaborations; however, Prins and Ewert (2002) argue Extension has worked with churches since the passing of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 and emphasize that both institutions have a common goal to build better communities.
- **Observability:** The outcome of Extension-cowboy church relationships was not apparent in this study.

Recommendations

Data analysis indicated cowboy church members may be interested in a variety of Extension programs; thus, disseminating information identified in the study reported here may open the door for Extension to provide other educational programs (McDowell, 2004) to cowboy church members. The following areas of interest were identified:

- Nutritional programming through chuckwagon cooking,
- Animal science educational programming during livestock exhibitions,
- Programming related to equine management and horsemanship, and
- Targeting cowboy church families for 4-H/youth development programs.

It is recommended that Extension agents identify and initiate contact with the cowboy churches in their counties, if applicable. Pastors should be contacted first regarding interest in collaborations as they serve as gatekeepers to the cowboy church community. Case studies should be conducted to better evaluate the trialability and observability of collaborations. Further qualitative research is needed to develop a better understanding of how Extension may address cowboy church member needs in other states. Extension could gain positive advocates in local communities (Telg et al., 2007) through educating and establishing relationships with cowboy church members. Expanding Extension's audience may assist the organization in better meeting the needs of respective local communities, as identified by the Kellogg Commission (1999).

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