

Face Time Is Still Critical to Effective Extension in Commercial Agriculture

Abstract

Even in the digital era, face-to-face meetings still have impact. Employees and managers must have a similar understanding of the challenges facing their industry. The meeting series described here was designed to allow workers and managers to learn side-by-side. A total of 622 workers and managers representing 75 companies (which have the combined annual capacity to feed approximately 1.8 million cattle, or 9% of the entire U.S. cattle feeding industry) attended seven meetings across western Kansas in which both overarching industry challenges and specific best management practices were communicated. Meeting face-to-face remains an effective way to communicate with commercial agricultural workers.

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Introduction

Although the use of digital and Web-based, communication methods as primary tools for delivery of Extension programming has grown dramatically in the past decade (Kallioranta, Vlosky, & Leavengood, 2006; Rhoades, Thomas, & Davis 2009; Kinsey, 2010), an argument can still be made for the value of in-person delivery of Extension programming. Certain audiences simply do not have access to or a preference for online education (Bairstow, Berry, & Driscoll, 2002; Hobbs, 2004; Ingram, Dorsey, & Smith, 2004; Kline, Kneen, Barrett, Kleinschmidt, & Doohan, 2012). In addition, certain types of training simply do not lend themselves well to online training and benefit greatly from experiential, hands-on instruction (Franck, Vineyard, Olson, & Peterson, 2012). In addition, Herzberg (1972) and McCaslin and Mwangi (1994) suggest that a trusted relationship between employee and supervisor is an important element of employee job satisfaction.

With the growth of the commercial feedlot industry throughout the High Plains of the U.S., and the active, regular presence of hired expert consultants advising the feedlots on nutrition, management, and veterinary care, local Extension agents have felt either intimidated or isolated from these stakeholders. Therefore, in many areas, Extension has lost its connection to the feedlot community, even though the feedlot industry employs a large number of citizens of the local community. In spite of the presence of outside expert consultants, Extension can provide needed training in many areas

unmet by professional consultants. As a means to provide expert and timely technical training directly to the feedlot technicians who could most readily adopt new ideas, a series of meetings was planned to expose feedlot workers and their supervisors to broad, philosophical issues facing the modern feedlot industry, along with expert, hands-on training in current best management practices.

Meeting Design

A series of meetings, titled Cattle Feeders' College, were organized to provide training and fellowship for Kansas feedyard industry workers. The operational theory was that, although upper-level managers have ready access to extensive industry expertise, the typical feedyard employee rarely benefits from ideas and expertise outside of the workplace. Also, the organizers believe there is value in team fellowship in a relaxed environment conducive to learning outside of the workplace without the normal tensions and expediencies of the workplace during normal work hours.

Meeting sites were identified in strategic locations throughout the primary cattle feeding region of western Kansas (Cimarron (x 2 meetings), Larned, Oakley, Scott City (x 2 meetings), and Sublette) that would be most easily accessible to feedlot workers and where local Extension staff were most willing to engage the feedlot community.

Topics were identified by the meeting organizers (two Extension beef nutritionists and one Extension beef veterinarian) and were selected based on two primary values: (1) issues of broad, industry-wide economic significance and (2) specific best management practices in the fields of equipment maintenance, stockmanship, and human resources. Speakers were enlisted to teach the various topic areas. Speakers were selected by the organizers based on knowledge of both their topical expertise and their experience in training feedlot workers in order to ensure a quality learning experience. The broad industry-wide issues were addressed during and immediately following an evening meal in which all attendees participated together; break-out sessions on best management practices were conducted after the meal.

Nominations, in the form of a short essay, were solicited from feedyard managers for employees within the general fields of Maintenance Crew or Cattle Crew, who were thought to exemplify work ethic, team work, and leadership in the workplace. The event organizers selected recipients of the Top Hand Award, specific at each meeting location, from these nominations. Immediately following the large group session and prior to the team specific break-out sessions, Top Hand Awards were presented to individual attendee in each of the fields of Maintenance Crew and Cattle Crew in front of the entire group of attendees. Rather than a plaque, the physical award was a custom, hand-crafted, lock-back pocket knife containing the words "Top Hand Award" and the Cattle Feeders' College logo.

After the meal, attendees were allowed to select either the maintenance, stockmanship, or human resources break-out sessions, based on their individual interest and specific job duties. Simultaneous translation from English to Spanish was available upon request.

Lessons Learned

The format of the meetings (meal, large-group presentation, small-group break-outs) has proven to be very popular with feedyard employees and supervisors alike, as measured by attendance and repeat

attendance. The relaxed atmosphere of the evening meal, provided at no charge to attendees, was enjoyed by attendees and was effective at relaxing workplace tensions and diminishing interpersonal barriers, thus improving the opportunity to learn.

The individual Top Hand Award has received mixed reviews. The employees, recipient and non-recipient alike, have expressed appreciation for the opportunity for public recognition of their daily, career-long contributions to their employer. However, although most managers are highly enthusiastic supporters of this public recognition of individual excellence, other managers believe public recognition of the individual detracts from their preferred philosophy of internal company recognition of entire teams that the feedyard company may espouse. These managers did not submit nominations for the awards.

Although the events were planned with the oversight of state and regional livestock Extension specialists, the most successful events, as measured by attendance and appreciation expressed by attendees, were conducted in locations where local Extension agents were highly engaged in the planning, publicity, and execution of the events. Those local agents who see the commercial feedyard community as a stakeholder group important to their programming contributed ideas and effort to making a quality event, but also made personal invitations to their stakeholder base to ensure that the events had a very visible profile and had excellent attendance.

Conclusions

The feedyard industry workforce benefits from specialized training outside of normal work hours and outside the workplace. In a relaxed training environment, workers focus on learning new techniques. When this training is encouraged by feedyard management, as demonstrated by management participation in the training, the employees learn that professional development of the individual worker is a priority to their company leadership, which strengthens employee loyalty and job satisfaction.

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