

The Communicator: Electronic Newsletter Provides Expert Support to FCS County Educators

Abstract

Extension specialists are challenged to provide expert support to county faculty on an ongoing basis, particularly in geographically large states with low populations. *The Communicator* is a newsletter developed by University of Idaho Family and Consumer Science specialists to update county faculty on research findings as they develop programs to meet clientele needs. Survey data show that county faculty in Idaho use the newsletter effectively, reading it promptly and extensively upon arrival and applying the information in their programs. Family and Consumer Sciences professionals are invited to subscribe to *The Communicator* as a resource for their ongoing professional development.

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Introduction

University Cooperative Extension programs were established at land-grant institutions to translate research into terms and formats accessible by the public to improve their lives (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011). Extension specialists are charged with the responsibility of keeping county personnel apprised of current research developments that can increase the effectiveness of their work.

However, communicating that information is an ongoing challenge for Extension, particularly in geographically large states like Idaho, with a small, widely dispersed population. Gathering county personnel to a single location for face-to-face in-service training poses challenges of coordinating staff schedules, funding travel expenses, and time away from attending to local needs.

Many models have been developed for efficient and timely expert support at a distance to Extension county personnel (e.g., Brannan & Gray, 1998; Murphy, Coleman, Hammerschmidt, Majewski, & Slonim, 1999). Research shows that newsletters can be an effective tool for communicating new information to professional and lay Extension audiences (e.g., Chipman & Litchfield, 2012; Erickson & Hansen, 2012; O'Neill, Xiao, Bristow, Brennan, & Kerbel, 2000) and can also be useful for training within the Extension system (e.g., Malone, Herbert, & Kuhar, 2005; Mullen, Thomison, Lentz,

LaBarge, & Watters, 2007).

The Communicator

Since 1970, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension specialists at the University of Idaho have published a monthly newsletter, *The Communicator*, to provide a steady stream of current research information to FCS Extension personnel around the state. Each specialist is responsible for a two-page section of the newsletter, providing current research information in his or her field of study. Sections include Food Safety, Nutrition Education, Family Development, and Family Economics. Idaho county educators work in in two or more of these program areas. The Director of the School of Family and Consumer Sciences writes the opening section of the newsletter.

The original format was a paper newsletter mailed out to county educators. Since 2002, the newsletter has been published electronically, with a link and a PDF attachment arriving by email for each newsletter and a searchable archive on the University of Idaho FCS website.

The focal audience of *The Communicator* remains the 23 University of Idaho FCS county educators around Idaho. However, the electronic format allows an expanded readership without additional cost, so the newsletter now reaches over 200 readers in Idaho and around the nation. Others who receive *The Communicator* include Idaho FCS junior high and high school teachers, University of Idaho alumni and faculty, and family-serving professionals in various work settings.

Communicator Use and Impact

In November 2012 the University of Idaho FCS Extension specialists surveyed the educators in counties around the state to see how well the electronic newsletter was meeting their needs. A 10-question Internet survey was sent via Survey Monkey link to the 23 FCS county educators in Idaho, and 16 completed the survey. The educators were asked to think back over the 10 issues of the past year when answering several questions about their Communicator reading habits and the impact of the information on their work.

Communicator Readers

Considering that there are 10 issues per year, we were particularly interested in consistent newsletter readers, i.e., those who read the majority (5+) of issues. Idaho county educators are loyal readers of *The Communicator*, with strong majorities reading articles within their program area (75%) and outside of their program area (75%) for most of the newsletter issues. Educators also tend to read the issue promptly, with 60% reading most issues within 2 days of arrival. A majority of educators consult *The Communicator* on the Web regularly, with 56% going to the Web for five or more of the issues over the year. Consulting archived issues is less common, but still a regular occurrence among the county educators, with 31% going back to five or more archived issues in a 12-month period.

Communicator Impact

Idaho county educators also report that *The Communicator* enhances their work, with 69%

strengthening their knowledge base in the broad field of FCS in most issues over the past year and even more (75%) in their specific program area. Educators also find the newsletter to be helpful in their written work (57% found help in most of the issues), and a near majority found the content to be helpful in communicating with stakeholders (47% report 5 or more issues to be helpful).

County educators also found *The Communicator* content to be helpful in program planning and delivery (rates of 47% and 44%, respectively, for 5+ issues). The newsletter was the least helpful in program evaluation, with only 20% finding help from most of the issues.

Educators were asked what they liked most about *The Communicator*, and their comments offer insight into the value of the publication. The most frequent comments were that the content was current, timely, and up-to-date (10 respondents). Others noted that the source was trustworthy, that the newsletter was convenient and easy to use, and that the archived issues were easy to access and search. In the words of one educator, "I enjoy it and read it every month."

The FCS Extension specialists at the University of Idaho rely on *The Communicator* to build and maintain an ongoing relationship with county educators around the state. Specialists commit considerable time each month to researching and writing articles relevant to county educator interests. However, the current survey responses show that newsletter development is time well spent in expert support to county educators. These survey results show that the newsletter is a resource Extension county faculty count on to keep them up-to-date on new developments in the field. It is also an important programming tool for them, supporting them in planning, delivery, and communication about their work.

As a Web-based resource, *The Communicator* is easily accessed by professionals interested in family and consumer issues at the University of Idaho FCS website, <http://www.uidaho.edu/cals/fcs/news/communicator>. To receive a monthly notice with a table of contents, PDF attachment, and link to the latest issue, email Debra Rumford at drumford@uidaho.edu, including "Communicator listserve" in the subject line and your email address in the text.

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