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Hey, Siri, What Is the Future of Extension?

Abstract

Extension faces unprecedented competition in the information marketplace. Although this is not a new concern, today Extension's competitors are no longer an abstract potential. They reside in our homes across the country. Is the past truly prologue? Is Extension destined to continue to experience erosion of audiences and political support? Or are there opportunities for Extension professionals to step up and stem the flow? The answer to the last question is yes, but doing so will take an understanding of the new competitors in the information marketplace and investments in innovation that do more than just sustain Extension's current market position.

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"Hey, Siri, find hybrid corn yield trials for DuPont Pioneer P0157AMX varieties."

"Alexa, I need fast-growing evergreens that grow at least 8 ft high to block out my neighbor's dogs that sit at the fence and bark all day. What trees would work best?"

"Google, please register Sally in 4-H for next year with the Washington County 4-H club. And send me a copy of the registration form when you submit it."

Extension has been a go-to source for situations such as these for more than 100 years, but who are the digital interlopers in these scenarios? Can they actually provide the information and solutions that have been the staple of Extension programs for decades? And if they can, what does that bode for the future of Extension?

My colleague Mike Boehlje, a Purdue agricultural economist, and I have been tracking how Extension has faced an increasingly competitive information marketplace since the mid-1990s when the evolution from analog to digital information began in earnest (Boehlje & King, 1998). At the beginning of the century, we suggested ways to deal with Extension's need to compete more effectively (King & Boehlje, 2000). Twenty years ago, many in

Extension thought these were abstract ideas. Now Extension professionals face a much less abstract reality. Moreover, responding to the new reality of a world with Siri and Alexa becomes more critical by the day.

In Oregon, we found that between 1986 and 2006, the number of people who said they had used Extension in the preceding year dropped from 44% to 22%, indicating a 50% loss of annual market share in 20 years. Even worse, in the subsequent 7 years, Extension use in Oregon dropped to 13%, another 50% loss in market share. Extension leaders in other states were not surprised. Several said that although they had not run similar numbers, they would not be shocked to find similar outcomes in their organizations. Across the country, fewer and fewer people are turning to Extension for information and training.

Part of the reason for this decline is internal. Too often Extension faculty and leadership myopically focus on specific information technologies themselves rather than the impact those technologies might have. The first questions they ask are these: How much will implementation of this technology cost? How difficult will this technology be for me to learn? Where will I get the time?

The more important questions to ask are these: How will implementation of this technology help my learners be more successful? How will it allow me to serve more people? How will it make Extension and my programs more competitive in the information marketplace?

As Extension continues to lose market share, abandoning larger and larger unserved audiences, others such as Amazon, Google, and Apple are stepping up to provide information—and generate larger and larger sums of money from the process.

Some Extension professionals dismiss these current competitors. They are not science based and objective. They are not part of our local community. They do not know *us*. In the meantime, Amazon, Google, and Apple have set up residence in *each of our homes*.

Extension is not alone in this disruptive environment. Clayton Christensen and his protégés at Harvard Business School have spent decades refining the concepts of what they call disruptive innovation—a business market environment in which a start-up providing less costly access to a service or product can move past a long-standing brand leader and market incumbent. They have pointed to the Internet as a disrupter that has changed how enterprises become successful. Disruptive innovation is different from a disruptive technology in that it focuses on the use of the technology rather than the technology itself (Christensen, 1997).

In 1994, when Mike Boehlje and I began design work that would ultimately evolve into eXtension, we started with a relatively generic question about how information gains value in the new digital world. However, by 1998, it was becoming clear that one of the best examples of potential disruption in this new digital marketplace was going to be Extension—a 100-year-old market incumbent. As Christensen has suggested, disruption in this kind of market comes from providing a product that initially may seem less sophisticated but is significantly less expensive and more easily accessible by larger and unserved audiences (Christensen, 1997).

Now, a little more than 20 years later, anyone can place voice-activated Internet access in his or her kitchen for less than the cost of a relatively nice dinner for two. Admittedly, these devices cannot yet answer questions such as those presented at the beginning of this commentary, but don't blink—change is coming fast. James Kobielus, writing in *Information Week*, predicted imminent improvements in what he calls conversational interfaces such as Alexa and Siri: "A distinguishing feature of digital assistants is their ability to anticipate what you will need under various circumstances and make recommendations at the appropriate time, and potentially, take action for you"

(Kobielus, 2018, para. 6).

Is this not what current Extension clients expect from Extension professionals?

If disruption is inevitable, can Extension disrupt from within? It is possible, but difficult. According to the fundamental concepts of Christensen's theory on disruptive innovation, disrupting from within is likely to fail every time unless new thinking surfaces. The incumbent will use new technology to attempt to enhance its success with current (and ultimately diminishing) audiences while the outside disrupter begins to satisfy the unserved audiences with less expensive and easier access. Before the incumbent can react, the disrupter surges past in the marketplace (Christensen, 1997). To some extent, Extension has already blinked. When federal funding became available to start eXtension several years ago, national Extension leadership was unable to deal with the "disrupt from within" issue. Rather than start something new, they fell back to shoring up the incumbent system.

So what now? Is the past prologue? Is Extension destined to see continued erosion of audiences and, therefore, continued erosion of political support? Is there a point at which the critical mass of support no longer exists?

First, Extension leadership, faculty, and staff must come to grips with the fact that this is real. When they do so, doors will open for new and innovative thinking.

Second, those responsible for hiring new Extension professionals must stop hiring in the 100-year-old Extension image. For decades, many assumed that Extension would change over time, that the old guard would retire and new leadership would step up. But many of those who hire new people have worked very hard to find individuals who look and think much like those retiring. Nothing changes when that happens (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011).

Third, the measurement of program success must be identifiable learner success, not exposure numbers, such as the number of people talked to or the number of workshops held.

Leadership must invest in change. Last year at Oregon State University, a university-wide innovation team developed a disruptive proposal to expand Extension's reach to unserved audiences in the business sector. The team's research indicated that the proposal could generate up to \$25 million in new funding in 3 to 5 years. It seemed that the necessary boxes were checked: Use existing infrastructure to expand the reach to new audiences, and generate new revenue not linked to state or federal funding. However, senior academic leadership dismissed the proposal with the comment "The faculty are not nimble enough." How will Extension overcome the endemic issue of meeting the ever-evolving needs of larger portions of society if university leaders do not see that the potential is worth the effort to change?

It is time to step up!

What if Extension leadership took 20% (or more) of block grant-like state and federal funding and made it available competitively to new regional, multiprogram Extension innovation hubs populated with the faculty who *are* nimble enough to respond directly to the needs of new and unserved audiences. These hubs would focus on specific, high-profile issues of concern to society. The system could market the heck out of this investment. Ultimately, this would show that Extension is relevant (again).

On a positive note, things are changing with new eXtension leadership. Efforts such as the Impact Collaborative and Designathons could create a toehold for these new Extension innovation hubs. However, progress will be

difficult unless Extension leaders provide significant support for faculty innovators when they return from these eXtension sessions.

We must recognize the dangerous potential we face. There are solutions, but they will not come from the approaches used in decades past. Renewed success will require ideas completely outside the current thinking of both leadership and faculty members. Otherwise, the following conversation will become the norm.

"Alexa, what's an Extension agent?"

"It appears that an Extension agent is an anachronism—a person who at one point in history provided personalized information from universities."

"Oh, really? How quaint."

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