

# Program Interpretation and Marketing Activities of the County Extension Council

## Introduction

The mission of the Cooperative Extension Service is to help people improve their lives through an educational process that applies scientific knowledge to issues and needs. Our purpose is to provide practical education to Arkansans for use in dealing with critical issues that have an impact on their lives and the state's future.

The strength of Extension education is directly related to our "grass roots involvement" of people in programming. Many leading citizens currently assist Extension in planning, implementing and evaluating educational programs. In addition, more citizens from varied occupations and positions of community leadership participate in focus group meetings every four years.

Major reasons that help account for this success of people involvement in Extension programming include the following:

- Organizational accomplishments and progress toward priority goals are being effectively communicated to members of the County Extension Council and others outside the Extension structure (study group participants, elected officials, key individuals and support groups, and the public).
- Council members are being recognized for their contributions in program development.
- Activities that enhance the visibility of the Council foster group solidarity. Group solidarity, in turn, provides a motivation for continued grass roots involvement.

Each of these reasons for grass roots involvement reinforces the importance of program interpretation and marketing activities. For example, the program/issue

meetings and activities related to developing a comprehensive county program have helped focus public attention on Extension's role and accomplishments in addressing economic, environmental, and social issues and concerns. Information days and other special events have been successful methods of Extension program interpretation throughout the course of a year.

Another example of program interpretation and marketing is the annual meeting of the County Extension Council. For some counties, the annual meeting has proven to be an effective way of marketing programs, recognizing members for their contributions and achieving group solidarity. For other counties, however, the annual Council meeting has not been a successful way to interpret programs.

In today's complex society, some people find it increasingly difficult to meet personal responsibilities (job and family) while devoting time to volunteer leadership roles on community and county groups. County Extension Council members are faced with this dilemma. Therefore, we must be open to alternative ways to market Extension programs, recognize community leaders and maintain group solidarity of our Councils.

## Marketing Extension Programs

All counties are expected to market programs and recognize Council contributions on an annual basis. Counties, however, are not required to hold an annual meeting of the County Extension Council.

## Annual Interpretation Activities

Program accomplishments should be reported frequently and systematically through a variety of means. Reports can highlight selected issues or other areas of concern, recent

programming activity and accomplishments (participation/progress/change) and cooperation (networking) with other groups. Program interpretation reports made through the local media will help people learn of results while they are happening. Reports to groups and organizations will also help interpret what Extension education is and bring about greater participation in and support of Council activities.

The Council should develop and follow a definite plan to create public awareness of the Council and the Extension educational program. In planning annual interpretation activities, the Council should consider who will assume responsibility for different aspects of marketing, who will be reached, kinds of explanations to be given and the methods to be used.

Some ideas to consider are given below.

- **Information day activity for targeted audiences:** Concentrate on identifying and reaching a segment of the community that may have had only marginal contact with Extension. Examples are media representatives, business leaders, church leaders, law enforcement officials, school officials, minority leaders, etc.
- **Special article/program via media outlets:** Feature high-priority issues and what's currently being done to address the issues.
- **Exhibits at strategic locations/times or in conjunction with scheduled events such as county fairs:** An exhibit can depict the mission and scope of Extension programming and/or feature selected programming efforts. Pictures with captions, charts, posters, publications, products, computer programs, and slide or video presentations are examples of ways to develop an exhibit.
- **Open house activity at Extension office:** Send special invitations to key people. Invite the public through local

media. Agents and Council members can greet visitors as they arrive. Serve light refreshments. Have something for people to see such as an exhibit or display. Give people something to take home (brochure about the Extension program, calendar of coming events, listing of Council members, etc.).

- **Recognition banquet:** Hold a recognition activity for a variety of volunteers – County Extension Council members, Extension Homemaker groups, Master Gardeners, 4-H leaders, agriculture result demonstrators, etc.
- **Short programs for civic clubs and other key groups:** Give a summary presentation of the county situation, pointing out opportunities for progress and problems that need solutions. Annual goals and priorities can be reviewed. Highlight selected educational programs and accomplishments. When appropriate, point out implications of certain issues to the group and how they might support the program. Different groups probably will be interested in different aspects of the county program. However, all should understand the purpose of Extension education, how programs are developed and their benefits to people in the county.
- **Newsletter:** In addition to external groups, efforts should be made to keep County Extension Council members informed of program progress on a continuing basis. An effective way for internal communication of progress is through a quarterly newsletter. A newsletter can highlight Council activities, progress and accomplishments of program area/issue committees, calendar of upcoming educational events and provide a means of recognizing members. Other key individuals not on the Council can be included on the mailing list.

Information in this publication has been adapted for Arkansas. Original materials were prepared by Burl Richardson, Extension Program Development Specialist, Texas Agricultural Extension Service.