

Centralizing Extension: Key Leader Input Concerning a Comprehensive Agricultural and Natural Resources Awareness Website

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Introduction/Purpose

The Florida Agricultural and Natural Resources (AGNR) Awareness Initiative is a multifaceted train the trainer approach aimed at educating the wider population about the importance of Florida's AGNR industry. The main goal is to improve the ability of Extension faculty, agricultural producers, and opinion leaders to deliver AGNR awareness messages and programs. Initiative objectives include: (a) cataloging existing AGNR awareness programs, (b) assessing knowledge, willingness to participate, and material/program needs of Extension faculty and other AGNR stakeholders, (c) providing key-message delivery training programs and materials for Extension faculty and other target audiences (opinion leaders, media, grassroots supporters), and (d) evaluating the relevance of these programs/materials.

While the goals and intentions of such AGNR awareness efforts are well-founded, they represent one more bite on the Extension educator's already full plate. Bull, Cote, Warner, and McKinnie (2004) advocate that in order for Extension professionals to perform these and other responsibilities with maximum efficiency and relevance, the Extension system must expand and redirect its resources to address multiple, evolving learning contexts.

Some believe the way to unifying Extension's outreach efforts and improving the consistency of their communications is through technology. The Extension Committee on Organization and Policy (ECOP) suggested in *The Extension System: A Vision for the 21st Century* (2002) that Extension systems, "provide the leadership necessary to ensure that state Extension organizations...establish and maintain a national information technology network to develop, organize, manage, and deliver Extension curricula..." (p. 13). From a leadership standpoint, it was also recommended that Extension "develop a rapid communication and decision-making system that engages and mobilizes Extension leadership nationally to focus and address current and emerging programmatic issues" (p. 13).

Could internet technology help mend the current communication issues between CES agents, leaders, and the general public that ECOP discusses? Leones (1995), and more recently Jackson, Hopper, and Clatterbuck (2004), offer promise for centralizing Extension through the use of technology, reporting that the communication efforts of Extension specialists are significantly enhanced by making educational materials they use with clientele available through electronic media.

King and Boehlje (2000) proposed the creation of a new virtual Cooperative Extension Service (e-CES) that would offer educational resources to CES agents, leaders and the general public while addressing the competition Extension is currently facing from private-sector information providers. They predicted that this virtual Extension system would attract new clientele, new sources/providers of information, and help overcome the traditional communication barriers facing Extension educators and leaders (King & Boehlje, 2000). Their suggestions led to the creation of eXtension, a nationwide effort to provide Extension programming online. While eXtension is a step in the right direction, it is currently limited to programs on personal finance, horse care, and wildlife damage management. Would a comprehensive website similar to eXtension work for AGNR awareness?

The purpose of this study was to determine the ability of a comprehensive website to centralize Extension's AGNR awareness-related interactions, as perceived by Florida Extension leaders. This qualitative pilot study was designed to aid in the development of a questionnaire to be administered statewide to all Florida Extension educators. The following three interview questions guided this study:

1. What barriers exist with regards to increasing the current level of AGNR awareness of Extension educators and their clientele?

avoid researcher bias, interview questions were formulated following a literature review on past and current trends in the Extension system's agent-to-agent, leader-to-agent, and agent-to-public interactions (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 2002). In addition, researchers used peer review and journaling after each interview to document their own subjectivity (Crotty, 2003).

As suggested by Boone, Safrit, and Jones (2002), a combination of two approaches was used to identify key Extension leaders. Considering the diversity of leadership roles within CES, using two approaches helps build trustworthiness and credibility of the data, while also ensuring that the selected leaders are representative of the target audience (Rossi, Lipsey, & Freeman, 2004). The *positional approach* was used first to identify leaders within the Florida Extension system who hold positions of authority and actively participate in making key decisions. To do this, a directory of Extension administrators was consulted. The *reputational approach* was then used to identify leaders based on feedback gained from non-administrative university faculty who have significant appointments or professional backgrounds in Extension. Five randomly selected non-administrative university Extension faculty were consulted and asked to identify Extension leaders they believed to have the following six characteristics (Boone et al., 2002):

- Well respected within the Extension community
- Previous collaboration with Extension educators throughout Florida
- Characterized by others as having an outgoing personality
- Make key decisions or have the power to influence key decisions
- Actively participate in decision-making
- Have influence or substantial control over important resources

Researchers also sought to ensure that selected leaders would (a) have an interest in planning for the improvement of the Extension system with regards to AGNR awareness, (b) be knowledgeable of current AGNR awareness efforts in Florida, (c) have a willingness to invest time into identifying areas in need, and (d) have the ability to function in a group (Boyle, 1981).

Key Florida Extension leaders included the Associate Dean of 4-H youth development programs, the Associate Dean of agricultural programs, and the Dean and Director of CES. Based on the work of Carter and Beaulieu (1992) and Boone et al. (2002), the key informant approach seemed most appropriate for gathering data on the needs of Extension agents using Extension leaders as liaisons of information.

Once key Extension leaders were identified, interview questions were developed and in-depth

To explore the first objective of perceived barriers, Extension leaders were first asked to describe the current AGNR awareness level of Florida Extension agents and the general public. Responses revealed that Extension leaders believed the current level of AGNR awareness among practicing Extension agents is high. One participant mentioned that Extension agent “knowledge of agriculture and natural resources in Florida is off the scale.” This participant also reported that even for agents not specializing in AGNR, awareness is high. This Extension leader went on to note, “...some of the best agriculture and natural resources awareness programs in Florida are *not* run by Extension agents who work directly with agriculture.” The participant representing 4-H programs indicated that although the majority of youth development curricula have a conceptual base in agriculture, “most of the agriculture and natural resources programs in Florida are not marketed as being agriculturally related.” This participant mentioned that, “because Extension agents must rely on subject matter as a ‘hook’ to get youth involved, often, at the national level, science and technology-related topics and terms are used to gain participant interest and increase program attendance.” This implies the relevance of an AGNR website for *all* agents, not just for those with AGNR-related appointments.

In describing the current level of AGNR awareness of the public, Extension leaders believed “they have a long way to go.” Specifically, one participant noted the lack of public awareness of the value of AGNR to everyday living, declaring that “...people don’t even understand where their milk comes from.” The need for increasing the AGNR-related awareness of the general public was noted by all three Extension leaders as being of priority importance.

Given the perceived gap of AGNR awareness levels between Extension agents and the public they serve, the researchers sought to understand how to reduce this gap through communication. To do this, participants were asked to identify priority barriers to improving communication of AGNR among Florida Extension agents. Three main barriers emerged from the data (Table 1).

Table 1. Priority Barriers of Florida Extension Agents to Improving Communication About Agricultural and Natural Resources, as Perceived by Florida Extension Leaders.

Perceived Barrier	Evidence
Information Overload	<p>“...there are so many curriculum/activity guides out there; agents don’t know how to handle it all.”</p> <p>“If we [Extension leadership] don’t come back and remind agents of the importance of enhancing the public’s currently low levels of awareness, it’s like talking to someone once and then asking them to do something among the other 1,000 things they have to do...they</p>

Delivery (lack of communication) county Extension offices.]”
 “There is inconsistency in resources and a lack of knowledge about what is out there.”

Objective two focused on developing strategies for overcoming the barriers identified by Extension leaders. Participants were asked to discuss realistic ways that such barriers could be minimized. Table 2 displays strategies for overcoming the top three barriers to communicating messages about AGNR, as perceived by the leaders.

Table 2. Strategies for Overcoming Listed Barriers, as Perceived by Florida Extension Leaders.

Perceived Barrier	Strategies for Overcoming	Evidence
Information Overload	Provide locally relevant, easy to use, current information at the county level	“...unless the information is locally relevant and directly applicable to current programming efforts at the local level, agents won’t use it.” “The material needs to be hands on, relevant, and easily applicable, otherwise it won’t be used.”
Lack of Agent Incentives (or knowledge that such incentives exist)	Link with accountability and online accountability system	“Unless agents are required to incorporate new initiatives into their plan of work or report of accomplishments, such things won’t become a priority.” “You would need to effectively market such material in a way that matches the current online accountability system. Otherwise, it will just become another thing on the shelf – an e-mail that gets filed.”
Inconsistency in Program Use and Delivery (lack of communication)	Agent training and follow-up evaluation	“If they [agents] are trained and evaluated more thoroughly, using ready-made educational resources will come up higher on the list...we can ask and ask and ask but until they are trained and evaluated, they won’t use the information.” Future agent trainings “...must be exciting, colorful, and help agents get excited about integrating agricultural and natural resources awareness topics into their programs.” “Agent confidence in their ability to effectively deliver such [AGNR awareness] information as part of their programs would be strengthened with training and

consistent...they just need help.” This same participant advocated that if a comprehensive website were created, “it needs to be just for people working in the industry...be comprehensive and accurate...and be a password protected component of Extension’s main website.”

Recognizing that leaders believed in the ability of a comprehensive website to reduce the AGNR knowledge-gap and centralize Extension, objective three examined strategies to get Extension agents to use such a website. All three participants agreed that doing this would be a function of:

1. The relevance of the information provided on the website;
2. The degree of support from Extension leadership *and* the public.

One participant commented, “this website would have to include practical information that agents could use, such as how to invite people to a meeting, how to put together an agenda, how to put together successful fieldtrips, how to get guest speakers, what works well, what doesn’t.” Regarding public support for the website and its resources, another participant suggested that the website “showcase success stories published by Extension agents regarding their efforts in AGNR awareness.” These success stories could be taken directly from accountability reports that agents are already required to complete.

The need for better marketing strategies was also mentioned by Extension leaders. The publishing of success stories could serve as a marketing technique for promoting continued use of the website and potentially increasing attendance at AGNR programs. As one participant put it, “the sharing of agent success stories on a website would be beneficial from an accountability standpoint.” Perhaps documenting success stories on an official AGNR awareness website would also help establish a sense of responsibility among agents to report and celebrate accomplishments with others.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Florida Extension leaders believed that a comprehensive AGNR awareness website would be an efficient first step in centralizing Extension’s interactions with colleagues and the public. While participants indicated that the current level of AGNR awareness of Florida Extension agents was high, they believed the consistency with which AGNR information is provided to the public could be improved. Haug (1999) agrees, noting that consistency in message delivery has been a reoccurring issue in Extension.

Considering AGNR awareness issues specifically, Florida Extension leaders believed that a comprehensive website would likely enhance the consistency with which Extension agents share information with each other and the public. Participants indicated that agent training and follow-up evaluation were two realistic ways to increase the likelihood that agents would use a centralized website. Bandura (1977; 1994) suggests that providing systematic, hands-on training to agents on how to use a newly developed website would increase the likelihood that they would use the website on repeated occasions. Indicating online the names of agents who have used the website and the frequency of such use might also be helpful. This is similar to the bandwagon approach used in marketing. McKenzie-Mohr and Smith (1999) suggest that providing such feedback would influence infrequent users to utilize this resource and could potentially redefine a social norm within the Extension system.

Given the need to reduce the gap between university academic departments, field educators, and the public (McDowell, 2004), according to Extension leaders in Florida, a comprehensive AGNR awareness website seems to be one important first step. However, along with providing agents direct feedback on website use by others and influencing norms via systematic trainings (such as train the trainer sessions), participants advocated that strong support from Extension leadership and the general public will be vital to generating support for the website. A comprehensive website would help Extension leadership to monitor the frequency and type of AGNR awareness information being shared, while also track what is working and what is not. In addition, a centralized website would aid Extension leadership in following the consistency with which educational resources are being used throughout the state, a priority issue supported by others (Haug, 1999; this study). Just as ECOP and others have suggested, a centralized AGNR awareness website may be the most effective way to organize and focus Extension's communications efforts. Support for a comprehensive website was unanimous from Florida Extension leaders interviewed in this study.

If a comprehensive AGNR awareness website were to centralize Extension, the results of this study indicate that it would involve systematic training, follow-up evaluation, and the following key elements:

- Practical, locally relevant information at the county level
- A direct link to the current accountability system
- Success stories (that are published and marketed)

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Results indicated that such a website could centralize Extension's efforts if it provided information at the county level, linked with the current accountability system, and showcased success stories.