Improving Extension Program Development Using Audience Segmentation[1]

Paul Monaghan, Laura Warner, Ricky Telg and Tracy Irani[2]

Introduction

Developing an impactful Extension program depends on acquiring a deep understanding of the audience's specific needs and preferences. One approach to program planning is audience segmentation. This approach allows an agent to increase his or her impact by addressing the variability that can be found among Extension clientele, which leads to "clump[ing] together in meaningful ways" (Andreasen, 2006, p. 105). When using audience segmentation, an agent can deliver the programming and messages that are most meaningful to an audience/clientele segment.

Audience segmentation can be based on any information Extension agents gather that informs them about the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of their constituents, as well as how the individuals differ from one another to form distinct sub-groups. There are various segments found within broad categories such as "homeowners with an irrigated lawn," "youth at risk for obesity," or "agricultural laborers." There are also secondary audience segments that can be important if they play a key role in influencing the behavior and norms of other specific segments. Secondary audiences might be pediatricians who encourage parents to attend Extension nutrition programs when their children are at risk for obesity or lawn care professionals who hand out Extension materials to inform their clients about landscape water conservation.

Defining these groups may help Extension agents learn who might benefit the most from current and future programming. Extension agents already know they do not have the resources to reach everyone in their potential audience (nor is it possible). In addition, a singular approach would not be suitable for all audiences. Extension can improve program outcomes (for example, behavior change) and increase relevancy to the community by adopting tools for identifying different segments and planning to reach these various segments in meaningful ways based on their program area.

Knowledge about an audience provides Extension agents with information to make strategic decisions about who should be targeted first for programming and what is the best way to reach them. An earlier EDIS publication documented the need to design **Extension communications** according to audience features such as demographics, psychographics, and their knowledge of the topic (Telg, Irani, & Varvorines, 2013). Here we discuss how the tools of audience analysis can provide clues to **better targeting current programs** or **developing new programming** that is relevant and impactful for a community.

When agents incorporate audience analysis in the early stages of program development, they can gain insight and guidance from the field of social marketing. Social marketing is the use of commercial marketing tools and concepts in order to foster behavior change in a community. The

goal of social marketing is to change individual and group behaviors to improve public health, resiliency, and conservation (Lefebvre, 2013). These goals align closely with the aim of UF/IFAS Extension, which focuses on helping communities around the state to solve their own problems and supporting a healthy economy, environment, and people (UF/IFAS, 2013). The social marketing approach borrows several key concepts from the discipline of marketing; one of the most important is the practice of using explicit criteria to **select the specific target audience** Extension agents want to reach. By implementing this concept, Extension agents will be able to answer questions such as who are the groups that are most interested in their programs, what are they like, and what needs do they have that Extension can serve? The answers to these questions may be very different for separate groups of individuals. The two main concepts to keep in mind are **audience segments** (those distinct groups found within the general public) and **target audiences** (the specific audience segments that Extension agents prioritize for programming).

Segmentation is Research-Based Audience Analysis

All social marketing tools are based on the use of social science research, which is fundamental to defining and describing audience segments. Deciding which groups are significant and then making the choice to target one particular group should not be done arbitrarily. Ideally, the decision to choose a particular segment should be based on scientific evidence, theories, and models about the behavior of the public. Using research to make these decisions increases the confidence agents may have that the public, or any other target audience, will adopt their recommendations and makes their efforts more efficient.

While research can be costly in terms of time and resources, agents can reduce these costs by using secondary sources or engaging their community partners to help them collect the data inexpensively through focus groups and online surveys (Israel & Galindo-Gonzalez, 2013; Israel & Gouldthorpe, 2013). Agents may find that a major benefit to conducting this research is that it can be used to support the Situation Statement and Plan of Work sections of the Extension packet and can be used to explain programming strategies to stakeholders.

Agents currently practice a form of audience segmentation through their assignment to a particular area of focus (e.g., 4-H, small farms, etc.); their relationships to agencies, local governments, and advisory boards; and their programming

with key stakeholder groups and youth. These broad audiences can help Extension agents know more about segments within their group. For example, email lists from such sources as homeowners' association (HOA) members, commodity groups, or individuals holding specific credentials, such as Certified Arborists, can be used for online surveys. Another inexpensive way to learn about audiences is to conduct focus groups and ask questions about the features that help define a group. Focus groups that are organized by HOAs, for example, can provide agents with information that highlights the different perspectives between homeowners and the HOA board members when they discuss landscaping and the environment.

Approaches to Defining Different Audience Segments

Agents have many choices in the ways they can describe and segment their constituents. Some are more appropriate than others, depending on the local conditions and on the resources they have to reach a particular audience. A broad segment of the population, such as homeowners who are members of a homeowner's association (HOA), or agricultural producers, can be segmented and grouped in many ways. Ultimately it will be the decision of the agent to describe the segments in ways that are relevant to program planning. The following are examples of how to describe a population to find the groups within it:

1. Can the audience be described geographically, demographically, or by their lifestyles, values, and norms (psychographics)?

This is perhaps the easiest way to describe the different groups that make up an Extension audience. Geographic segmentation in a county, for example, might show the different age of neighborhood landscapes as they go from newly established to mature; Extension agents could prioritize programming with one group of these homeowners depending on where they live and their information needs. Demographic segmentation such as age, gender, and income all divide populations into groups with different concerns and interests. While agents often develop different programs based on demographic features such as youth and retirees, we are suggesting they use the demographic information to learn more about segments within those stakeholder groups, their overall size, and their potential impact on such issues as water conservation. A primary source for demographic data is the U.S. Census (http://www.census.gov/data/data-tools.html), which can help agents describe and define their audience and its segments.

Additionally, the USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service (http://www.nass.usda.gov/Quick_Stats/) provides tremendous amounts of data that can be used to describe agricultural-related information, in many cases at the county or even zip-code level.

With experience, agents come to know the lifestyle attributes that shape behaviors of groups among their public. For example, it can take very little research to confirm that a significant percentage of residents in an HOA tend to avoid doing their own lawn maintenance and rely on landscape contractors. This would prompt the development of much different programming, perhaps targeted at improving communications between residents and the companies they hire for lawn care. Better contracts, more explicit directions, oversight of practices that protect the environment, and rewards for environmentally friendly companies are all appropriate to that segment. These homeowners also may be described and further segmented into smaller groups by knowing their norms and values. Audiences that attend rain barrel workshops, for example, have been shown to practice additional water conservation behaviors, demonstrating how they value water as a resource and also asking for different programming from agents (Ott et al., 2014; Monaghan et al., 2013).

2. Does the audience fit in a particular stage in a behavioral or attitudinal model?

Many models have been developed to provide ways to describe audiences in terms of their current behaviors or their stage on a path to behavior change. Some of these descriptive models or typologies can be useful to Extension program development. There are many common models that describe different segments, such as Global Warming's Six Americas (Leiserowitz et al. 2013), the Stages of Change (Prochaska, DiClemente, and Norcross, 1992) and the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, Strecher, and Becker, 1988). Rogers (2003) lists five adopter categories that describe population segments according to their approach to, and readiness for, adopting a new behavior or technology. An Extension agent could use surveys and focus groups to determine if their constituents can be divided into the following categories from Rogers:

Innovators: This is an audience segment that is venturesome and may have the resources to test an uncertain idea and risk failure.

Early adopters: This segment serves as a role model for their peers; they decrease uncertainty about the innovation by showing how it is done and how it can work.

Early majority: These are the deliberate ones who pick up on a new idea or practice just before the majority adopts them.

Late majority: These are the skeptical ones who wait for most of their peers to adopt first.

Laggards: The last ones to adopt the new behavior as they maintain their traditional practices.

When research is used to describe whether an audience fits into a particular stage or has similar attitudes, programming can be targeted specifically at them. Agents can ask themselves and their advisory board, administrators, and state specialists for feedback on whether it is better to spend resources on the individuals or households with no knowledge of a sustainable technology, or instead to improve chances of making an impact by focusing on those households that have a favorable opinion about the technology but just need a "nudge" before they will try it. Research that focuses on the early adopters (often known to Extension as the "choir") reveals to agents how these individuals were able to overcome the barriers to accepting a new technology. Their experience can teach agents about pitfalls and pathways to change.

A very helpful book on applying social marketing to behavior change projects is Nedra Klein Weinrich's *Hands On Social Marketing: A Step By Step Guide for Designing Change for Good* (2001). The book explains the concepts and tasks of social marketing and provides worksheets that agents can follow. The author points out the importance of identifying secondary audiences, too. These are the segments that influence others and either make change easier or get in the way. Extension agents should ask themselves, "What groups have the most influence over the primary audience, what benefits would they receive by acting as intermediaries, and what are the barriers to involving them in the program?"

Recommendations

By documenting the **behaviors** of an audience, agents can have more information to make programming decisions. By asking the following questions they can get some guidance on which groups to prioritize when developing targeted programming:

- What behaviors do they have that put them **at risk** for wasting resources, suffering a chronic disease, or having an on-the-job accident? Choosing to focus on the highest water users in a community or on different ethnic groups with high rates of hypertension or diabetes helps agents

focus on the behaviors that put these audience segments at risk.

- Do they have a **large impact** on the issue at hand? If they are the small percentage of high water users that a utility has identified, they may be difficult to change but will make a big impact if Extension programming is successful. Identifying and targeting opinion leaders for adoption of a new behavior may also be the best way to disseminate social change as their impact extends beyond just their personal actions.

- Do they **demonstrate awareness** of the issue and the ability (self-efficacy) to adopt the solutions proposed by Extension? Choosing to focus water conservation programming on households that have already adopted rain barrels from the local Extension office builds on that success, for example. Does the audience have a positive and supportive attitude about the Extension objectives?

Social marketer Craig Lefebvre (2013) calls segmentation the **first critical marketing decision,** and we argue that it is also a critical Extension programming decision. Lefebvre provides two reasons for the critical role of segmentation, and both are relevant to Extension agents who are developing new programs and revising existing ones:

- We can better design messages, products, services, and the behaviors we ask people to engage in that are relevant to their lives.

- We can better tailor and position our value propositions, behaviors, products, and services in relation to people's existing beliefs and preferences and the behaviors they currently practice.

The best way to decide to focus on a particular group is to use data, get feedback from stakeholders and advisory boards, and look at comparative literature on behavior change. There are several ways to reduce the costs of data collection on segments (using secondary sources and getting community members to volunteer their time in focus groups). Once they have identified segments, agents have to take a different approach to allocating resources—do they have what is needed to reach a difficult target group? Once segments are identified, should each group get some attention, or should resources be focused on just one? These are all ways that can make an agent's decision who to target easier and more evidence-based. There is no one way or right answer to choosing segments; it might be the groups at highest risk, the regular Extension audience, a group of opinion leaders, the group most likely to change, agency employees, or a demographic group such as Millennials. Agents should choose their targets based on their ability to meet the needs and interests of the chosen group.

Conclusions

Audience segmentation is a means of understanding the Extension audience in a way that allows agents to deliver the solutions that are really needed by a community. Ultimately, thoughtful audience segmentation can support meaningful decision-making capabilities of Extension agents, which can lead to impactful programming. A marketing campaign in the private sector would be taking a big risk by committing resources without first deciding where they are best spent. Firms in the private sector spend a lot of money studying their potential audiences and follow the warning that "if you are targeting everyone, you are not reaching anyone."

Bibliography

Andreasen, A. R. (2006). *Social marketing in the 21st century*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.

Israel, G. D. & Galindo-Gonzalez, S. (2013). *Using focus group interviews for planning or evaluating extension programs.* (IFAS Publication AEC 387.) Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Retrieved from http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pd036.

Israel, G. D. & Gouldthorpe, J. L. (2013). *The savvy survey #13: Online surveys.* (IFAS Publication AEC 407.) Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Retrieved from http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/pd077.

Lefebvre, R. C. (2013). *Social Marketing and Social Change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Leiserowitz, A., Maibach, E., Roser-Renouf, C., Feinberg, G., & Howe, P. (2013). *Global Warming's Six Americas, September 2012.* Yale University and George Mason University. New Haven Connecticut: Yale Project on Climate Change Communication.

Monaghan, P., Ott, E., Wilber, W., Gouldthorpe, J., & Raceviskis, L. (2013). *Defining audience segments for Extension programming using reported water conservation practices. The Journal of Extension, 51*(6).

Ott, E., Monaghan, P., Israel, G. D., Gouldthorpe, J. L., & Wilber, W. (in press). Rain barrel owners as a piece of the water conservation puzzle: Segmenting Extension audiences using their landscape water conservation practices. *Journal of Extension.*

Prochaska, J., DiClemente, C., & Norcross, J. (1992). In Search of How People Change: Applications to Addictive Behaviors. *American Psychologist, 47*(9), 102–1114.

Rogers, E. (2003). *The Diffusion of Innovations.* New York: The Free Press.

Rosenstock, I., Strecher, V., & Becker, M., (1988). Social Learning Theory and the Health Belief Model. *Health Education and Behavior, 15*(2), 175-183.

Telg, R., Irani, T., & Varvorines, J. (2013). *Extension marketing: Campaign planning and audience analysis.* (IFAS Publication AEC 397.) Gainesville: University of Florida Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences. Retrieved from http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/wc078.

UF/IFAS Extension Administration. (2013). *Florida Extension Road Map 2013–2023.* Retrieved from http://extadmin.ifas.ufl.edu/roadmap.shtml.

Weinrich, N. (2011). *Hands-On Social Marketing: A Step-By-Step Guide to Designing Change for Good* (2nd edition). Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.