Communication:
The Extension Process and How to Use It

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The Extension Process:
Most of the extension process is composed of the various ways to translate, transmit, and deliver information to identified audiences. A large part of it includes using all kinds of media such as TV, radio, news releases, and public meetings to carry educational messages. Extension people have a subject matter specialty, but it may be no more than a learned ability to deal with people.

Information transfer occurs in a number of ways. The principal idea of extension is that if a few people adopt something different, others will benefit through example. This is a basic tenet of teaching and marketing. Humans tend to be imitators of success and rejectors of failure.

Someone has to take risks in the testing of anything new. Regardless of the subject, some people, classed as "innovators," will try things very early, often with only a short period of evaluation, and then accept, modify, or reject it, while thinking of "better" ways to do it. Innovators are only a small minority of the people. They are dynamic, they may be leaders, but often "things" do not progress fast enough to satisfy their innate personalities. Sometimes innovators try and then reject something new before it is fully tested.

A second group are known as "early adopters," and as the name implies, will evaluate a practice, product, concept, or whatever, and then press forward putting it to work. They may be more cautious than innovators, but nevertheless, they are very positive. They tend to be leaders. The mass of us are "middle adapters" who need to be shown and, once shown, will go ahead with it. Finally there are the "late adapters" who, at least in agriculture, are those who are just barely making it. Last are the small minority who do not adopt change until forced to, often too late.

Although there are variations to this model, the concepts are valid. In extension, when demonstrations or applied research situations are needed, the early adopters are often utilized. Innovators provide a medium for experimentation but not generally for demonstration.

Historically the primary "extension way" was through local demonstration of various practices, techniques, procedures, and approaches by the county agent who possessed expertise, interest, and enthusiasm to show and tell people the good news. By necessity, extension agents are generalists. Extension Services do not have the luxury to staff all areas with the level and degree of subject expertise that would best fulfill the needs. People working in extension are often referred to as "change agents."

One of the main parts of the extension process is that there must be a theme or focus plus volunteers. Without volunteers, little progress would have been made in youth education, agriculture, and the extension of useful concepts and procedures to rural America. The rancher, upon whose land we have a grazing demonstration, the 4-H club leader, the homemaker who offers her facilities and time, and certainly the local people on extension advisory councils are all volunteers. This process has worked for the past 75 years. In the past 30 years urban America has been an important part of the extension process.

The Cooperative Extension Service:
Extension services in the United States are organized differently than anywhere else in the world. In most other countries, the extension services are a part of the federal government. In the United States the thesis is that extension is an education function and should be a part of higher educational institutions. In addition, since the recipients of education all reside in some particular locality, a tie between the local government entity and the educational institution is desirable and necessary. The extension idea originated in the early 1900's when it became recognized that people living and working on farms and ranches must be provided with opportunities to learn modern techniques through off campus procedures. This was necessary, not only to provide food, but to improve the standard of living. In this context, the original extension agricultural, home economics, and 4-H youth programs were created.

The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 set up the format of the Extension Service. This act provided for cooperative funding based on overall coordination through the USDA, direct staffing through the land grant universities, and direct support and advice through local county governments. Staffing consists of extension agents at the county level, extension subject matter specialists at the state level, and a national program leader at the federal level.

The federal government provides funds for a relatively small Washington D.C. staff which provides coordination of programs and liaison with other functions and agencies of national government. It also provides funds to state universi-
funds through normal legislative procedures for extension needs. In most states, federal and state revenues provide significant support for all extension personnel and operating budgets for campus based or branch office noncounty staff. The counties are requested to provide funds for offices, clerical staff, supplies and services, and travel for county extension personnel. Local support levels vary greatly. Theoretically, they should reflect local demand for educational services. In practice, local budgets are based on property taxes and are subject to a vote when increases above a certain level are requested. Also, Extension Services are not mandated by law such as law enforcement and public safety, which makes county support less stable than either state or federal budgets.

Subject matter programs are identified from both county and state level through the processes of consultation with members of clientele groups. Advisory groups for the subject matter often are not formalized and each agent or specialist must develop a procedure which is suited to the situation. County advisory councils are formally appointed groups who provide input and evaluation of overall county programs. They are invaluable in helping to explain extension roles to various groups.

Using the Process:

If a rancher or farmer wishes to obtain information and educational materials at the county or state level, the most critical function is to meet and get to know the extension people. An extension person wanting to impart information may find it more beneficial to act through a local group such as a livestock organization, Soil and Water Conservation District, or local SRM Section or Chapter than on an individual basis. This is important when the local extension agent is not a range trained person.

With respect to range management, all states from the plains to Hawaii, excluding Alaska, have extension range specialists on their land grant university campuses and/or branch stations. To the extent possible, local county agents may have some range training and be involved with the Society for Range Management. For example, over 50% of the livestock and range extension specialists in eastern Oregon are members of SRM. The rest have range interests but it is not their speciality. Local extension educational programs such as short courses, tours, demonstrations, or even applied research plots benefit greatly from the help of SRM members who can provide expertise.

Extension does not have a corner on ideas. All can assist. Extension does have a delivery system. As long as the ideas are sound, have merit, and meet acceptable objectives, extension can serve a valuable function. Extension people want to help and many can use the ideas you may contribute. For any subject, the audience must be defined along with the expected accomplishments, and suggested follow-up procedures. If awareness is the goal, this will require a different procedure then if adoption of new technology is the object. In that case, the educational format should include more time in the learning process, some hands-on experience, and in-depth technical lessons. Remember the target population and the objective.

While the extension delivery system is an effective one, it cannot be “all things to all people.” Fortunately, range subjects lend themselves to extension education. Virtually all range management extension specialists are active in SRM. Ideas expressed to these people will have a fair hearing. Cooperation in developing extension range programs and making sure they receive the best attention should be a joint goal of SRM and the various Extension Services of each state.

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