

## Comparison of Supervisor and Extension Personnel Perceptions of Communication Needs

Brittany Bowman

Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership  
Oklahoma State University  
448 Agricultural Hall  
Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
brittany.bowman@okstate.edu

Quisto Settle

Department of Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership  
Oklahoma State University  
448 Agricultural Hall  
Stillwater, OK 74078  
405-744-8036  
qsettle@okstate.edu

Elizabeth Gregory North

Office of Agricultural Communications  
Mississippi State University  
Box 9625  
Mississippi State, MS 39762  
662-325-2262  
elizabeth.north@msstate.edu

Keri Collins Lewis

Office of Agricultural Communications  
Mississippi State University  
Box 9625  
Mississippi State, MS 39762  
662-325-2262  
keri.lewis@msstate.edu

## Comparison of Supervisor and Extension Personnel Perceptions of Communication Needs

### Introduction

In order to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cooperative Extension must expand and redirect its resources (Bull, 2004). Cooperative Extension is a well-kept secret, and “many who could find value in Extension’s programs know little or nothing about the organization (West, 2009). County Extension agents and supervisors rank communication and public relations skills high amongst competencies needed for job success (Cooper, 2001). Technology is changing rapidly, and it is important for Extension outreach to clientele to reflect these changes (Harder, 2010). Supervisors play a key role in employee performance, and “it is the role of supervisors to operationalize corporate culture” (Vlosky, 2009). There is a need for parity between supervisors’ and employees’ perceptions of communications to ensure successful adoption of communications activities.

### Theoretical Framework

The stages of the innovation process within an organization (Rogers, 2003) are (1) agenda-setting, (2) matching, (3) redefining/restructuring, (4) clarifying, and (5) routinizing. In agenda-setting, a perceived need for innovation arises from problems within the organization. In matching, an innovation is matched to a problem an organization is encountering in meeting its agenda. In redefining/restructuring, the organizational structure is modified, and the innovation is adapted. In clarifying, the organization-innovation relationship becomes more defined. In routinizing, the innovation loses its identity as it is incorporated into the activities of the organization. Cooperative Extension has identified many communications needs within Cooperative Extension (Alston, 2011; Cater, 2013; O’Neill, 2011). In this study, both Extension supervisors and personnel ranked the level of importance of communication mediums in meeting the agenda of Cooperative Extension.

### Methods

A survey was conducted of Extension personnel, including their supervisors. The questionnaire was developed for this project with input from Mississippi State University’s Office of Agricultural Communications. The employee group consisted of county agents, area agents, associates, regional specialists, and state specialists/faculty. Of these, 356 were sent the questionnaire and 129 responded (36.2%). The second group consisted of the primary group’s supervisors: statewide administrators, R&E center heads, regional extension coordinators, and department chairs. Of these, 25 were sent the questionnaire and 15 responded (60%).

### Results

Extension personnel ranked social media and visual communication higher than supervisors did. On a scale of 1= *Not Important* to 5 = *Extremely Important*, supervisors responded with  $M = 2.64$  for managing a Twitter account, compared to personnel who responded with  $M = 3.98$ . Creating Instagram posts received  $M = 2.55$  from supervisors and  $M = 3.71$  from personnel. Creating Facebook posts received  $M = 2.91$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.24$  from personnel. Visual communication included graphic design and editing videos. For example, supervisors responded with  $M=2.55$  for graphic design for newsletters, while personnel responded with  $M=3.98$ . Supervisors’ response to editing video was  $M=2.55$  and  $M= 3.50$  from personnel.

Importance of written communications appears similar between personnel and supervisors, while news communication varies based on the medium. Importance of writing an educational newsletter received  $M = 4.09$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.36$  from personnel. Writing a business letter received  $M = 3.82$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.32$  from personnel.

News communication included being interviewed for radio and TV, writing a news story, and working with local media to get coverage of Extension events/stories. Being interviewed for radio and TV were very similar between supervisors and personnel. Being interviewed for radio received  $M = 3.91$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.01$  from personnel. Being interviewed for TV received  $M = 3.73$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.16$  from personnel. However, writing a news story received  $M = 3.36$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.22$  from personnel.

The only two communication mediums Extension supervisors ranked as more important than personnel were marketing and making a speech or presentation. Marketing received a level of importance of  $M = 4.73$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.66$  from personnel. Making a speech received  $M = 4.73$  from supervisors and  $M = 4.67$  from personnel.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

Cooperative Extension must be creative in its marketing strategy to remain relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Burrows, 2008). Communication mediums, such as news outreach and social media, that Extension personnel and supervisors report low use or importance of can have large impacts in Extension marketing. For example, writing a newspaper column can influence reader awareness of an issue by over 40% (Ehret, 2008), and Facebook posts of 45 Extension respondents can collectively reach 6,000 followers (O'Neill, 2011).

Because communication and social media use is influenced by organizational factors (Walden, 2016) and Extension professionals seek professional development, "in the latest developments in digital technology" (Alston, 2011), professional development in communication strategies for Extension personnel is strongly recommended. Such professional development should allow personnel to try new skills and receive feedback (Garst, 2014) and take a step-by-step approach to save Extension personnel time in overcoming the high learning curve (O'Neill, 2011). With low reporting rates of social media use by Extension personnel to supervisors (O'Neill, 2011) and the importance of reports in analyzing an organization's use of resources and growth (Malmellin, 2007), a recommended component of professional development is documentation of communication. This could assist supervisors in more accurately knowing personnel's communication strategies and facilitate conversations on the mediums both personnel and supervisors consider most important.

Additionally, professional development should share analytics with personnel and supervisors on the benefits and potential reach of different communication mediums. It is possible that personnel's and supervisors' estimate of importance is low because of low use of that communication medium. Therefore, Extension personnel and supervisors would not have an opportunity to realize how large the potential impact a communication medium can have for a target audience. Professional development should assist Extension personnel and supervisors in identifying local news media agents (Caldwell, 2005) who can provide partnership in advancing the communication strategies of Cooperative Extension and complement Extension personnel skill sets. Finally, changes in technology affect professional development delivery (Harder, 2010). Technology can be valuable in making professional development cost- and time-efficient, but the skills and preference of professional development participants must be considered. While Extension personnel support use of webinars in training, they are unlikely to use Twitter or professional development blogs (Cater, 2013), which should shape delivery choices.

### References

- Alston, A. J., Hilton, L., English, C. W., Elbert, C., & Wakefield, D. (2011). Analysis of the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service's role in bridging the digital divide. *Journal of Extension*, 49(6).
- Bull, N., Cote, L., Warner, P., McKinnie, M. 2004. "Is Extension Relevant for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?" *Journal of Extension*. 42(6).
- Burrows, M. 2008. "Using Local Farmer's Markets to Promote Extension." *Journal of Extension*. 46(6).
- Caldwell, C. 2005. "Identification of Strategic Communication Competencies for County Extension Educators: a Delphi Study." *OhioLINK*.
- Cater, M., Davis, D., Leger, B., Machtmes, K., & Arcemont, L. (2013). A study of Extension professionals preferences and perceptions of usefulness and level of comfort with blogs as an informal professional development tool. *Journal of Extension*, 51(4).
- Cooper, A., Graham, D. 2001. "Competencies Needed to be Successful County Agents and County Supervisors." *Journal of Extension*. 39(1).
- Ehret, M., Kiernan, N. 2008. "How to Ascertain the Impact of Writing a Newspaper Column." *Journal of Extension*. 46(3).
- Garst, B., Baughman, S., Franz, N. 2014. "Benchmarking Professional Development Practices Across Youth-Serving Organizations: Implications for Extension." *Journal of Extension*. 52(5).
- Harder, A., Place, N., Scheer, S. 2010. "Towards a Competency-Based Extension Education Curriculum: A Delphi Study." *Journal of Agricultural Education*. 51(3).
- Malmellin, N. 2007. "Communication Capital: Modeling Corporate Communications as an Organizational Asset." *Corporate Communications: an International Journal*.
- O'Neill, B., Zumwalt, A., & Bechmen, J. (2011). Social media use of cooperative extension family economics educators: online survey results and implications. *Journal of Extension*, 49(6).
- Rogers, E. T. (2003). *Diffusion of Innovations* (5th ed.). New York, NY: Free Press.
- Vlosky, R., Aguilar, F. 2009. "A Model of Employee Satisfaction: Gender Differences in Cooperative Extension." *Journal of Extension*. 47(2).
- Walden, J. 2016. "Integrating Social Media Into the Workplace: A Study of Shifting Technology Use Repertoires." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 60(2).
- West, B., Drake, D., Londo, A. 2009. "Extension: A Modern-Day Pony Express?" *Journal of Extension*. 47(2).