

Where Everybody Knows Your Name: Cheers to Extension Television

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Introduction

Extension subject-matter specialists are typically state-level employees tasked with providing support to county level programs, guiding programming, and connecting research efforts with local needs (Woeste & Stephens, 1996). Increasingly, mass communication through electronic formats is a job expectation for these individuals. As an educational tool, video allows an audience to self-direct their interaction in both scope and time (Schober, Selaa, Fernandez, Ferrell, & Yaroach, 2016). Research has shown that watching television is a preferred method of learning scientific information (Boellstorff et al., 2013).

Although limited research exists on the effectiveness of video programming in advancing the mission of Extension (Rockwell & Randall, 1987; Wagenet et al., 2005), little can be found that explores the participation impacts on the careers of Extension specialists.

Theoretical Framework

The guiding theoretical framework for this study was cultivation theory as it interacts with the construct of source credibility. The theory states that increased media use will shape a viewer's perception of reality to more closely align with the vision of reality presented through video (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). Source credibility may be defined as the "communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receiver's acceptance of a message" (Ohanian, 1990). Ohanian further proposed a construct of expertise, trustworthiness, and relatability to measure source credibility (Ohanian, 1990) built on two general theories: the source-credibility model and the source-attractiveness model. Pfau, Mullen, Deidrich, and Garrow (1995) found that cultivation theory and source credibility work in concert to craft public perceptions of those representing industries with limited public exposure. Agriculture is one such identified industry (Beam, 2017). Cultivated perceptions of Extension specialist's credibility are thus expected to affect interactions with Extension clientele and enhance the effectiveness of Extension specialists.

Purpose & Objectives

The purpose of this study was to document the perceived relationship between Extension audiences and Extension specialists who regularly participated in video communication over many years.

Methods

A case study was designed involving telephone interviews of Extension specialists who have regularly contributed to a land-grant produced broadcast program over long periods of time. The SUNUP television program produced by the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service and Oklahoma Agricultural Experiment Station was selected for study. This program was broadcast on the statewide PBS network from 1986-2004 and 2008-present. Three individuals were identified for interviews: all Extension specialists who had each contributed on a weekly or bi-weekly basis over the past 30 years. Each maintained an Extension role requiring in-person engagement with Extension clientele at local meetings during that same timeframe. These individuals were selected as they have frequent recurring experiences which occurred over a lengthy period of time. Each is known to carry the trust of their peers, the ag press, and Extension clientele. They are identified here as *Specialist 1*, *Specialist 2*, and *Specialist 3*.

Findings

Specialist 1 said being a known presence from television proved beneficial when he would first meet an Extension client. “It gives you name recognition,” he said, “. . .and because you're on the radio or you're on TV or you're in the press, you've got to be credible or you wouldn't be there. It gives you notoriety and it gives you credibility.” However, *Specialist 3* suggested the audience reaction went beyond recognition, “People would call you by your first name rather than just being Dr. [*Specialist 3*].”

Specialist 2 said involvement with SUNUP improved the quality of conversations he has with in-person audience members. “Broadcast exposure allows me to maintain a stream of conversation with the producers that I see regularly,” he said, “I think it levers the time a little bit, in terms of there's not as much need to lay the ground work for a particular discussion when you have that ongoing stream of contact with them.” *Specialist 2* attributes this to a sense of camaraderie that develops between the audience and those on the program. “It's not a sterile environment once you get this ongoing relationship,” he said, “I think there's more of a familiar approach where you're talking to friends. You're talking to almost to family in some cases, and it allows you to have that communication with them.”

Conclusions

Extension specialists interviewed here demonstrated improved career effectiveness through increased credibility and augmented producer engagement. The participants reported audience perceptions of each credibility component: relatability, trustworthiness, and expertise (Ohanian, 1990). Local producers appeared to feel increased familiarity and comfort with Extension specialists they saw them regularly through television confirming the cultivation effect (Gerbner & Gross, 1976). As a result, these television appearances were not seen as one-directional communication but rather as part of an on-going two-way conversation between producers and Extension specialists. It is important to recognize that although these effects are a product of television exposure, the results are observed in local, in-person meetings. Although these specialists stated mass communications was the most effective way for them to reach an audience, the combination of mass communication and in-person events is shown to produce powerful results.

Recommendations for Research

Going forward from this study, a quantitative instrument should be developed to examine such effects in Extension professionals participating with television and other programs in other states, in programs produced outside of Extension, and of those participating at varied frequency. Additional study is also suggested to examine these effects from the perspective of Extension clientele. Perceptions of Extension specialists at in-person events should be compared between those who watch broadcast programming and those who do not.

Recommendations for Practice

A recommendation of practice is for Extension specialists to partner with both Extension and non-Extension media in order to maintain a channel of communication with clientele. Use of social media and self-produced video may result in similar effects. Further, emphasis should be placed on professional development opportunities that broaden the content specialist's communication skills. Both in-person and on-camera training is warranted.

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