

Introduction

The Road Ahead: Cooperative Extension and Information Technology

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The age of the digital economy is dawning, and with it, new mechanisms for Cooperative Extension to connect with its stakeholders. While our work focuses on people and their needs, technological advances make it possible to provide applied education more rapidly than ever before.

Cooperative Extension's dynamic relationship with technology typifies the adage, "the more the world changes, the more it remains the same." While the technology that facilitates university outreach has changed over time, its role in program delivery remains the same – vitally important!

The objectives of this book are threefold:

- To show ways in which information technology (IT) is being used in existing Extension programs;
- To indicate how new Extension programs and audiences are being developed through IT;
- To examine the implications of the digital divide for Extension programming.

This webbook captures some of Extension's pioneering IT efforts and innovations. In the years ahead, this initial base of knowledge will grow as new contributions are added. We hope that this resource will be useful to Extension professionals seeking to innovate and expand their educational programs through the use of emerging information technology!

Changing Assumptions

Through the years, technology has helped Extension staff to stay connected with people and speed the delivery of critical information to them. Cooperative Extension has utilized a wide variety of technologies to achieve significant educational impacts. Today, as never before, we are challenged to aid society in dealing with economic shifts and changing technological assumptions.

For instance, the rate of adoption of digital technology by U.S. citizens is proceeding at a dizzying pace. Although radio existed for 38 years before gaining 50 million users, and television took 13 years before reaching that threshold, it took just four years for the Internet to attract 50 million users in the United States.

Children and teenagers are leading the way. Ninety percent (or 47.4 million) of children between the ages of 5 and 17 now use computers at home and at school; 75% percent of 14- to 17-year-olds, and 65 percent of 10- to 13-year-olds use the Internet. Households with children under the age of 18 are more likely to access the Internet (62.2 percent) than households with no children (53.2 percent).

Commerce Secretary Evans, 02/05/2002



According to the Department of Commerce, as of September 2001, Internet users numbered 140 million adults in the United States, or 54 percent of the nation's adult population (see <http://www2.osec.doc.gov/public.nsf/docs/Evans-Census-Online>). By the year 2005, this participant level is expected to double, with more than two million new users adopting the Internet each month (Dept of Commerce). In a recent industry study, two-thirds of youth and adults said that if they were stranded on a deserted island they would prefer Internet access to a television or phone. Also, sixty-three percent of the youth surveyed indicated they would rather surf the Web than watch television!

The digital technology revolution of the twenty-first century also promises to provide access to goods and services beyond the bounds of time and place. Peter Drucker anticipates that an eCommerce-driven marketplace and economy will radically change the mental geography of capitalism.

For most small entrepreneurs, this shift likely means that neither their competition nor their markets will be just local. However, while e-commerce holds opportunity for economically disadvantaged communities, businesses and individuals to participate in the new economy, they are all in danger of being left behind for lack of necessary skills, experience and technical support.

Novel Opportunity

The present wave of technological change occurring alongside significant economic changes, and those changes are of increasing concern to Extension clientele across the nation. Where many once relied on natural resources alone, the pursuit of economic opportunities now increasingly requires the adoption and use of information technology (DeYoung, 2001).

For instance, telecommunication networks in the United States are expected to soon carry more electronic data than voice. With voice communications expected to comprise less than two percent of the traffic by 2005, this shift portends a future in which telephones run on the Net rather than the Net running on telephone systems.

The importance of artfully blending technology with the personal touch in university outreach is reflected in the sage advice of a veteran Cooperative Extension agent:

"The Extension delivery method is simple - stay close to the people to learn what they need. If you don't know an answer, get it however you can - letter, telephone, library search or research study. Make the answer timely and as understandable as humanly possible. Provide all your information in a form people can use. If the public can't or won't come to receive it - deliver it. Above all, don't be afraid to try new programming delivery methods in order to help people!"

Jordan, 1976

This shift is likely to significantly reduce long-distance telecommunication costs, thereby encouraging greater use of digital information technology by business and society. Electronic gizmos such as mobile phones, pagers, email, global positioning satellites and others yet to be invented will become ever more commonplace in our daily lives.

Due to its widespread presence and credibility with both adult and youth audiences, Cooperative Extension has the opportunity to leverage its existing programs to build clientele interest and skills in information technology. However, this technology-enabling outreach must continue to be characterized as knowledge that is applied, multiplied and trusted by diverse audiences for its accuracy and timeliness.

Implications for the Future

With the world becoming hyper-connected and global marketplaces being the rule rather than exception – what are the implications for Cooperative Extension in the future?

The answer to this question can be found within our core values. Cooperative Extension was born with a mission of concern and spirit of service that has the goal of improving individuals' well-being and quality of life. Our delivery of educational programming can fulfill these mandates by using an appropriate blend of personalized communication patterns with emerging information technologies.

Individual extension professionals are in the best position to judge the program delivery tools and strategies needed to achieve the desired educational outcome for different target groups. But, as part of the outreach process it is important not to lose sight of clients as individuals. The personal touch fosters people's trust and confidence in using the information being conveyed through emerging technology. In fact, the limited evidence that is available to date suggests that "...telecommunications may be a complement to, or at least not a strong substitute for ... face-to-face interactions" (Gaspar and Glaeser, p. 136).

As a Webbook reader you are most likely an Extension innovator. Given this, we look forward to learning about your novel outreach programs integrating "high tech and high touch" approaches for educational success!

References

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