



Extension: On the Brink of Extinction or Distinction?

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The sky is falling. The sky is falling.

Yeah, right. We've heard that before. People have been saying that about Extension for years.

Well, if we carefully analyze the pieces we find landing all around us, the evidence indicates Chicken Little may be right this time about the future of Extension.

Why do we say that, and what can we do? Read on.

The Evidence

Information & Value

Information now has real, measurable value. Private-sector information providers such as crop advisors, business consultants, and private education and training providers are cropping up everywhere. The attraction is the revenue garnered by refining information to meet specific audience needs.

No Longer Sole Source

Extension has spent decades as a sole-source provider in the information and outreach market. Technology has created the opportunity to provide and promote access that wasn't realistic before. Because of this, the traditional education market is also more easily accessible for competitors—other universities, private education developers, and commercially based education and training organizations.

Technology combined with open access to the rapidly expanding knowledge marketplace entices private information providers to step up the competition for learners who previously were dependent on Extension as a sole-source education provider.

From Distribution to Access

A "provider mentality" focuses on the process of distribution, meaning it is driven by what we want to distribute. A "user mentality" focuses on access and the customer, meaning we now need to anticipate customer needs and provide them access to our knowledge base.

Reach vs. Richness

The richest form of interaction with Extension educators has always been face-to-face (F2F). But reaching a mass audience with F2F richness requires more resources than Extension could ever generate. But now think about Amazon.com, which uses technology to remember what individuals have ordered before and suggests other books they might find interesting, thus enhancing the richness of their interaction with the countless customers they reach.

Navigators in the Lead

Evans and Wuster (2000) also say reach, even when it carries F2F richness, is just clutter without some form of navigation. Navigators can be software (Quicken), evaluators (Consumer Reports), or search engines (Yahoo).

However, Navigators can also be people. They say private-sector Navigators are driving fundamental power shifts among the other players. Given the ongoing privatization of information, Extension must respond, or the private sector obviously will dominate.

Navigation is not a new concept to Extension. Sorting information and helping people navigate to effective answers has been the foundation of the Extension system from the beginning. However, with the number of Web sites doubling every 100 days, the amount of information to navigate through is phenomenal. Are we up to it?

Disruptive Technologies & Innovations

Christensen (2000) says, "Many of the most powerful innovations that disrupted other industries did so by enabling a larger population of less-skilled people to do, in a more convenient, less expensive setting, things that historically could be performed only by expensive specialists in centralized, inconvenient locations."

Compare the distribution of traditional Extension educational programs to the access model of other providers, where you can obtain what you want, when you want it, in the convenience of your own home or business. Clearly, we can legitimately be described as having "relatively expensive specialists in centralized, inconvenient locations."

The Consequences

Extension will continue to have difficulty coping with the transition to a marketplace environment where we are not the sole-source provider of educational opportunities.

Christensen's examples clearly demonstrate that large, traditional organizations are unable to effectively compete in smaller, rapidly expanding new markets created by disruptive technologies.

Time is of the essence. Economists say the first competitor in a newly defined market niche could maintain as much as 50% market share, leaving others to fight over the remaining available customers.

Extension's 100 years of experience may give us a head start toward a successful entry into a newly defined niche of technology-mediated outreach for broader audience segments, but if we don't move quickly, others will.

Turning 100 years of inertia? Good luck.

Our Proposal

Rather than reinvent from the inside, we propose creating from scratch a new virtual Extension Service: e-CES.

Reinventing from the inside doesn't work--it is typically bound by incrementalism. As technology maven Nicholas Negroponte from MIT says, "Incrementalism is innovation's worst enemy."

We're proposing a new e-CES in classic, new-market-entrant, start-up mode. Initial goals will be to match and surpass Extension's current supply-oriented distribution system with a demand-oriented anytime, anyplace, any-source access system.

Working with a virtual foundation on the World Wide Web and other technologies, e-CES will attract new customers, new sources and providers of information, and new talent able to overcome the traditional barriers to which incumbents appear blind or by which they are constrained.

How Will We Do It?

We'll leverage our brand identity from the larger parent organization into these new markets. The value of science-based objectivity has dropped in relative importance lately, with access and timeliness moving up as higher priorities for outreach audiences. But objectivity will reemerge as a high priority--and as our competitive advantage--when access and timeliness are offered by everyone.

As a new competitor, e-CES, with its brand-based credibility, will resonate with new customers growing cynical in the commercial churn of the virtual marketplace.

Brand identity will be maintained as Land-Grant faculty and specialists build and offer new educational modules focused intensely on identified customer needs. Faculty and specialists will be reimbursed for their involvement, just as the private sector is currently doing, using consulting

agreements.

Grassroots contacts will help us identify issues. We'll follow up with extensive and ongoing audience analysis pinpointing the needs of "communities of interest" well beyond traditional audiences. Having effective sensors in every community could give us a leg-up on private-sector competitors.

While attempting to cherry-pick off the best revenue-generating customers in multiple markets, private providers may not have enough foundation in any one market to gain access to the customer intelligence we can develop--if we have the right people in the field.

Also, we'll attract development talent from the dot.com-startup world. The rush to mine the virtual gold of e-commerce has chewed up and spit out some highly talented people that could find the long-term societal value (and the revenue) created by e-CES to be the next great challenge.

How Will We Fund It?

To create a seed-money, venture capital fund, we'll approach major philanthropic foundations and corporations with national scope and presence. Corporate partners will be required to have a broad understanding of the value of science-based objective information and must not expect to "own" or control the flow of educational programming.

We'll use initial funding during the startup and transition until we can establish a competitive user-fee structure that covers all operating expenses. e-CES will be a separate, public/private joint venture, but with clear public accountability and identity. It will have an "Extension inside" image and branding, much like "Intel-inside" in the computer industry.

Are We Up to It?

We'd better be. If we aren't, in the very near future we won't have a professional foundation from which to work. Anyone assuming they will be working in Extension in the same way they do today beyond the next 5 to 10 years is just not paying attention.

React On-Line

Okay, now it's your turn.

Take a look our extended discussion of these issues, available in three on-line documents at <http://www.agcom.purdue.edu/AgCom/EXTonBrink>:

- Boehlje, M. D., & King, D. A. (1998, October). "Extension on the brink--Meeting the private sector challenge in the information marketplace," *Journal of Applied Communications*, Vol. 82, No. 3.
- King, D. A., & Boehlje, M. D. (2000). "Extension's future: A conversation about what lies beyond the brink" CES-324-W. Purdue Extension.

- King, D. A., & Boehlje, M. D. (2000). "So you want to have a job in 2005? Bringing Extension back from the brink" CES-325-W. Purdue Extension.

Then, log on to our Brink of Extension Discussion Forum, also available at <http://www.agcom.purdue.edu/AgCom/EXTonBrink>. React to our proposal. Scan the reactions of your colleagues. Return, and react some more. [NOTE: This discussion site is no longer operational.]

We'll use your input to help formulate the next steps in this effort to frame and implement e-CES.

References

- Evans, P., & Wuster, T. (2000). Blown to bits: How the new economics of information transforms strategy. Harvard Business School Press.
- Christensen, C., Bohmer, R., & Kenagy, J. (2000, September-October). "Will disruptive innovations cure health care?" Harvard Business Review.

This article is online at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2000october/comm1.html>

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