



April 2009
Volume 47 Number 2
Article Number 2COM1

[Return to Current Issue](#)

Extension: A Modern-Day Pony Express?

Ben C. West

Associate Extension Professor
Mississippi State University
Starkville, Mississippi
benw@cfr.msstate.edu

David Drake

Assistant Professor
University of Wisconsin
Madison, Wisconsin
ddrake2@wisc.edu

Andy Londo

Extension Professor
Mississippi State University
Starkville, Mississippi
ajlondo@cfr.msstate.edu

Abstract: Extension now faces the same problem that threatened and ultimately led to the demise of the Pony Express: survival in changing times. The Pony Express was made irrelevant by revolutions in society and disappeared into American history. American society has undergone many revolutions since Extension's creation, and we argue that the organization simply has not kept pace. We opine that Extension is dangerously close to also becoming irrelevant, but that it can survive with bold and visionary leadership that addresses Extension's niche and mission, funding challenges, marketing strategies, and rigor of our programs.

The Pony Express was a fast mail service crossing the North American continent, operating from April 1860 to November 1861. For a brief time, the Pony Express was the most regular and predictable mail service in the U.S. While in operation, the Pony Express was successful because it filled a specific and important niche. But times change, and the Pony Express failed to adapt. In 1861, the building of the transcontinental railroad and development of the telegraph promised to transform America forever. Society's evolution caused the Pony Express to become outdated and irrelevant, and forced it to close its doors and declare bankruptcy.

The year following the collapse of the Pony Express, while America was embroiled in the Civil War, the land-grant university system was created. On July 2, 1862, President Lincoln signed the Morrill Act, which endeavored to provide education in agriculture, mechanical arts, and military strategy. To facilitate the creation of state universities, each state was provided an incentive of 30,000 acres per Congressional representative.

With these resources as a foundation, states quickly began creating public universities collectively referred to as "land-grant" institutions. Congress further solidified its support of agricultural development with the

passage of the Hatch Act of 1887, establishing an agricultural experiment station at each land-grant university. Their role was to explore ways of enhancing agricultural production, efficiency, and profit. In every way, early development of the land-grant system was structured to serve America's agrarian society (Rasmussen, 1989).

Integral to the land-grant mission is the concept of outreach and engagement with communities. Early on, this philosophy was codified in the Smith-Lever Act of 1914, which established the Cooperative Extension System. Extension's role was to disseminate agricultural research-via the network of county Extension offices and local agents-to farmers. "Helping farmers farm better" was an often used phrase to describe Extension's early mission. Indeed, much of the success of American agriculture can be traced back to the research and Extension programs delivered by Extension personnel at land-grant universities.

Changing Times

The Pony Express and Extension are two completely dissimilar organizations linked by a common problem: survival in changing times. America is now a much different place than in the early and mid 1900s, when Extension was at its zenith. According to the United States Census Bureau and the National Agricultural Statistics Service, 60% of the country's 76 million citizens lived in rural areas in 1900. During that same time, only 7% of the public held high school degrees. Moreover, 42% of Americans were employed on the farm, providing the labor force necessary to run the 5.7 million farms that existed then. Today, the United States' population exceeds 300 million, with only 20% living in rural areas. Less than 2% of America's labor force is employed on our 2 million farms, and our educational levels have risen dramatically, with 80% of Americans holding at least a high school diploma.

Despite these trends in our society and agriculture, Extension at most land-grant Universities expends much of its effort on traditional agricultural education. Although some might argue that Extension has trended too far from its agricultural roots (Franklin, 1990), we believe the current path is a recipe for irrelevance. Farmers represent a much smaller portion of the American public, and the farming professional does not need the basic level of agricultural training that Extension traditionally has provided (Agunga & Igodan, 2007). Many farmers have formal training in agricultural science and also access to other sources (e.g., Internet, industry consultants, other state and federal agencies) for reliable information. As a result, the traditional, basic agricultural education provided by the Extension system is increasingly irrelevant and ignored, causing a decline in the philosophical and financial support for Extension at local, state, and federal levels.

Extension at a Crossroads

We contend that Extension is at a crossroads, and others have agreed (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004). Like the Pony Express, Extension began with a unique niche and an associated business model. The Pony Express could not adapt to change and became a relic of the American West. Extension is now potentially facing the same fate, and indeed others have similarly questioned whether Extension will long survive (Fribourg, 2003).

This fate is not sealed. The basic concept of Extension-using objective, research-based information to help the public-is of greater importance now than ever. Like us, others have suggested that Extension must adapt to survive (ECOP, 2002), and certainly Extension has slowly evolved throughout its history. Change has been slow coming, though, and we suggest that dramatic transformations must occur to ensure Extension's future. Within this context we offer the following recommendations to, if nothing else, stimulate ongoing dialogue about strategies to ensure the organization's survival.

Defining Our Niche

Most Extension administrators, faculty, and agents agree: Extension cannot be all things to all people. Extension's historic success was due to its service of a specific audience (farmers and other rural citizens) and for a specific purpose (to increase agricultural productivity and enhance the rural lifestyle). Extension's traditional niche is disappearing, and Extension must thus redefine itself to survive. Many Extension professionals are skeptical of abandoning traditional clients, and that is a valid concern. In the short term, we must find ways to serve traditional partners with traditional methods while also exploring new horizons.

An immediate first step would be to conduct a rigorous market analysis to identify potential programmatic, demographic, and economic niches. Once that is complete, long-term strategies probably will require a change in the nature of our relationship with traditional clients (Bloome, 1992), which doesn't necessarily portend an abandonment of agriculture, but rather may unveil better ways to serve farming interests.

Marketing

Extension is today a well-kept secret. Historically, with a clear and uncomplicated audience and mission, the value and services provided by Extension were mostly spread by word-of-mouth. What farmer in the 1950s didn't know about and rely on Extension?

Today, though, many people who could find value in Extension's programs know little or nothing about the organization. Essentially, Extension has not had to traditionally promote itself or its programs, and now does not know how to do so. Once Extension better defines its modern-day niche, major efforts must occur to develop relevant programs and aggressively market them to the appropriate clientele. By increasing visibility through reaching larger constituencies and improving product identity, greater support and loyalty could be built for Extension funding at local, state, and national levels.

Rigorous Communication and Education

Without a doubt, Extension has been a pioneer in new communication strategies, and Extension professionals continually explore modern methods of education (see the [June 2008 issue of the *Journal of Extension*](#), for example). In our quest to communicate better, all would agree that our programs and products should be grounded in communication and education theory and then rigorously applied and evaluated.

The fact remains, however, that Extension is dominated by individuals with subject-matter expertise but with little or no formal training in education, communication, psychology, or other fields relevant to Extension's mission of education. The stark reality is that we have limited evidence to demonstrate Extension's effectiveness and, in this day of heightened scrutiny and expectations for governmental programs, we must improve in this arena.

Funding Challenges

State and federal funding for Extension has been in decline for several years, and little evidence suggests a reversal of the trend. In light of diminished budgets, financial creativity and leveraging will be paramount to Extension's success. As an example, an increase in fee-based programs and products should be fully explored; although some state Extension organizations promote fee-based services, others eschew them. Not only will this generate revenue, but also attaching a value to the Extension brand provides legitimacy and a measuring stick for demand. Such an approach is not without challenges, however. Jackson and Johnson (1999) provided an appropriate caution regarding the potential of external monies to exert undue influence on

Extension's mission and operation.

Conclusion

Extension represents the very essence of the land-grant university system. For the organization to survive, university administrators must grapple with the reality that society has undergone many revolutions since Extension's founding in 1914 but that Extension's gradual evolution has not kept pace. This reality inevitably leads us to a conclusion that Extension, as it currently exists, cannot survive. Revolutionary thinking and action will be required to rouse the organization, led by bold and progressive leaders who have the vision, courage, and capability to lead such change (Fehliss, 2005). Such visionary leadership is the only way Extension will evade the same fate experienced by the Pony Express.

References

- Agunga, R., & Igodan, C. (2007). Organic farmers' need for and attitude towards Extension. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 45(6) Article 6FEA6. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2007december/a6.shtml>
- Bloome, P. D. (1992). Seeking a mature relationship with agriculture. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 30(1) Article1TP1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1992spring/tp1.html>
- Bull, N. H., Cote, L. S., Warner, P. D., & McKinnie, M. R. (2004). Is Extension relevant for the 21st century? *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 42(6) Article 6COMM2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2004december/comm2.shtml>
- Extension Committee on Organization and Policy. (2002). *The Extension system: A vision for the 21st century*. Washington, D.C., National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges.
- Fehliss, C. P. (2005). A call for visionary leadership. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 43(1) Article 1COMM1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/2005february/comm1.shtml>
- Franklin, R. E. (1990). More production agriculture, not less. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 28(3) Article 3LET1. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1990fall/let1.html>
- Fribourg, H. A. (2003.) Land-grant colleges need new grants. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* 50(16) B20. Retrieved January 8, 2009 from: <http://chronicle.com/weekly/v50/i16/16b02001.htm>
- Jackson, D. G., & L. Johnson. (1999). When to look a gift horse in the mouth. *Journal of Extension* [On-line] 37(4) Article 4COM2. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1999august/comm2.html>
- Rasmussen, W. D. (1989). *Taking the university to the people: Seventy-five years of Cooperative Extension*. Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#).