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Coming to Grips with the Way the World Works

Abstract

Extension finds itself in a cultural phenomenon known as disruptive change. Clientele increasingly access products and services digitally and in real time. This digital revolution challenges historical methods that have served Extension for over 100 years. Extension's response going forward may stem or even reverse current organizational decline. The Joint Council of Extension Professionals responded to member feedback in 2017 by hosting a virtual town hall meeting (VTHM), initiating a national conversation on innovation and change. The VTHM produced provocative discussions regarding the potential use of digital tools to increase Extension's relevance and value. In this commentary, we reflect on the implications of those discussions.

Keywords: [innovation](#), [disruptive](#), [leadership](#), [digital](#)

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Introduction

Extension educators nationwide find themselves in the eye of a digital hurricane that will direct the course of Extension's future. *Disruptive change* is a term describing a cultural phenomenon, a fundamental shift in the playing field. Innovation expert Clayton Christensen describes disruptive innovation (the catalyst for this change) as "a process by which a product or service takes root initially in simple applications at the bottom of a market and then relentlessly moves up market, eventually displacing established competitors" (Christensen, n.d., para. 1). A contemporary example from the realm of education is the University of Phoenix (Blumenstyk, 2013; Friedman, 2018). While higher education debated the validity of distance education, for-profit corporations took the lead in a shifting education industry. Seaman, Allen, and Seaman (2018) reported that "almost half of all distance education students are enrolled in just 5% of the nation's institutions" (p. 3).

Adoption of a "new normal" in this digital age is pervasive in most aspects of society, including education, communication, medicine, agriculture, and industry. Historically, Extension has played a significant role in change

leadership, communicating new technologies based on the evolving needs of production agriculture, communities, youths, and families. Yet a cursory environmental scan of the world around us clearly documents that the digital revolution has resulted in the rapid divestment of many products and processes, including many staples of Extension's work.

Concurrently, an environmental scan of our Extension organization nationwide reflects leadership responses that include rebranding, reorganization, and intensified multistate collaboration to discuss evolving tools and methods. Contemporary debate includes the argument that we not "leave traditional clientele behind." In periods of fundamental and disruptive change, it is critical that organizations are honest about the status quo, thoughtful about their future goals, and intentional about investments required to succeed. Organizations steeped in tradition (such as Extension) often do not fare well during such times. Christensen observed that "disruptive technology brings to a market a very different value perspective . . . there is great value in coming to grips with 'the way the world works'" (Christensen, 1997, p. 9).

Where Does Extension Stand?

Where does Extension stand in the digital learning space? During the last decade Extension has not sustained the support necessary to maintain and grow operations. Downsizing, hiring freezes, discontinuation of entire programs, and budget cuts have been at the forefront of state, regional, and national actions. The "best kept secret" discussion is ever present, but to what result if our web resources are shallow and we are not digitally engaged? Supporting a clientele that is increasingly diverse and digitally connected should be at the forefront of our discussions.

Extension leadership must be intentional in change management. The importance of accessibility in 2018 is consistent with its importance in 1914; the methods of knowledge transfer have simply expanded. Digital product development in Extension will have to be supported to reverse a national trend reflecting a tenuous organizational future. Effectively building organizational capacity requires recruitment of those with a required skill set and an expanded strategy. To that end, the Joint Council of Extension Professionals (JCEP) took action surrounding its 2017 Leadership Conference to shape the discussion of innovation in Extension by conducting a national survey and holding a virtual town hall meeting (VTHM) on the issue.

Emerging Issues and Innovation Survey

In preparation for the 2017 JCEP Leadership Conference, the conference planning team conducted a national online Extension survey on emerging issues and innovation. The goal was to support Extension leaders by identifying strategies related to these topics. The Emerging Issues and Innovation (EII) Survey was administered across seven Extension member associations: Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals, Epsilon Sigma Phi, National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals, National Association of County Agricultural Agents, National Association of Extension 4-H Agents, National Association of Extension Program and Staff Development Professionals, and National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences.

Respondents to the EII Survey ($n = 318$) rated Extension on the following four characteristics of entrepreneurship (as a measure of innovation):

- constantly works to identify changing clientele needs,

- is willing to take risks to innovate in response to changing clientele needs,
- invests/shifts resources to meet changing needs, and
- has enthusiasm for and belief in capacity for innovation.

VTHM

Results from the EII Survey were used to inform the VTHM discussion. The VTHM was produced live and broadcast from two locations (Orlando, Florida, and Washington, DC). Virtual participants included 226 Extension professionals from 47 states and Alberta, Canada. The broadcast was developed according to digital education best practices, including adherence to instructional design restrictions related to content formatting for graphics/slides, production scripting to include live and recorded video, interactive on-site and remote participant surveying, and engagement through questions and answers.

EII Survey and VTHM Results

An analysis of the EII Survey data revealed that respondents considered Extension to be entrepreneurial in the following ways:

- constantly works to identify changing clientele needs (66% of respondents rated the organization as high or very high for this characteristic) and
- has enthusiasm for and belief in capacity for innovation (72% rated the organization as high or very high for this characteristic).

Conversely, respondents viewed Extension as less entrepreneurial related to the following characteristics:

- is willing to take risks to innovate in response to changing clientele needs (58% rated the organization as low or very low for this characteristic) and
- invests/shifts resources to meet changing needs (83% rated the organization as low or very low for this characteristic).

During the VTHM question-and-answer discussion, a key question related to the EII Survey findings emerged: "How do we get from here to there?"

What Is Extension's Imperative for Innovation?

To investigate how to move from our current position to the optimum, we first need to consider the impetus for doing so. As always, Extension's reasons for action should center on the organization's clientele. New data from the Pew Research Center on Internet and technology use has striking implications for organizations desiring to access and serve clientele across the United States: "The vast majority of Americans—95%—now own a cellphone of some kind. The share of Americans that own smartphones is now 77%, up from just 35% in Pew's first survey of smartphone ownership conducted in 2011" (Pew Research Center, 2018, para. 2). Clearly, the imperative for innovation in 2018 includes the need to provide information where Americans seek it.

Extension's current national leadership discussion addresses the need to expand the organization's capacity for rapid response. The discussion also has involved questioning the current methods by which we respond and the time lag when we do so. Do clientele today want fact sheets or facts at their fingertips? With a talent pool second to none, how does Extension effectively mobilize resources to deliver real-time research-based consultation and education based on contemporary clientele expectations? Relevance in 2018 demands timeliness; it is a nonnegotiable in today's culture.

One strategy for getting from here to there is to look inward for examples of innovative real-time delivery of education. The 2017 JCEP VTHM received high evaluation ratings from Extension participants, with 86% identifying conference accessibility as valued. Can Extension exponentially expand the use of such digital education methods in a scalable manner with clientele? The 2017 JCEP VTHM presenters encouraged participants to become intentional about prioritizing and scheduling time to develop new skills for innovative development in response to changing clientele needs. Ironically, some participants indicated that the Extension culture makes this impossible.

This response from VTHM participants along with the EII Survey respondents' feedback led us to wonder what is holding us back. Are we stuck in our historical way of working that has been successful in the past? C. M. Ferguson, former administrator of the Federal Extension Service, assistant secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and editor of the *Journal of Extension*, reflected on Extension's golden anniversary in 1964 that "while bureaucrats fear the highly creative and spontaneous individual . . . Extension's history has been one of innovation—in methods, in subject matter, in audiences" (Ferguson, 1964, p. 153). It may serve Extension well to heed Ferguson's warning about the risks inherent in a bureaucracy and to contemplate his description of the true nature of our traditions.

Conclusion

Can you teach an old dog new tricks? It depends on the dog. A wide angle view of Extension's future should include an honest consideration of perceptions identified in the EII Survey indicating that Extension is enthusiastic about innovation and believes in our capacity to innovate but is unwilling to take risks and invest/shift adequate resources to meet changing clientele needs.

Extension faces some tough decisions. Will future budgets be managed through attrition or intention? Innovation is not easy. The value of face-to-face education cannot be minimized; it provides unique sensory and social experiences and connections. In light of declining traffic into their brick-and-mortar stores, U.S. retailers have developed business models for those who continue to choose this option. All stores will not close. The ones that remain open will offer unique value experiences for customers (PwC, 2018). This is not an either/or debate for the United States' retail giants or for Extension.

Establishing and maintaining a formidable digital presence goes well beyond a web page. Although use of technology is often framed as demonstrating a generational divide, clientele across all age groups are increasingly accessing resources and conducting business electronically. Do we really need another survey to come to grips with this? There is no magic to the creation and publishing of digital products. Accomplishing these actions requires institutional investment in the form of personnel rather than position papers.

In the midst of a well-documented digital revolution, have our clientele surpassed us in the adoption of technology? Leading from behind is rarely a strategy for success. Extension's stagnant or declining budgets are indicative of a decline in clientele valuation of Extension. Extension must deliver value in a multichannel world.

The writing is on the wall. This future of Extension is in our hands.

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