

In short

■ by the North Central Farm Management Extension Committee
William M. Edwards, Iowa State University, and David C. Petritz, Purdue University, editors

Targeting extension management and marketing programs

The declining size of the Extension Service staff in most states makes it difficult to be all things to all people. Yet managers of small, medium, and large farms clearly need different educational programs and delivery methods. Extension farm management and marketing specialists have a special challenge to identify and meet these needs. At the same time, resources are dwindling; Extension educators can improve their efficiency and serve clients better by taking a closer look at the needs of different target audiences.

Educational needs of small farm operators

Small farms are those that do not generate enough income to support a full-time operator. They include high equity semi-retired operators, part-time operators with substantial off-farm income, and full-time operators living near the poverty line.

Members of the semi-retired group may be former full-time operators who did not expand as labor-saving technology became available, or who have liquidated some of their assets. Most are living from returns to equity, earnings from nonfarm assets, and social security payments rather than labor income. Although their net worth may be relatively high, cash income available for living is often limited. These operators are concerned about retirement planning, leasing arrangements, cost control, estate planning, and income tax management.

Part-time operators include both hobby farmers and small-scale operators who work off-farm to supplement farm earnings. They want to know about income tax rules for part-time farming, small-scale livestock facilities, and contracting custom operators. Many are primarily rural residents more concerned about rural development, transportation, health care availability, and quality of schools than about maximizing farm profits.

The third group, small full-time operators, must rely on high equity or efficiency to earn a living. They are often classed as low resource or low income farms. Little or no revenue is left for business growth or the

entry of the next generation. These farmers want to know how to employ surplus labor, add supplemental enterprises, adopt low-investment technology, and stretch operating capital. As with all small farmers, though, acquiring new technology involves a high cost per unit of output.

The diversity of small farms prevents a single educational approach. Well-educated hobby farmers are more likely to ask for a bulletin or a video tape that explains a concept fully than to want an immediate answer to a specific question. They will seek out extension specialists as their own schedules permit. Other part-time farmers have little or no time to read bulletins or watch videos, however. Information must be packaged for quick absorption and made available during nontraditional hours.

Small scale operators nearing retirement may prefer daytime meetings, and bulletins in large print. Small, full-time farmers often have time for traditional extension activities, but may lack the motivation to attend, or feel they do not fit in with larger operators. Many low resource operator programs rely on farm visits and one-on-one contacts. Training paraprofessionals or volunteers to provide such individual assistance can extend scarce staff resources.

Educational needs of medium-sized farms

The medium-sized farm is probably best described as the typical family farm, which has been the traditional client for extension programs. The medium-sized operator must cover many bases. There is little opportunity to develop expertise in specialized areas. Labor, rather than management, has first claim on time. Management activities such as record keeping and market analysis are commonly done during the evening. Time for education must compete with leisure activities. Some are willing to combine education and leisure, such as at weekend retreats.

Medium-size operators need help with accounting, financial planning, time management, market trends,

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analysis of government programs, and tax planning. Farm business associations can help provide many of these services. Land-grant universities are ideal sponsors of such associations because they have a broad knowledge base and a state-wide mission. However, the individualized nature of these services will require that business association members pay most of the service costs.

Operators of medium-sized farms need fast answers to specific questions. Meetings must be short and convenient to reach. Publications and newsletters must provide concise information. Video tapes, satellite transmissions, toll-free telephone numbers and facsimile machines can provide timely information about markets, weather, and pest populations to even the most remote areas. However, these technologies offer little chance for interaction between the extension specialists and the operators.

Educational needs of larger farming operations

Most large farms have grown from successful medium-sized farms. They usually include multiple operators, and utilize hired labor, borrowed capital, and rented assets to achieve technical and financial economies of scale. They must build a management team, hire and train personnel, implement an accounting system that helps control their business, and develop a strategic plan for the future.

Unlike small and medium-sized farms, large farms can assign specific management tasks to different personnel, and spread the costs of acquiring management expertise and specialized equipment over many units of production. They use sophisticated marketing tools to control price risk, and their large volume of production helps them achieve advantages in buying and selling. Large farm operators can identify their own problems, and utilize raw data to help solve them.

Off-farm consultants complement the strengths of the management teams in areas such as nutrition, animal health, crop production, marketing, financial planning, and legal affairs. Large farm managers often serve on boards of directors of cooperatives, commodity groups and farm organizations. Despite their small numbers, large farm operators may have considerable influence on public policy makers and budget setters.

Managers of large farms understand the need to learn. Most of them have already mastered the content of typical extension meetings, workshops, and bulle-

tins. They may bypass county extension staff and challenge the knowledge level of state specialists, or even contact specialists from other states. Delivery methods that are especially attractive to large farm managers include graduate type management courses, computer assisted instruction, on-line data bases, and executive training seminars. They may prefer to learn from private consultants, and they are willing to pay. A curriculum approach with in-depth analysis is more suited to them than short, single topic meetings. These extended workshops may even be organized on a regional or national level, because large operators can devote more time away from home to master advanced topics. Managers talking to other managers can also play a critical role. Extension staff can be the catalyst for the exchange of ideas among managers of large farms through case studies, panel discussions, and study tours at home and abroad.

Conclusions

Small, medium, and large farms each have distinct marketing and management needs. Extension can play a role in educating all groups, but it will not be the same role in every case. Both subject matter and delivery methods need to be targeted to each audience. Shrinking resources for extension programs will make this solution more necessary. ■

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