

Marketing and Communications Summary

Metropolitan County Situation: K-State Research and Extension

I. Introduction

Through meetings with individual metro counties, it became apparent that although each county has its own unique programs, challenges and qualities, there are a number of characteristics that were consistent from county to county. The following report will help summarize those characteristics and hopefully provide some insight into the similarities shared by the metropolitan counties in K-State Research and Extension.

II. Audiences

Reaching

In general, counties reported that the audience they reach regularly is composed primarily of a white, middle-class population. This is particularly true within agriculture where the average client was described as the traditional, middle-aged (40s-60s) farmer. However, the counties also noted that a newer audience that is becoming increasingly more demanding is that of the hobby farmers or small landowners. Most counties were open to working with this new population, though several expressed some insecurity about the best ways to contact and interact with these individuals.

In the traditional 4-H community clubs, counties report dealing primarily with the same type of population. Most of the youth involved are described as “cream of the crop” and “white, bright and polite,” and come from middle-class, busy, two-parent families. However, a number of the counties provide a 4-H after-school program, where they reach a more diverse (both racially and economically) audience of children. The FCS school

programs, many of which are targeted at schools made up of children from low-income homes, also reach a more diverse audience of schoolchildren. The FCS agents reported seeing more diversity in all of their program audiences. Several noted that this was likely because many of their programs were targeted toward low-income populations. The FCS agents also reported working with a high number of senior citizens through different programs and that the majority of these individuals were also low income.

Most counties reported their volunteers as fitting into the traditional white, middle-class audience. Master Gardener volunteers were often described as retired with disposable income.

Not Reaching

There were a number of audiences that counties reported they did not feel successful in reaching. The first of those was the age group of approximately 18-35 – the young adults and families just starting out. Agents brought up concerns about the lack of programming targeted to these individuals and also that many of them are simply too busy to utilize KSRE because they are employed full time.

In general, members of the work force were a concern for counties because they are “too busy” for KSRE. Counties noted that many are working during the regular KSRE office hours and feel they have too much on their plate to attend meetings in the evening.

Although the FCS programming tends to reach more minorities, the counties still expressed concern at the lack of diversity (particularly racial diversity) within their program audiences. A number

of the counties have significant Hispanic or black populations, but most counties felt these numbers were underrepresented by the program participants.

Some counties also expressed concern in reaching the smaller communities outside of the main metro area. Others reported difficulty in reaching the more affluent populations. The final audience of concern was those who do not come from a KSRE or 4-H background.

III. SWOT

(Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats)

Strengths

Staff: Most counties considered their staff as one of their greatest strengths. Many noted that their staff worked well together, that there was low turnover and that most had previous experience with KSRE, all qualities that the counties felt gave their programs and services more strength and stability.

Research-based information: Information that is research based and unbiased was another strength regularly mentioned. The counties felt that being associated with K-State and providing information without trying to sell something made them more credible to their audiences.

Tradition: Counties noted that the tradition and history of KSRE's presence was a strength, as was their history of providing credible information.

Broad knowledge base: KSRE's coverage of broad subject areas was also listed as a strength, although it would be listed as a weakness as well. The broad knowledge base offers something for everyone, agents said.

Coalitions: Many counties, particularly within their FCS programming, reported that coalitions with other community groups helped increase community awareness of KSRE and its services as well as provided an avenue for KSRE to put on even more successful programs and events.

Hello, this is K-State Research and Extension...: Several counties said that answering the telephone at their county office "K-State Research and Extension _____ County..." gives them more

clout and credibility. They said this has also helped increase community awareness about KSRE and its connection to K-State. Some counties noted that it has created confusion for callers or friction with county commissioners.

Weaknesses

Funding: Every county listed funding as one of their greatest weaknesses. Several felt that budget limitations were keeping them from being more successful in their marketing and limiting their abilities to do more with program areas. It was also seen as a threat for future success.

Time: Time seems to be an issue for all counties. Many commented that they felt stretched too thin to be able to handle an increase in clients or programs.

All things to all people: The broad knowledge base that was first mentioned as a strength was also seen as a weakness by many counties. Agents noted that the subject variety makes it more difficult to specialize and look polished as well as market a single "product."

Diversity: Many counties reported that the level of diversity among those participating in KSRE programs was disproportionate to county levels and would like to see this improve.

Opportunities

Small acreage management: Small landowners and hobby farmers are presenting a number of new opportunities for counties. These individuals tend to be younger and to expect more one-on-one contact. Agents noted that many require more guidance in understanding rural life, creating new challenges as well as opportunities for the agents working with them

Hispanic audiences/minorities: Minority populations, particularly Hispanic in many counties, constitute new opportunities for agents. Many counties are already targeting these populations and others have planning in the works.

Web site: Most counties see their Web site as an opportunity to reach those who aren't acquiring

information by coming in or contacting the offices directly. They see it as a way to help promote programs and save costs in printing publications.

Growth: Many of the counties within the Metro County Area are experiencing growth. The significance of such growth varies, with the greatest being in Johnson County, where the population increased by 7.8% between 2000 and 2003. Several agents listed population growth as an opportunity for expanded outreach and awareness. Some noted increasing numbers of schoolchildren or an increase in urban sprawl.

Volunteers: The expansion of a volunteer base is seen by the counties as a significant opportunity to help expand programs and make others more self-sustaining as well as continue the success of current programs.

Threats

Sports/activities: Youth sports and activities present threats in particular to the 4-H community clubs. The counties reported that when kids are forced to choose, 4-H tends to come last.

Competing with people's time: Busy lives with little down time are making it more challenging to be a regular part of people's lives. Attendance at meetings is on the decline for many counties.

"Ag" stereotype: Being associated with cows and canning is a stereotype all counties are struggling with. Several said that the perception of KSRE as being about more than agriculture is getting better, but that it still needs more work. Greater awareness about KSRE and what it offers needs to improve in order to help alter this stereotype.

Funding: The question of, "Will the funding be there tomorrow and will there be enough?" weighed heavy on the minds of many agents. Budget cuts and commissioners who don't understand what KSRE is present threats to its existence.

Commercial companies: With more companies out there providing information, agents are being forced to compete with the industry experts who have the resources to put on meetings with "perks."

Schools: Schools, in their focus to increase standardized tests and make sure no child is "left behind," are becoming less flexible and supportive of KSRE programs.

College grads: Today's college graduates aren't built to be KSRE agents, counties said. They want (and demand) a 40-hour per week job instead of the kind of schedule required of an agent. Who is going to make up the future generation of agents?

Internet: With the advances in technology and the Internet, people can become information gatherers for themselves. Counties were concerned that people don't always realize that the sources they are using may not be reliable. This results in misinformed people. In addition, several agents brought up a concern that if people can get all their information from the Internet, will there continue to be a need for agents?

Awareness: Most counties noted awareness as a weak point. It was often stated that awareness is a generation removed: Those who know and were loyal to KSRE are getting older, and their children, who do not have the same awareness, are not utilizing it. It was noted repeatedly that those who know KSRE use it frequently, but the rest of the population are not users. Several counties mentioned confusion among individuals about the connection between the university and KSRE. There was also the general feeling that individuals were more familiar with programs than KSRE in general, and therefore were not making the connection between programs and K-State.

Loss of specialists: Many counties feel they are losing the support they need from K-State specialists. Without the research and assistance coming out of K-State, agents feel that they are on their own and worry that this will only continue to get worse.

Transients: Several metro counties are experiencing a transient population. This can be military, college students or even families of prison inmates. Counties said these populations create constant challenges for attaining and sustaining awareness and lifelong clients.

Fewer larger farms: The decrease of large farming operations poses a threat to KSRE – there are fewer farmers to utilize the resources of KSRE and fewer farm families (who make up more the traditional supporters of KSRE) to participate in programs.

IV. Additional observations

Relationships with legislators

Relationships with county boards and state legislators differed considerably from county to county. Although most counties invited their commissioners to events and banquets, some counties had only a few opportunities for interaction on an annual basis, while others interacted with commissioners on a weekly, or even daily, basis. Some counties felt strong support from their boards while others mentioned that at least one member of the board didn't understand what KSRE was. Perhaps an area for idea sharing from different counties?

Media

Media was an area for mixed responses by the counties. Several listed media as one of the county's strengths, while others listed it as a weakness. In some counties, the agents described the media as being good to work with and actively interested in KSRE while others saw their media as difficult to work with and putting little importance in KSRE. Several counties made the comment that they felt the media was an open resource and that they, the county, should work harder in utilizing it.

Volunteers

Like media, volunteer participation was also rather county specific. Some listed volunteers as strengths; others listed them as weaknesses. All counties saw the value and need of volunteers and want to find ways to help obtain and sustain them.

Web sites

Many counties mentioned their Web site as an area that needed to be updated more frequently and developed further. Some counties questioned just how many people were visiting the Web site and wondered about its importance as a resource. A few counties are looking toward updating their site in the near future or are currently in the process of doing so.

What is our message?

Several counties called for guidance in identifying a unified message coming from KSRE as a whole. Many also requested that assistance be provided to all the metro counties to help assure that the message that is coming out is clear and consistent from county to county.