

The Role of Extension in Communicating Contentious Issues

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Extension educators are expected to provide research-based information to a wide variety of audiences. Sometimes, that information may touch on issues that are contentious or controversial. Examples include climate change, genetically modified organisms (GMOs), hydraulic fracturing (fracking), water rights, and endangered species, among others. This factsheet provides suggestions for dealing with controversial subject matter so that you, the Extension educator, can address potentially contentious issues while maintaining your constituent's trust.

Depending on the specific topic, Extension educators may communicate as a conveyor of information, as a mediator among conflicting viewpoints, or as a network builder. Understanding which role is appropriate for you depends on your knowledge and experience with the issue, the audience's level of understanding, how contentious the topic is, and the overall educational objective.

- ◆ **Conveyor of information:** Educators are expected to convey the most relevant and valid information available. When disseminating documented, science-based information on certain topics, the educator may appear to be advocating a position that some participants oppose, when in fact, he or she is simply reporting relevant information that is supported by a preponderance of available data. The goal is to be perceived as providing information and letting the audience members make up their own minds.
- ◆ **Mediator:** On issues where research findings are not conclusive or when multiple viewpoints appear to be legitimate, Extension educators may have to facilitate discussions of competing

viewpoints without being seen as advocating one position or another.

- ◆ **Network builder:** Extension agents and specialists serve as catalysts to build and strengthen community relationships and leadership. Extension builds networks to connect people with questions to those who might have the best answers.

The role, or roles, you assume when dealing with specific issues depends on the nature of the issue, your knowledge of the issue, and risks to your credibility:

- ◆ **Nature of the issue:** What makes the issue contentious? Is science unclear on the subject, are specific interest groups creating controversy, or are there other reasons?
- ◆ **Knowledge:** How much do you know about the subject? Do you need the expertise of others to help you address the issue?
- ◆ **Credibility:** Do you put your credibility at risk by getting involved with a specific issue or by taking a certain position? On the other hand, do you risk credibility by avoiding the issue or not providing the best information available on the subject?

The following are some strategies and techniques you can employ when communicating controversial issues.

- ◆ Agents and specialists should not be afraid to present what they understand to be the best information that is supported by scientific research. Waffling does not build credibility.
- ◆ At the same time, you should be willing to listen and take dissenting viewpoints seriously.

- ◆ When county agents find it helpful, they can bring an Extension specialist or other expert into the community who can speak more knowledgeably on the subject.
- ◆ It may be helpful to include alternative points of view, for example in panel discussions, if it can be done without undermining agent or specialist credibility.
- ◆ It is important for Extension agents and specialists not to be seen as promoting the agendas of particular federal or state agencies, corporate sponsors, or other special interests. Extension should be seen as a source of sound, science-based information, which can help solve problems to improve people's lives.
- ◆ Building strong relationships with your community is essential to establishing trust and credibility.
- ◆ As Extension services become more streamlined, you may need support from other county agents and specialists to assume different roles and meet changing expectations.
- ◆ Extension agents in the field and specialists at university centers should maintain open lines of communication to facilitate dialogue regarding new research and future research.
- ◆ Timing is important—responding to inquiries with valid information in a timely fashion builds trust and credibility.
- ◆ The three most powerful words for agents and specialists are “research has shown.”

Changing technologies present challenges and opportunities. Many controversial issues are inflamed by internet sources that use misinformation to exploit fears and biases. At the same time, the Internet and other resources can provide information that is valid and beneficial.

- ◆ The Internet can help you find verifiable research-based information to respond quickly to client needs. It can also help you find strategies used in other states to help clients compare information and make informed decisions. Be careful to use web-based information only from reliable sources.

- ◆ Digital diagnosis is an important tool in the changing world of Extension. These resources can help agents in the field by quickly connecting them with university specialists to identify plants, insects, etc.
- ◆ Webinars can reduce travel time by delivering slideshows and other presentations electronically. Recorded webinars can be available whenever they are needed and fit easily into agents' schedules.
- ◆ Social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and others can supplement traditional media and in-person encounters to guide users to science-based resources from universities.
- ◆ Mobile apps can help you meet reporting requirements more efficiently, for example, by allowing you to quickly collect and submit demographic information from meetings.

Extension is one of the most trusted sources of objective, research-based information. How its educators chose to deal with current and future controversy is critical to preserving that trust. Extension educators will assume various roles in communicating contentious issues—from conveying information to bridging gaps between divergent positions. The role you take on will depend on your knowledge of the underlying science and its certainty. Ultimately, the primary goal must be to support your clientele with relevant information and practical solutions based on sound science and proven research.

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