USEFUL TECHNIQUES IN AN EXTENSION MARKETING PROGRAM*

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The most obvious approach to a discussion of this topic would be to list and evaluate the teaching methods most commonly used in extension and to illustrate how these have been used in certain marketing projects. Certainly the effective use of market tours, radio, written materials, meetings, and discussion groups could be discussed by extension workers with profitable results. At present, however, I am more concerned with what has been termed "approaches" to doing extension marketing work rather than with specific teaching aids.

Because of the numerous phases of marketing work which need attention, the specialized problems for particular products, and the different groups of people involved, the major problem for most state extension marketing economists is to decide how they can most effectively use their time and resources. The Extension Service is responsible for an educational program in marketing which in part includes: providing and interpreting market news and outlook information; organizing and guiding farmer cooperatives; extending and improving grading and inspection services; promoting programs to increase the consumption of agricultural products; keeping producers, processors, distributors, and consumers informed as to the economic significance of new developments in processing, packaging, and merchandising; and providing information to handlers and other market intermediaries on methods of improving operating efficiency.

More specifically the problem is to develop procedures for reaching and working with the various groups of people, i.e., producers, handlers, and consumers. From my own experience I am led to believe the most effective approach is, first, to gain the confidence and respect of those actually engaged in carrying out the marketing processes. We gain this confidence, are called upon for help in solving acute marketing problems, and are in a better position to initiate long-time improvements only if we are thoroughly familiar

with conditions peculiar to each commodity. In business parlance, an extension marketing economist must build up a “clientele” of people who are interested in a particular commodity or marketing problem. Unless the extension worker is considered somewhat of an authority in specialized marketing subject-matter, he is not likely to have a very large “clientele.”

Obviously, it is not possible for one extension marketing economist to be an authority in several commodity fields. And in states where there are only one or two people in extension marketing a more general approach is almost essential.

Our situation and program in Illinois may illustrate both approaches; i.e., the commodity and service approach and the general economic approach. At the College we have teaching and research specialists in each of four commodity fields but only two men in extension marketing. The two persons with extension appointments have had the major responsibility for outlook and agricultural policy projects and have had little time for work along commodity and organizational lines. In addition to our College staff there are several well-staffed farmers’ cooperatives operating in the important commodity fields. In general, the personnel of these organizations have taken care of the promotional and specialized service needs.

Under these circumstances we have felt our major contribution should be to provide farmers, their leaders, and trades people with factual economic information which would guide their policies in developing new programs and adjusting methods of operations. More often than not, requests for this type of assistance come direct to the person in the teaching and research who is specializing in the commodity with which the people are concerned. The extension staff has frequently helped with investigational studies which might be needed to answer specific questions or to point out desirable adjustments in marketing procedures.

Participation in these studies by the extension economist has not only increased his knowledge but has also provided a valuable contact with farm leaders and trades people which later has been useful in the conduct of broader projects.

Our present program is grain elevator management training illustrates this point. Because of contacts made in grain elevator studies and surveys, we were able to get the country grain trade, both independent and cooperative, to co-sponsor this program. As
a result of their participation, we believe the type of instruction has been superior and the general success of the program greater than it could have otherwise been.

As specific projects have led into more general programs, likewise general educational programs have given us the opportunity to work with leaders on specific commodity problems. Our fall livestock outlook meetings are an example. They are planned and participated in by the Departments of Agricultural Economics and Animal Science of the College, the Illinois Agricultural Association, and the cooperative marketing agencies serving the state. Largely because of this project we attend quarterly meetings of managers and directors of these cooperatives where livestock marketing problems are discussed. Thus we have a medium for keeping in close contact with developments and an opportunity to work on specific phases of livestock marketing which need attention.

A somewhat different approach in extension teaching was used several years ago with some success. The Department of Agricultural Economics held a series of agricultural economics study school for farmers at the county level. Reference and discussion outline materials were prepared and placed in the hands of those enrolled prior to the meetings. The topics dealing with marketing were "Basic Facts about Marketing," "Basic Facts Concerning Cooperative Marketing," and "Increasing Efficiency of Marketing." Because of the increasing demands on our time from other projects we discontinued this project during the war. It is significant, however, that after ten years we still have requests from individual farmers for these schools.

In summary, I believe the most effective extension teaching in marketing must be done with leaders and agencies who are occupied with day to day marketing problems. We can only gain and maintain the confidence of these people and have the opportunity to advise if we are well informed along the lines in which they are interested. Once we have this confidence we are in a position not only to render invaluable service in an advisory capacity, but we can also obtain information which is essential if we are to suggest improvements.