

Is anyone listening? To Extension?

Extension specialists and agents create many educational programs using radio and TV programs, circulars, newspaper columns, websites and videos, expecting a target audience to receive and pay attention to the message. The message often concerns innovative practices stemming from recent research so that it is important to reach this group.

Yet many members of that target audience – be they farmers, nursery operators, 4-H leaders, single parents – work long hours and confront many distractions in their busy lives which interfere with their ability to pay attention to the information extension is putting before them.

Given the extraordinary cost and labor of producing this information, extension needs to monitor how well the message in its educational materials is being received and given attention.

You can evaluate this goal with the following set of questions.

- The principal question measures *degree of attention*: this question gets at the issue, “Is anyone listening to Extension?” and provides the degree to which members of the target audience have paid attention to information on *each* of the recommended practices. The specificity of the question increases the likelihood of the validity of the data.

Example:

How much attention have you paid to information from extension about each of these practices?

Manure Crediting	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Legume Crediting	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Split Application Of Nitrogen	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Farmstead Assessment System	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL

- Another question measures *degree* of information *received*: You can reduce potential bias in the question above by *prefacing* it with one that asks members of the target audience to indicate first, the degree to which they have even *heard or read information* on each practice. This question acts as a screen or control question.

Example:

How much have you heard or read in the past 12 months from extension about each practice below?

Manure Crediting: Reducing the rate of commercial fertilizer based on nutrients in manure application.	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Legume Crediting: Reducing the rate of commercial fertilizer based on nutrients in prior legume credits.	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Split Application of Nitrogen: Applying less than full rates of nitrogen at several points during the year.	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL
Farmstead Assessment System: Assisting in determining potential well contamination.	NONE	A LITTLE	SOME	FAIR AMOUNT	GREAT DEAL

Researchers who used a similar set of questions in a water quality study referenced below, found that data from the principal question above on *degree of attention* (when prefaced by the question on *degree of information received*), was a significant predictor of the usage of the four practices.

Consider adapting and then assessing this set of respondent-friendly questions about receiving and paying attention to extension information as before-after measures in an evaluation of a program.

Reference: Nowak, P.J., G.J. O’Keefe, C. Bennett, S.S. Anderson, and C. Trumbo. (1997) Communication and Adoption Evaluation of USDA Water Quality Demonstration Projects: Evaluation Report Washington, D.C.: CSREES/USDA

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