

Valuing Success Stories in Program Evaluation

Background

In fall of 1997 I joined the Clemson Extension Service as an evaluation specialist. The first six months I spent mostly on understanding the system and the culture of the organization. In addition, I was totally involved in preparing the performance plan under GPRA that was due March 1, 1998.

Sometime in summer of 1998, a senior administrator walked into my office with a huge stack of papers and said, Rama, these are the success stories written by our agents. Would you please review them and suggest changes, if any, so that agents can do a better job of showcasing their program efforts. Before leaving my office, the administrator said there are about 300 of them, grouped by the program areas—agriculture, natural resources, family and consumer sciences, food safety, 4-H and youth, and community and economic development. The administrator left the office by saying take your time and let us visit again sometime in early fall.

As I started perusing these stories over a period of one month, several weaknesses stood out: stories

- ◆ varied in length from five sentences to three pages—suggesting no format or guidelines
- ◆ lacked organization in terms of content
- ◆ lacked a logical flow
- ◆ lacked description of the problem the agent was trying to minimize
- ◆ provided no report data to show program activities, and
- ◆ were poorly written (sentence construction, grammar, spelling, etc.).

After I read all the stories, I came to the conclusion, that I needed to develop guidelines for writing success stories so that agents could do a better job of showcasing their program efforts. In the following paragraphs, I will share with you what I did and how it came about. You can judge whether or not this was a time well spent. The review of these 300 stories resulted in writing “Tips to Writing Success Stories” for all Clemson extension agents.

TIPS TO WRITING SUCCESS STORIES

Extension agents are frequently asked to write success stories showcasing their program efforts and/or accomplishments. The purpose of writing success stories is to convey to the stakeholders the problem situation (may include who identified the problem and how it was addressed) extension program activities, results, and/or impacts. Frequently asked questions in writing success stories include: 1) what content should be included? 2) what should be the length of the story (how many words/pages)? 3) can charts, graphs, tables, etc., be included? 4) what opportunities exist to share success stories with others? Here are some **TIPS** to writing success stories.

1. **Rationale (Problem or Issue):** Explain in about 10 sentences the need, importance, and significance of your program to the clientele, community, county, and state. In other words, describe briefly the problem situation.

2. **Objectives and Methodology:** What do you want to accomplish through your program, and the methods you used to collect information? *(Should not exceed 5-6 sentences).*
3. **Program Results:** What happened as a result of your program? Highlight major or significant findings/results of the program. For example, you may want to include the awareness or knowledge level of participants or what they need in order to solve a particular problem or issue. Using catchy phrases, quotations from participants, or facts and figures helps to get the attention of the stakeholders. Also, you may want to think of charts, pictures, etc., to illustrate the success of the program. *(Should not exceed 10-15 sentences).*
4. **Program Impact:** What impact did your program have on participants, families, and communities? Have people learned new things and are they using them in their day-to-day needs? Are people doing anything differently than they used to do before? *(Should not exceed 10 sentences).*
5. **Future Potential:** What potential does your program have in the future? Help people understand your program's contribution to the well being of the society. *(Should not exceed 5 sentences).*
6. **Dissemination:** Well-written success stories can be published as "Exemplary Programs" or "Showcase of Programs" in newsletters of professional organizations, conference proceedings, local newspapers, Extension publications, Staff Updates, Impact statements, etc., and some even can be turned into a journal articles.

"Tips to Writing Success Stories" was shared with Extension administrators and all 14 cluster directors. Almost all were pleased with the format and guidelines suggested. Inservice training on how to write success stories was also offered in some clusters. A decision was made that each agent should write at least two success stories in their major program areas. A proposal was made to the administration to select the top success story in each of the five GPRA goals and to recognize and reward agents with the top story with a cash award of \$500.

Success stories tell our story and provides for a qualitative measure of extension program success. For organizations and its employees, success stories serve as a communication and marketing tool besides improving the communication and/or writing skills of extension professionals.

Two examples of success stories written by agents are showcased here.

Small Farmer Crop Intervention Project—Roger Francis, Charleston County, SC

Vegetable crops are an important part of the agricultural landscape in Charleston. Small farmers grow the bulk of the vegetables produced in the county. The estimated value of vegetables produced by this group in 1996 was about \$2 million. Farm sales represent about 60% of all household income for a majority of small farm families. A major characteristic of most small farms is intensive crop production. Wide mixtures of warm- and cool-season vegetable crops are generally grown. Produce from these farms is sold through direct market channels and to local supermarket chains.

Although intensive farming is characteristic of these small farms, income is not steady. Small farmers generally experience significant reduction in income from farm sales during off-production season. The shortfall in income experienced during these periods is directly related to the absence of a diversified cropping system.

The local Extension office undertook a crop diversification project. The goal of the project was to identify and promote the production of suitable cash crops which could generate farm income during the off production season.

An informal study of small farmers was conducted in 1992 to gather background information for the project. The objectives of the study were to: 1) determine the growers' reaction to possible intervention in their traditional cropping system, 2) get the growers' input on the proposed intervention, and 3) identify adaptable cash crops with excellent market potential.

Crop selection for the project was based on the following criteria: adaptability to the area, maturity dates, and resources needed to grow the crop, and local market demand. To ensure success of the project, only crops with established market demands were planted. The decision to raise a particular crop was made by the grower. Guidance was provided to the growers regarding different crop options and the resources that were needed to produce the crop.

The project started in 1993 with two growers planting a total of 1.25 acres of strawberries. At present, five growers are participating in the project, of which four are growing strawberries. In 1996, the acres planted in strawberries increased to 9.5 acres. Two reasons for the rapid and projected increase in strawberry production are high returns the growers receive per acre and demand for the crop. All information about production practices and variety selection is provided by the local agriculture Extension agent. Strawberry production cost is estimated at about \$4000/acre. Average yield for the 4 farms is about 14,000 lb./acre. At present, strawberries are sold at 89 cents/lb., U-pick. One grower has started to produce strawberry jam from his crop. Most of the crop is sold through on-farm, ready pick and U-pick. Some are also sold at roadside markets, farmers markets, and local supermarket chains.

Crop intervention into small farmers' traditional vegetable cropping systems can be achieved successfully. One way of ensuring success is having growers' involvement from the beginning of the program. This will give growers a sense of ownership, thus reducing the risk of the program failing. In addition, having good background information on the grower's production practices and available resources is also very important. The growers should make crop selection and marketing decisions with assistance from the Extension agent. Furthermore, the crop being introduced should fit within the resource base of small farmers.

Reach Financial Heaven in '97—Delores Keller, Sumter County, SC

Today we must face reality. Women and men alike suffer the economic consequences of illness, aging, physical or mental disabilities, marriage, divorce, death of a spouse, loss of employment, inflation, investment failures, and property damage. Every woman and every couple need to plan ahead for personal and family security. But, survival is not the only reason for taking charge of their money. They also want to enjoy life! With these concerns in mind, a seven-week

