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executive summary

Perceptions of Extension Personnel as Brand Managers for UF/IFAS Extension

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Introduction

Due to limited resources, public sector organizations must often rely on their employees to convey the organizational brand to target audiences. County level employees of state Extension systems, however, live and work in their local counties but also must represent the state Extension system as a whole and even the university. One of the major branding challenges for state Extension services across the country have often dealt with the conflicting nature of Extension agents working in the counties but also being representatives of the university. This study was conducted to help IFAS, IFAS Communications Services (ICS) and state and county Extension faculty and staff understand the perceptions and needs of the people representing the UF/IFAS brand across the state of Florida.

A questionnaire was developed to address employee perceptions of communications and branding of UF/IFAS Extension. In June and July of 2013, personnel working with Extension were surveyed online through Qualtrics. The online survey was distributed to 829 faculty and staff who work with Extension. After incomplete responses were removed, there were 435 responses to the survey (52.5%). Members of the sampling frame were sent successive waves of emails until new responses were too low to justify further contacts. Data were analyzed for simple descriptive statistics.

Findings

- Email was the most used and most preferred means of getting information about UF/IFAS Extension
- Workshops, websites, and word of mouth were considered the most used and most important channels for UF/IFAS Extension to communicate about its programs to public.
- “Education,” “training,” and “providing solutions” were the most effective words for explaining Extension personnel’s work to the public.
- Respondents believed external communications were important, but had neutral evaluations of the effectiveness and consistency of Extension’s external communications.
- Employees had high overall perceptions of the organization, though accessibility was the lowest-rated attribute.
- Extension personnel believed the public and county leaders had relatively high perceptions of UF/IFAS Extension, though not as high as the Extension personnel’s own perceptions.

- The respondents tended to view providing research-based information, helping to solve problems, providing training for clientele, and expertise as the core functions of Extension.
- Clientele and funders were considered the most important opinions to UF/IFAS Extension.
- Extension personnel liked the mission statement but did not view it as particularly strong for differentiating UF/IFAS Extension from other organizations.
- County personnel had relatively neutral evaluations of the importance of differentiating between county offices.
- Extension personnel believed good design/branding were important, but they were not well aware of the resources that were available to them.
- Although still positive, state-level faculty had lower evaluations of UF/IFAS Extension and its functions than the other employee groups.

Recommendations

- UF needs to be clearly linked to Extension when communicating about Extension to benefit from the associations with the university.
- UF/IFAS Extension needs to enhance efforts to increase public understanding of the organization, including increasing its communication with the public to improve awareness, which was indicated as a problem by Extension personnel.
- UF/IFAS Extension's social media use should continue to increase. Social media offers the opportunity to reach a wider audience, including those who have been missed by traditional Extension efforts.
- The avenues deemed most important for communicating with the public were ones that effectively reach a specified audience, but this limits the ability to reach new audiences to increase overall awareness. Clarification of target audiences could aid communication with new audiences, including appropriate choice of communication tools and messages.
- UF/IFAS Extension and its personnel need to consistently represent the brand when using key messages and branding materials to increase the likelihood the public will remember the brand and its attributes.
- UF/IFAS Extension needs to ensure employees know what communication and branding resources are available to help ensure employees brand within UF/IFAS Extension's guidelines.
- The results of this study indicate employees believe the organization's core functions are providing research-based information, helping solve problems, providing training, and expertise. If these are not the core functions UF/IFAS Extension wants to represent, UF/IFAS Extension needs to work with Extension personnel to represent the most important functions in communications with external audiences.
- Focus on core functions in broader communications, such as brand materials and messages going out to large groups. The other functions are still important and need to be represented once external audiences begin searching for more in-depth information, but the core functions increase the simplicity of messages and make it easier for the messages to be remembered.
- When communicating with the public, formally or informally, personnel in Extension need to keep the scientific information relatable so the public can see the immediate benefits of Extension.
- The keywords reported by Extension personnel as most effective were education, training, and providing solutions. "Extension" as a term was not highly evaluated. While the name of the organization is unlikely to change, the key words could be useful when explaining what Extension is to new audiences.
- To avoid confusion, every UF/IFAS Extension county's website should be consistent, simple, accessible and updated frequently, so the public can easily utilize it as a valuable tool.
- UF/IFAS Extension should continue using e-mail to relay information to employees because most employees prefer e-mail communication. UF/IFAS Extension supervisors should also relay important information face-to-face in addition to e-mail, particularly for non-faculty personnel.

- UF/IFAS Extension should make an effort to improve the connection between state-level faculty and Extension because state-level faculty had consistently lower views than the other respondent groups.
- The brief branding guide available on IFAS Communication's website is a good start for improving employees' brand management skills, but that resource should be actively distributed to Extension personnel
- Those interested in a more in-depth understanding of branding can pursue the branding course available through eXtension.org.