

Dealing with Contentious Public Issues and Public Opinion: The Role of 21st Century Extension and How We Get There

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Overview

- 21st Century Extension
- Public issues education (PIE) - what is it?
- Public opinion – why does it matter?
- 21st Century Extension – where do we need to go and how do we get there?
- My background:
 - Director, UF/IFAS PIE Center
 - Faculty member, ag communications
 - Chair, 2012-2022 Florida Extension Long Range Plan

21st Century Extension

- Clientele have changed
 - Urban, older, diverse
- Funding models have changed
 - Limited resources, support for programs
- Nationally, move from **program** based to **problem** based Extension
 - More focus on visibility of Extension
 - More focus on public issues

Issues in the news...

- “Climate Change in Hawaii: It’s Here”
- “Hawaii Drought Squeezes Agriculture, Food Supply”
- “Expensive Electricity Threatens Hawaii’s Food Security”
- “Don’t Let At-Risk Youth Slip Between the Cracks”
- “Hawaii to Mitigate Urban Runoff Off Maui”
- “Hawaii Senate Defers GMO Labeling Bill”

Roles

- Is Extension currently involved in public issues?
- How has this changed over time?
- What is Extension's role? What are the needs that can be addressed?
- What are the barriers to undertaking an issues-related role?

*Public Issues

- A public issue is a topic of concern to a broad community.
- Controversy often arises from the differing views, values, and interests that people hold about the issue.
- Public issues prompt public choices—to change policy or preserve the status quo.

Public issues education

- Public issues education began as an Extension educational activity that emphasized knowledge-based decision-making.
- The principal objective was to help citizens educate themselves so that they could make better informed policy choices.
- Public Issues Education programs incorporated techniques used in public policy education and issue resolution.

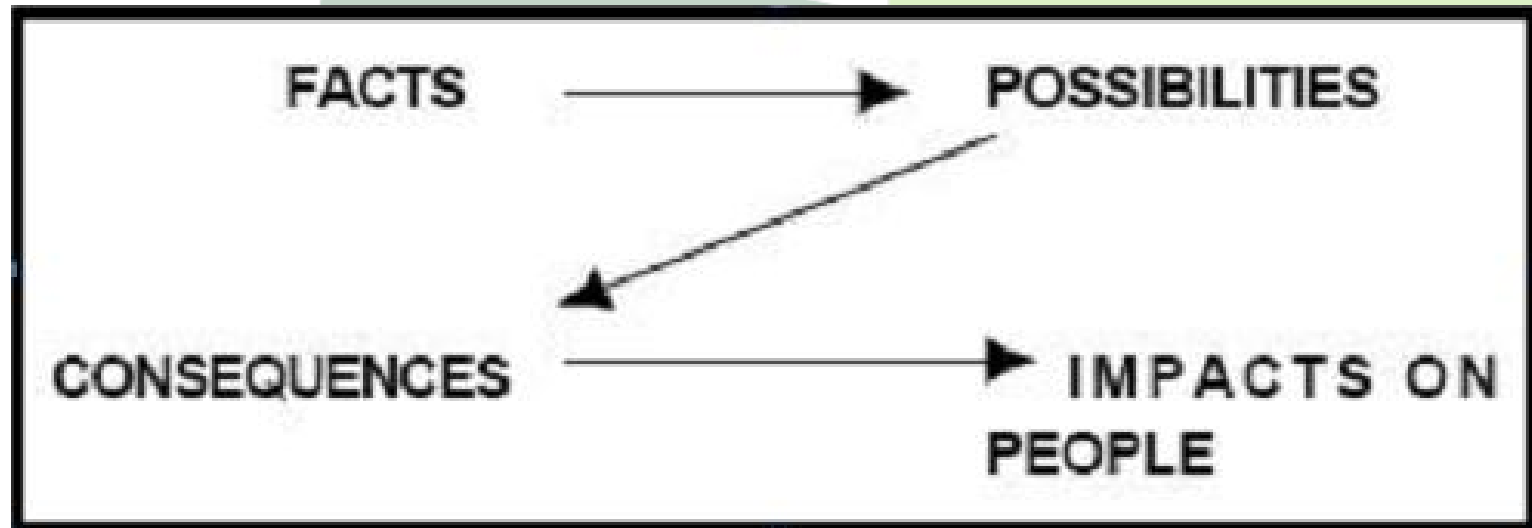
Public issues education today

- Includes a research based understanding of public opinion to better address audience/community needs
- Adds the Extension role of communicator to other PIE roles
- Uses facilitation/issues management/conflict resolution tools to help citizens educate themselves about the issues
- Is more two way than traditional nonformal education

Extension Roles in Public Issues Education

- Creating materials based on research to provide information about issues
- Bringing together stakeholders
- Presenting the policy options
- Providing alternatives and consequences
- Remaining objective and neutral

Alternatives and consequences model



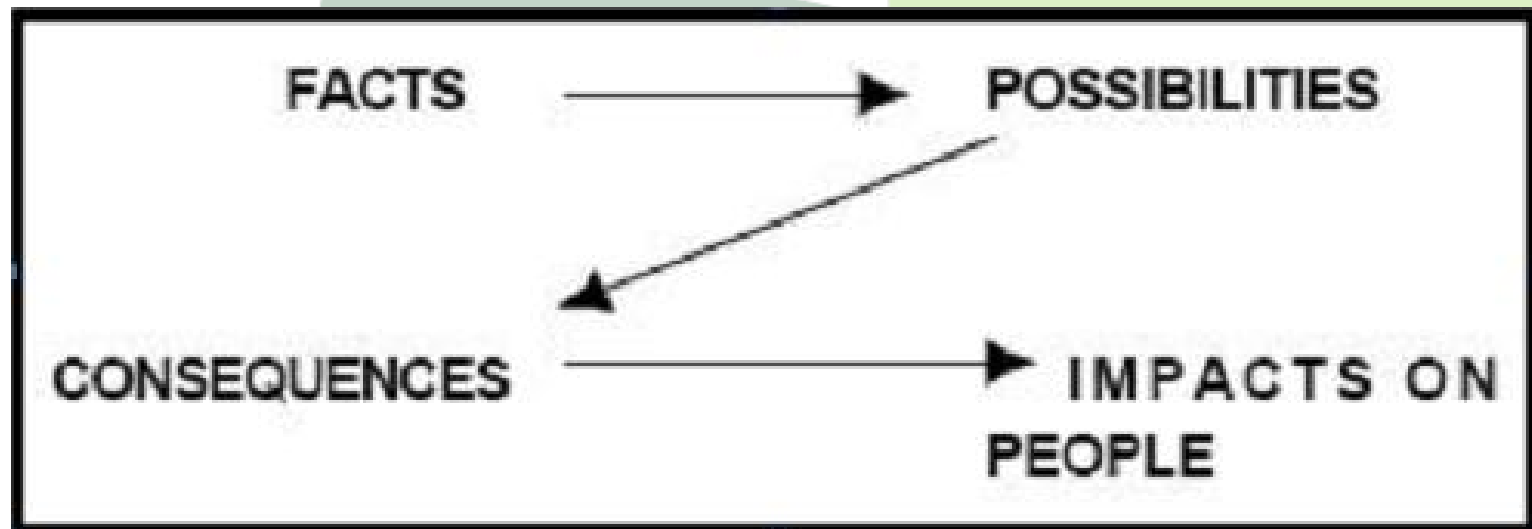
Public issues case study:

- One of your clientele tells you: “We citizens took the advice you gave us in your water conservation program and have done our best to conserve water by changing our consumption practices. We saved some money!”
- Now it seems that because demand is down in the whole neighborhood, the utility company needs to make up for a low level of fiscal reserves that, by law, must be kept on their books at all times. The proposed action is to raise our rates to make up for the shortfall.
- How should you respond? What would your objectives be, and how would you go about achieving them?

Public issues case study:

- Bacteria which can cause serious foodborne illness such as Salmonella and E. coli O157:H7 can be transferred from the hide of meat animals to the carcass surface during slaughter. The interior of a cut is protected from possible contamination.
- Also, during cooking, pathogens which could be present on the surface of these cuts will be killed. However, a large percentage of wholesale cuts are subjected to processes such blade or needle tenderization to improve their eating quality, but this process could introduce pathogens from the surface of the cut into the products' interior.
- These products are defined as “non-intact”. Currently “non-intact” cuts do not have to be labeled at retail or declared at foodservice. Yet, non-intact meat products have been linked to serious foodborne illness. An irate citizen comes up to you and says at the end of a program: “Numerous consumer groups want to modify the current label requirements to improve transparency and consumer safety. I want to know what I eat!”.
- What would you tell the concerned citizen? How would you go about facilitating a meeting with concerned citizens and industry stakeholders?

Alternatives and consequences



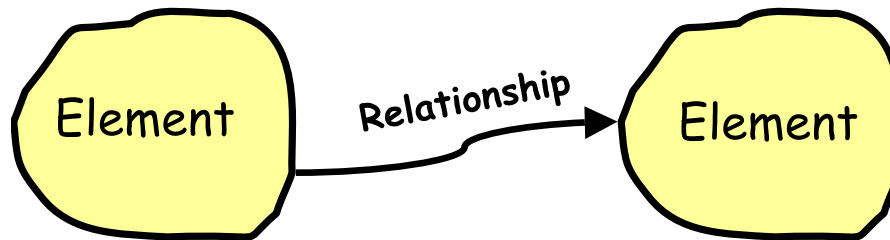
How can you apply the alternatives/
consequences model to these cases?

Public opinion and public issues

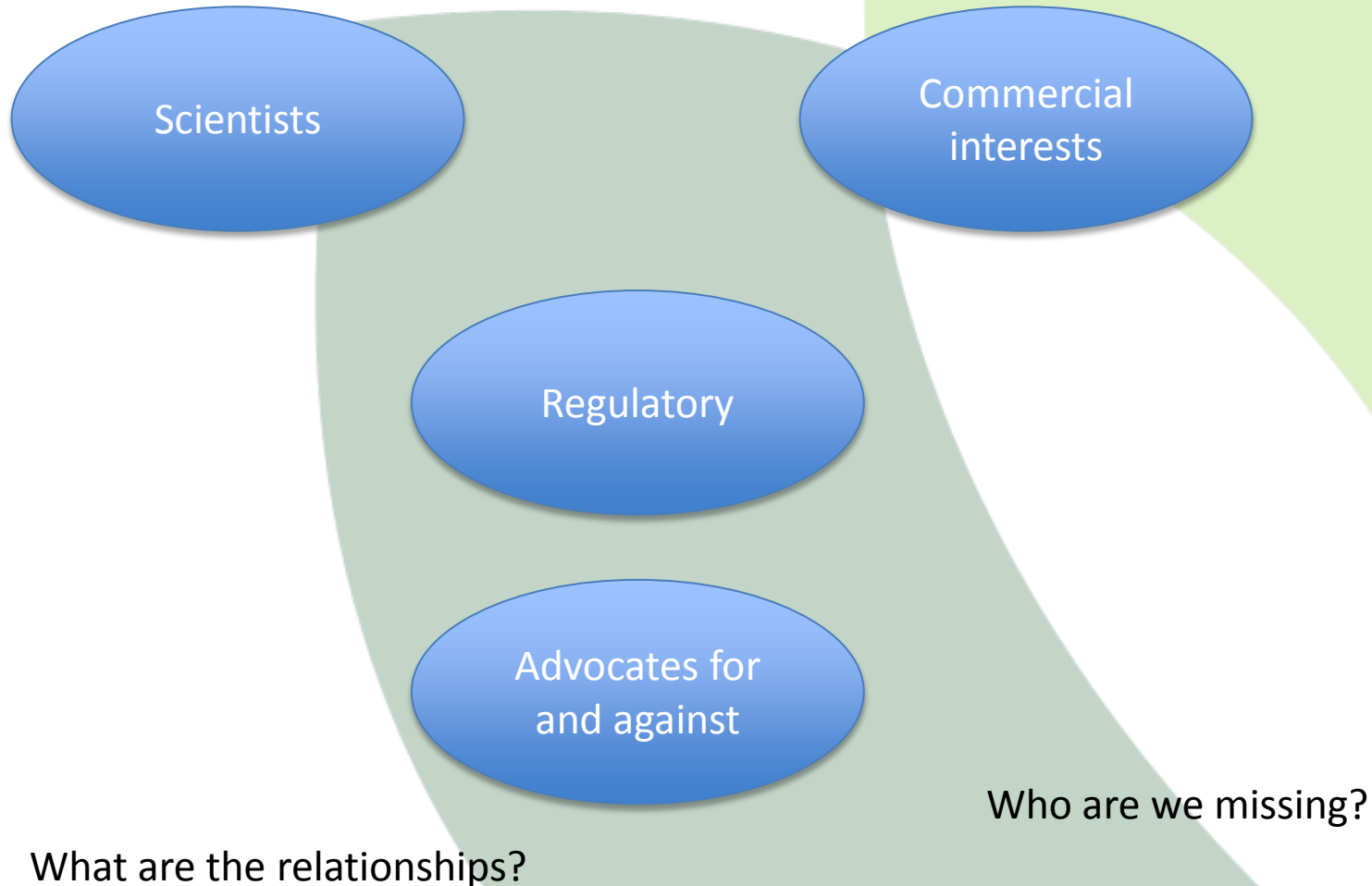
- What the public thinks about an issue
- What the public thinks is influenced by
 - What the media says and how (news media)
 - What others think (opinion leaders)
 - Information and misinformation (knowledge gaps)
- Public opinion influences
 - Policy agenda
 - Media agenda

Visualizing opinions and issues

- A situation map is a visualization tool.
- It “maps” the elements and relationships of a situation.
- It helps participants understand the situation and begin to identify information needs.



Visualizing GMO labeling issue



Situation map

- Draw information linkages – who has data about what?
- For each “human” element (person, organization):
 - Who has data?
 - Is the information viewed as credible by all?
- For each “nonhuman” element:
 - Is the information complete? What additional information is needed?
- For each relationship:
 - How much information is needed to understand interactions between elements? How complete does it need to be?
- Identify information deficiencies
- Establish priorities for collecting information

Situation map

- Frame the resulting discussion on how the stakeholders as a group can find a livable solution.
- The greater the uncertainty, the more adaptive the resulting solution should be.
- Explore the best and worst alternatives to a negotiated agreement to understand how each party proposes to handle uncertainties if there is no agreement

Using situation mapping: Case Study:



Apalachicola Bay occurs in the Panhandle region of Florida, in the NE corner of the Gulf of Mexico. The Bay is largely enclosed by a barrier island.



Here's a typical scene on a day of intensive oyster harvesting on one of the productive bars. The oysters are taken with hand tongs, transported back to shore and then placed into bags for delivery to a wholesaler.

Case study – Oyster harvest collapse

- More than two years after the BP oil spill, researchers are still trying to address concerns in Gulf coast communities. This past fall, the oyster harvest collapsed in Apalachicola Bay, Franklin County.
- During an informal listening session in Apalachicola, about 30 residents shared their concerns. According to them, the problem affecting the region is larger than the declining oyster population. For more than two years, residents along the Gulf coast have seen worrisome changes in fish, birds, beaches and water.
- Because the residents feel they have a difficult time accessing clear and reliable information, they are conducting their own research. Residents reported an overall lack of trust of regulatory agencies that are perceived as hiding relevant information and ignoring anecdotal evidence reported to them.
- **Extension has been asked to facilitate a solution. What role should Extension play here and why?**
- **How could situation mapping be used?**

21st Century Extension and public issues

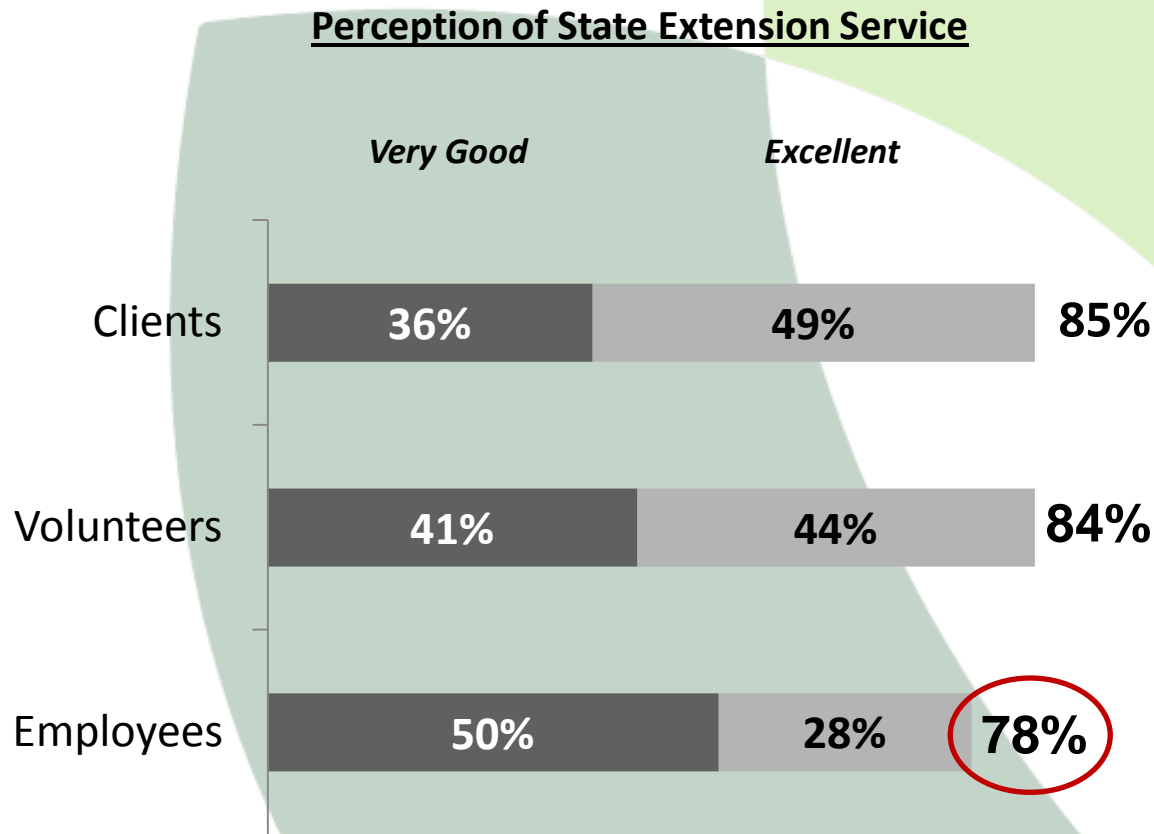
- Should Extension address public issues?
 - Why or why not?
 - If so, how?
- If Extension were to focus more on public issues, would it need to change?
 - If so, how?
 - If so, how do we create planned, incremental change for Extension?

Let's reflect on what this means...

- What do you think are the major challenges for Extension?
- What are some of the possible ways to address these challenges?
- Should Extension be solving problems or running programs?
- How does this relate to Extension visibility and support?

National Extension Stakeholder Research

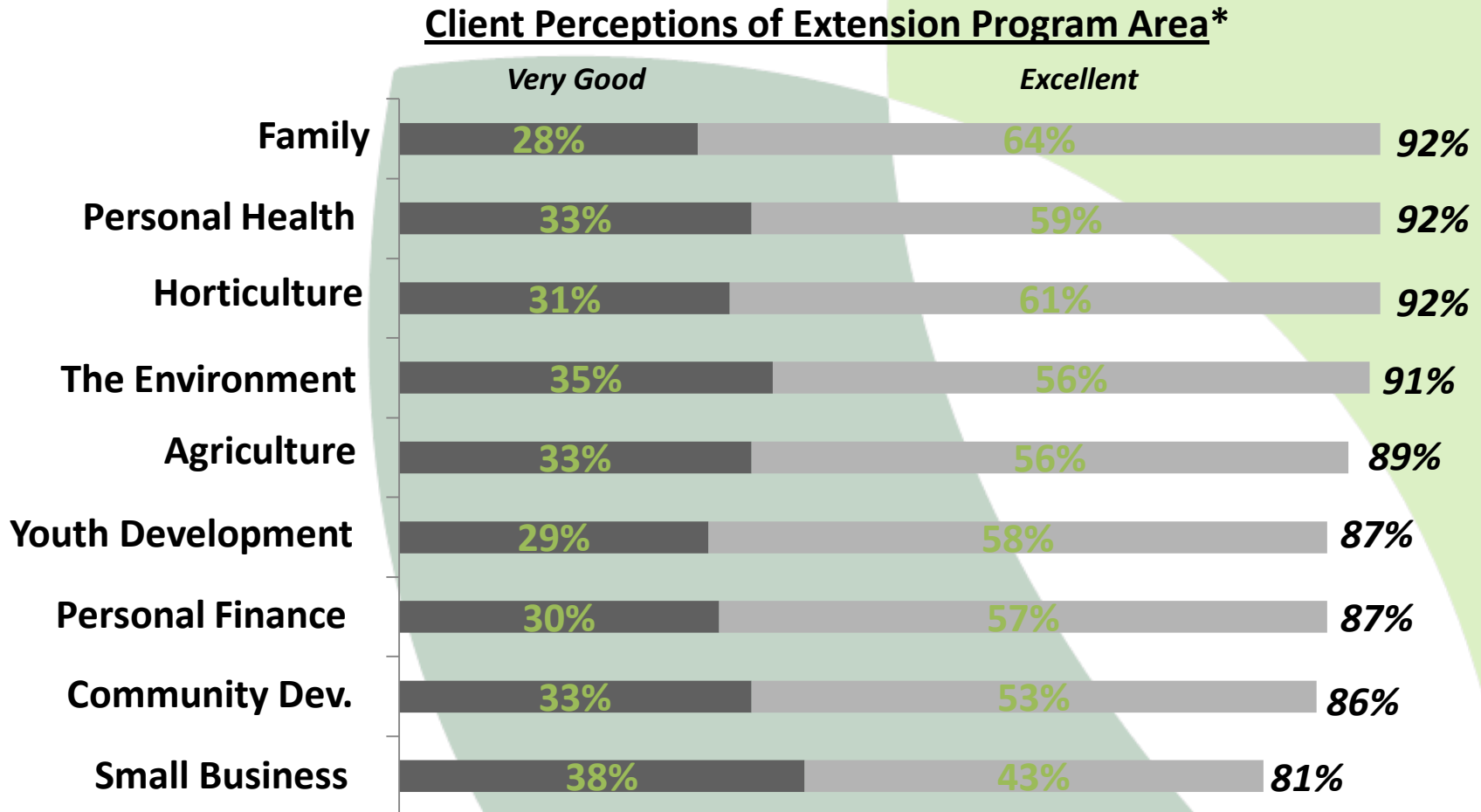
Overall, **Stakeholders' impressions** of their state's Extension Service are **very positive**.



Q32. And, overall, how would you rate [STATE EXTENSION NAME]?

Stakeholder Research

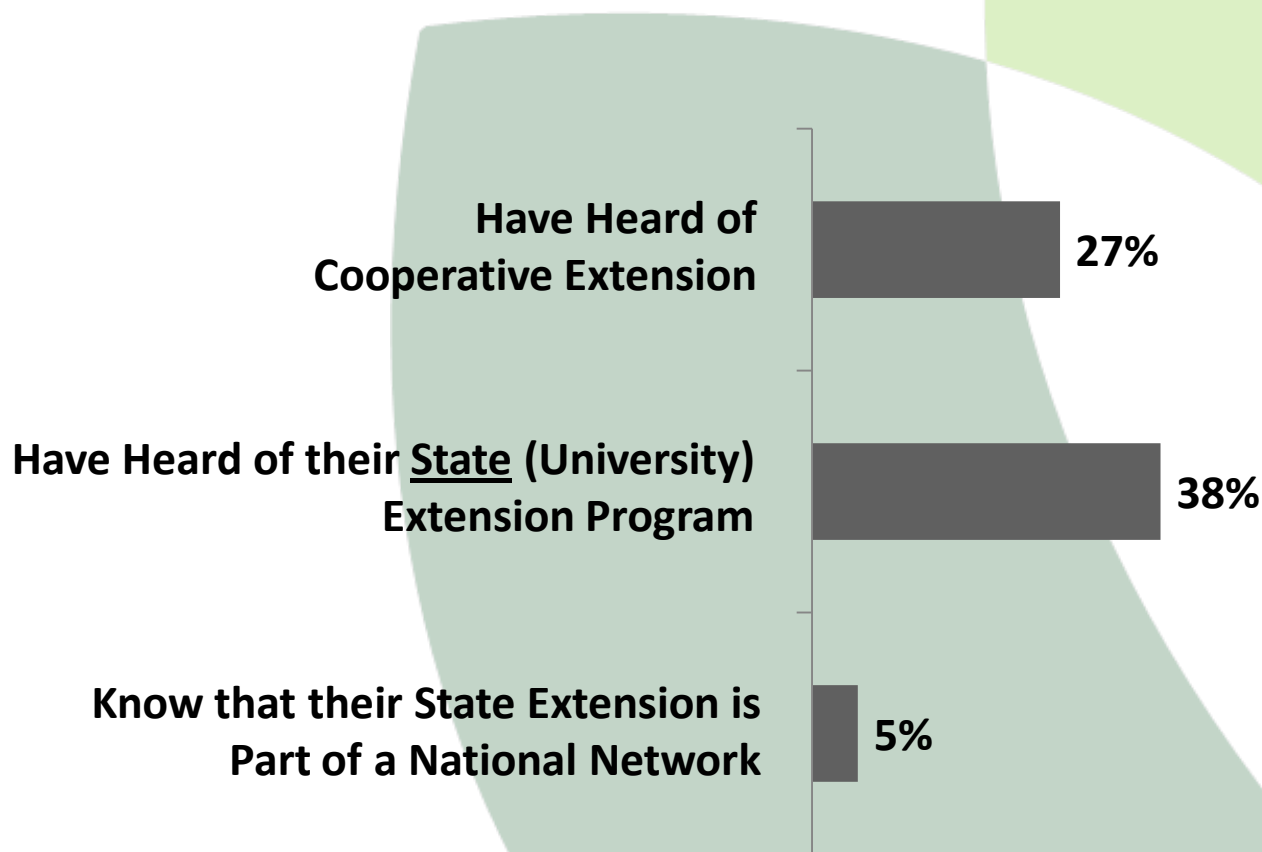
Clients have very positive perceptions of the programs they have used.



Q22. What is your overall impression of the information, programs or services that are provided by [STATE EXTENSION NAME] in each of the following areas?

*Among clients using each program area.

Awareness of Cooperative Extension is low. Very few people know that their State Extension service is part of a National Extension Network.

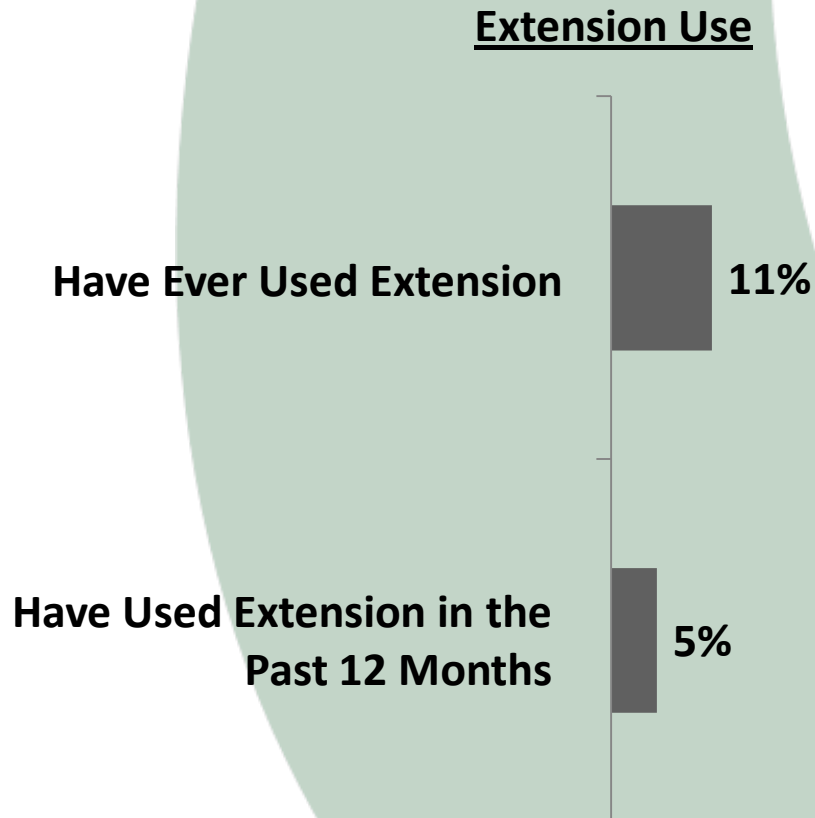


Q5. Have you heard of a community outreach program called “Cooperative Extension”?

Q6. Have you heard of [STATE EXTENSION NAME]?

Q12. Did you know that [STATE EXTENSION NAME] is part of a national network of universities called the “Cooperative Extension System”?

Not surprisingly, given the low awareness and familiarity with Extension, very few have used Extension services.



Q7. Have you ever used [STATE EXTENSION NAME] information, programs or services?

Q8. Have you used [STATE EXTENSION NAME] information, programs or services in the past 12 months?

Organizational change...

- Starts with a problem
- Involves leaders
- Is usually unplanned and gradual
- Not linear

Leaders and change

- Change agents and champions
- Gatekeepers
- Information flow
- Mission/vision/planning

Looking to the future

- Transformational change in the LGU system
 - Social science becomes strongly integrated into multidisciplinary research
 - Extension becomes problem/issue based
 - University engagement beyond the land grant piece to solve problems and address issues

PIE Center's role

- Provide trusted outlet for public opinion research
- Help organizations understand consumer mentality, public opinion of issues, communicate and educate effectively
- Give strategies and recommendations for developing plans for planned organizational changes to achieve goals

Action Plans

- What are your big takeaways from today's session?
- What are some next steps?
- What's the future look like?

- Thank you!
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