

Listening Tour Report: Executive Summary

A listening tour is a lot like a fishing trip: It provides an opportunity to get out, meet the clientele, become acquainted with the landscape, and most importantly: chum the waters before dropping the line. By visiting them in their own habitat, the 2006 Extension Listening Tour proved to be indispensable in increasing the understanding of our state and its people. Although there were very few surprises, the value in meeting with people face-to-face, (especially when you're the new face), was invaluable in building relationships that will go a long way in augmenting Extension's cause.

The strategies were simple:

- Organize a statewide tour to glean constituents input in each county or region— (community/business leaders, students, legislators, and clientele).
- Design and implement public engagement activities that will motivate a call for action.
- Build presentations and materials that will both communicate our message and bring people into discussion.
- Visit ISU Colleges and select Community Colleges and Extension offices.
- Determine current lines of communication, function, and composition.
- Listen to concerns and ideas.

In all areas that we visited, we asked three fundamental sets of questions about Iowa as a state, not about our organization:

1. What does Iowa need and expect of Extension? What factors—economic, demographic, and technological, for example—are likely to influence future needs and expectations?
2. How well does the current performance of Extension meet state and public needs and expectations? Are there gaps in program offerings, in accessibility, and/or in quality? Are realistic plans in place for filling these gaps? How well prepared is Extension to meet projected future needs?
3. If there is a gap between higher Extension performance and Iowa's needs—or if it appears that projected needs cannot be met without major changes—what options does the Iowa State Government and Extension have to remedy the situation?

Attendance was greater than expected and Iowans certainly lived up to their reputation as being friendly folks, as we were greeted very cordially throughout our travels. That is not to say that there weren't a few people who were critical of Extension. After all, that's why we were there, to listen to what we could do better. For the most part, the criticism was constructive.

What was most interesting was that most of the less-than-positive comments we heard stemmed from problems that might have been solved by Extension, if the parties had been aware of our services at the time. Indeed, the take-home message was, "To know Extension is to like us." This was very good news for ISU, Extension, and a solid validation for the hard-working staff serving our clientele.

However, there are many people who could benefit from Extension's services, but don't know that they exist. For instance, Glen Smith from the southwest region said most mainstream agricultural producers rarely use Extension. "We hire on the cutting edge, mainstream farmers are not getting the information from Extension; we are beyond that from a technological side." Ray Underwood added that farmers turn to the chemical companies and seed companies, because they are selling enhancements to products and are just adding a service to their sales. Apparently they had not heard about Extension's "Train the Trainer" program that is part of ISU's Corn and Soybean Initiative in which our specialists train the employees at the seed, fertilizer, and equipment companies, who in turn train the farmers. So in the end, the farmers are getting their information from the same source, Iowa State University Extension.

Throughout the tours we heard from people that we need to do a much better job of getting our information and message out to more people. Consequently, Extension's image and marketing channels are going to become a major focus in the coming months. Having good work go unrecognized is almost as bad as not doing the work at all.

At every stop and turn, we asked about Extension's relevance in today's world and we were told that we were certainly relevant, but needed to do more, which translated into having a broader reach and more feet on the ground. The challenge will be to teach more people with Extension's services within budgets that are shrinking. That will mean looking at our delivery systems and finding new ways to communicate through technology.

The recurring themes, the topics that are high on our clientele's radar screens, are pretty much what we thought that they would be:

- Economic Development (defined broadly and includes all aspects, such as agribusiness to small manufacturing)
- Community and Family Programs (again defined broadly)
- 4-H and Youth

Overall, the tour was a great success from both a strategic planning standpoint and in making Extension more visible, and thus, more relevant. Although time-consuming, I would recommend conducting future tours to see and hear first hand how the initiatives that are generated from this tour are doing.