

IMPROVING EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMMING BY UNDERSTANDING THE CLIENTELE

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Abstract—During the 2002 restructuring of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, several county extension agents were reclassified as regional forestry specialists within their particular geographical area without regard to their experience or educational background. In an attempt to prepare the new regional forestry specialists for the upcoming task, the Mississippi State University Extension Forestry Program randomly surveyed 4,000 non-industrial private forest landowners in five geographically diverse counties in 2004. The survey had a 19 percent return rate with 69 percent of respondents indicating an interest in forestry-related issues. The purpose of the study was to identify educational needs of non-industrial private forest landowners and their preference of educational delivery methods. During the analysis, three barriers impeding educational programming of forest landowners were identified. Awareness of Educational Programs - 47 percent of respondents were unaware of extension educational opportunities. Scheduling of Educational Programs - 49 percent of surveyed landowners reported lack of time as the main reason for not attending programs. Reluctance to Use Technology - less than 10 percent of respondents chose the Internet as either an educational delivery method or a repository of information. To overcome the identified barriers, extension professionals must heighten awareness of education programs through client preferred marketing, schedule programs during client preferred times, and plan each program to integrate practical uses of technology. This study was important because it revealed barriers impeding successful educational programs of forest landowners. As extension professionals we must be aware of clientele needs, attitudes and preferences to successfully reach our constituents. Because forestry landowner needs and preferences change over time forestry programs must be proactive in our educational offerings, and responsive to landowner needs and request.

INTRODUCTION

The State of Mississippi has a diverse landscape considering the relative small size of the state, only 46,907 square miles. Approximately two-thirds of the State of Mississippi is forested with 66 percent of the land owned by over 314,000 non-industrial private forest landowners (NIPF). Forestry ranks second, in terms of Agricultural production, within the state. This large number of NIPF landowners provides a diverse constituent base with wide ranging needs. During the 2002 restructuring of the Mississippi State University Extension Service, several county extension agents were reclassified as regional forestry specialists within their particular geographical area without regard to their experience or educational background. In an attempt to prepare the new regional forestry specialists for the upcoming task, a survey instrument identifying constituent needs and desires was constructed, implemented and results analyzed in 2004. The purpose of the study was to identify short and long range educational needs of non-industrial private forest landowners and their preference of educational delivery methods.

METHODS

The counties of Greene, Lincoln, Tishomingo, Wayne and Yalobusha were sampled (fig. 1).

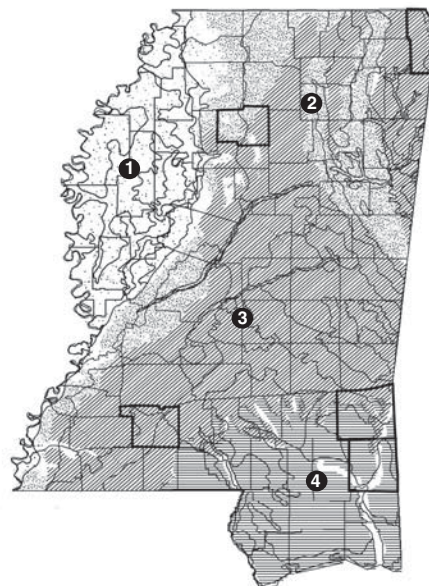


Figure 1—Counties involved in needs assessment survey.

A twenty-four question instrument was created and mailed to 4,000 individuals in five counties. Stakeholders were chosen at random from county tax records and were mailed a survey with instructions to return the completed survey within a two week time period. After the initial two week deadline elapsed, a follow up reminder was mailed to individuals who had not returned surveys and a secondary

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survey was mailed to incorrect addresses. Following the second deadline, responses were then entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for analysis. After adjusting for incorrect addresses, the total number of mailed instruments was 2,339. Data were summarized based on the five hundred and seven (n=507) individual responses to the survey, resulting in a 19 percent return rate for the questionnaire. The number of responses varied for each question, with some questions receiving multiple answers and other questions left completely unanswered. A comprehensive analysis of all participant responses was calculated. Each participant was grouped by county of origin, total ownership size of forested land, total household income, and respondent age group.

RESULTS

Before educational improvements occur, factors hindering the education process among clients were identified. During the analysis, three barriers impeding educational programming of forest landowners were identified. Those three barriers were awareness of educational programs, scheduling of educational programs and reluctance to use technology.

In the educational topics portion of the needs assessment, participants were asked to identify any and all forestry-related educational programs attended. Eighteen different programs were listed from Best Management Practices to Wildlife Management including a space for non-listed programs to be penciled in. Forty-nine percent of survey participants indicated they had not attended any educational program (fig. 2).

The non-attendance category was anticipated to be high, but we were surprised to find that almost half of all participants had never attended any extension educational programming. The subsequent questions inquired as to the reasons why participants had not attended forestry programs. Forty-five percent indicated they were simply unaware of educational opportunities (fig. 3).

Scheduling educational programs was also found to be a barrier for NIPF. Thirteen percent of participants indicated inconvenient timing of programming (fig. 3) as a reason for not attending forestry educational programs. Thirty four percent identified lack of time as a reason for not attending programs (fig. 3). Anticipating program logistics as an obstacle, question 11 requested participants to identify the day of week and time of day best suitable for educational programs. Survey respondents identified Thursday evenings, from 6pm-till, as the most convenient day and time for educational programs (fig. 4).

The third barrier impeding educational programming was identified as landowner reluctance to use technology. While 64 percent of participants owned a personal computer, only 40 percent reported access to the Internet. Twenty nine percent of landowners reported the Internet as a useful delivery method for information, ranking last on the survey. Only 7 percent of participants chose the Internet as a preferred way to be informed about future forestry-related educational programs.

Participants preferred to receive newsletters for both delivering information and program notification. Findings also reveal that only 3 percent visited the Mississippi State University Extension Service website, only 2 percent visited the Mississippi State University College of Forest Resources website, while just 2 people visited the Forestry Wildlife Research Center website.

DISCUSSION

The barriers identified are significant obstacles in educating the clientele. There are inherent obstacles associated with all adult programs, but these complications can be reduced to mere inconveniences if appropriate and thoughtful educational programming is implemented. The limitations of this study include a small survey of participants in a localized area. The researchers suggest that surveys be implemented by each extension agent within his/her local community to develop ways to improve educational programming within his/her region.

To overcome the barrier of awareness, extension agents should advertise education programs through client centered marketing strategies. Program marketing strategies should be developed during the program planning phase to increase awareness among constituents. The participants of this study preferred newsletter methods of marketing. Increased awareness of educational programming leads to more constituent participation and superior levels of education.

Program scheduling also proved a barrier for busy landowners. Landowners in this study reported little time to attend educational programming. Also, landowners reported educational opportunities to be offered during inconvenient times. To overcome the barrier of scheduling, extension agents should survey their constituents and offer programs during client preferred times. Also, technology related programming should be introduced as a time efficient method for educational opportunities.

Results of this study repeatedly indicated client resistance to technology. Extension agents may have an uphill battle in convincing clients to use this method of education.

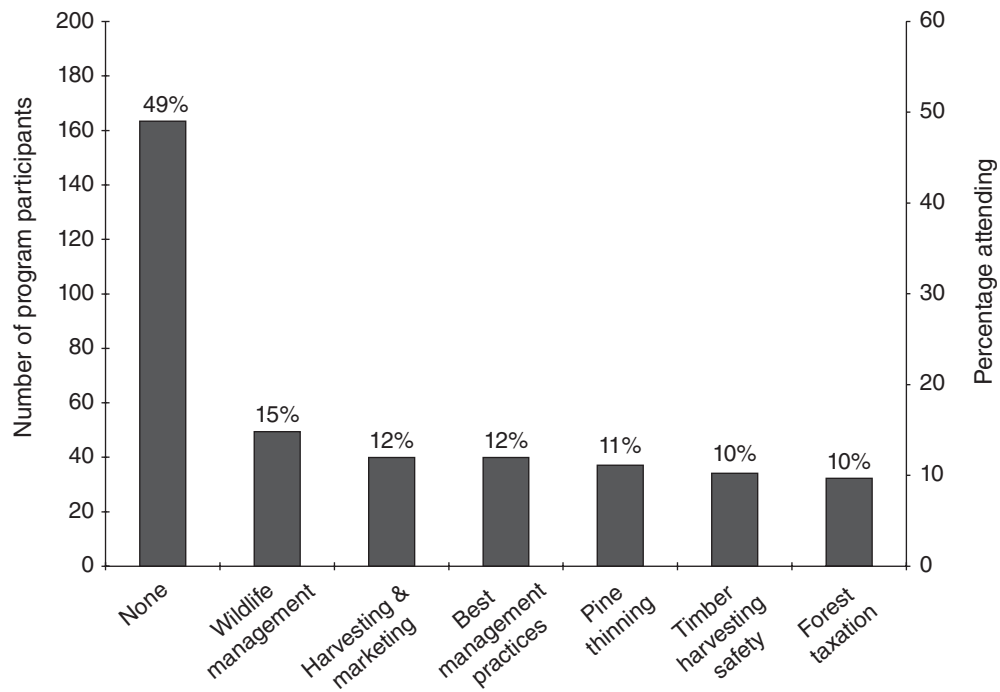


Figure 2—Attendance of forestry education programming.

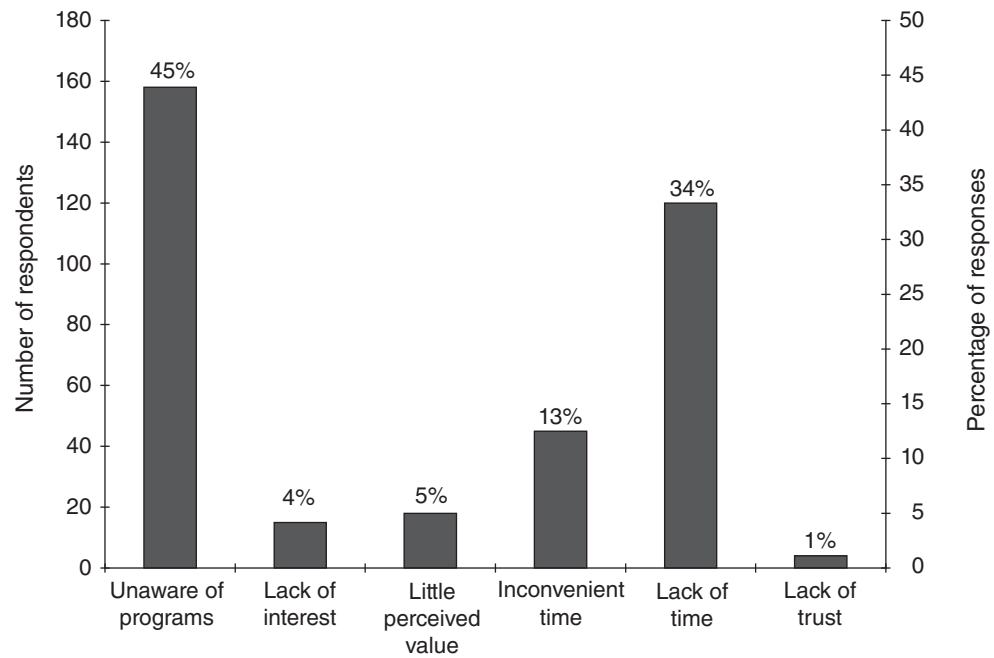


Figure 3—Reasons for nonattendance of forestry educational programs.

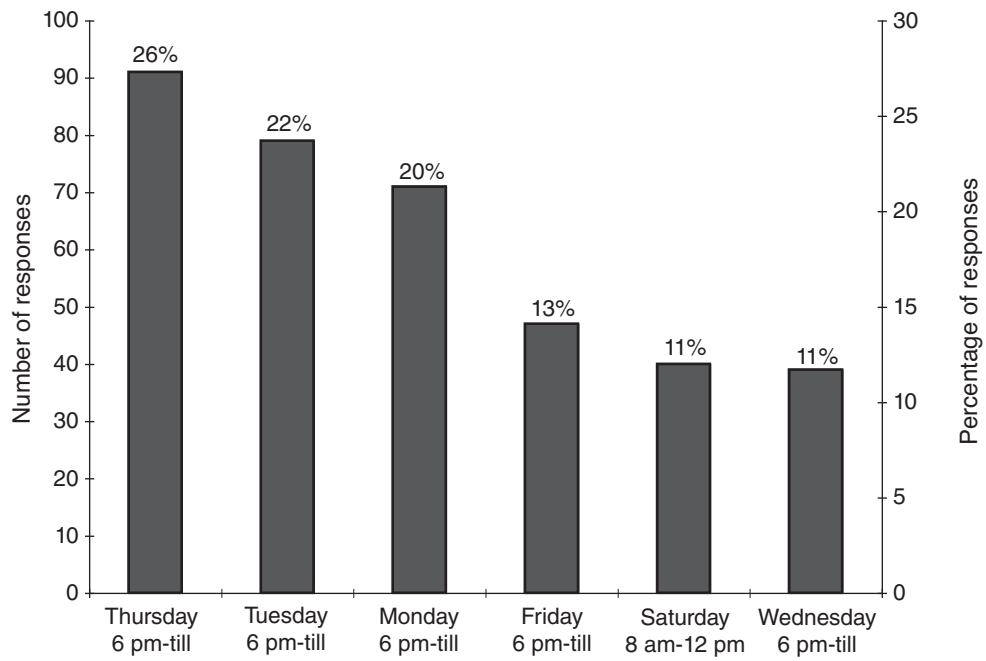


Figure 4—Program day and time preference.

To overcome the barrier of technology, extension agents should plan each program to integrate practical technology uses with positive experiences. Extension agents should demonstrate technology uses as time-saving, client centered and diverse opportunities for educational advancement.

This study was important because it revealed barriers impeding successful educational programs of forest landowners. As extension professionals we must be aware of clientele needs, attitudes and preferences to successfully reach our constituents.