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## Discussing Extension Agents' Role in Moderating Contentious Issue Conversations

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## Discussing Extension Agents' Role in Moderating Contentious Issue Conversations

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*Extension agents are finding themselves engaged in problem-solving roles as public needs adjust to a climate where issues facing the agricultural and natural resource industry are more often contentious than benign. As connectors between the Land-grant university system and the public, Extension agents need to know how to effectively communicate about contentious issues with clientele. This study used an online survey design to determine Extension agents' attitudes toward contentious issues, challenges that they face, and effective means of communication. The findings revealed Extension agents' attitudes toward communicating about contentious issues were more positive than negative. Additionally, they found the availability of misinformation and the complexity of contentious issues to be most challenging when communicating with clientele. One-on-one in-person, workshops, phone calls, and group meetings were identified as the most effective methods of communicating about contentious issues. Additional training and familiarization with current contentious issues were recommended. Future research should examine the contentious issues Extension agents are discussing, methods being used to facilitate conversations, the effect of contentious issues on job satisfaction, and the factors hindering Extension agents as they address contentious issues.*

**Keywords:** Extension agents, communication, contentious issues, Extension communication, contentious issue communication

### Introduction

State Extension agents have bridged the gap between the Land-grant university systems and the public for the last century (Warner et al., 1998). Extension agents serve to provide invaluable

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knowledge to the public (Benge et al., 2011) through agriculture, family and consumer sciences, 4-H youth development, and community development (Conglose, 2000). Extension agents work within Land-grant universities to help develop research agendas and serve the public by “enhancing the well-being of individuals, families, and communities” (Warner et al., 1998, p. 1) through nonformal education. The role of Extension agents has shifted as the needs of the public have become more complex. Extension agents are finding themselves more engaged in community problem-solving roles (Warner et al., 1998).

Technology has changed the way the world communicates but has offered an additional way in which Extension agents can reach clientele and problem solve (Bailey et al., 2014). Extension agents have taken advantage of technology and used distance-based learning and online resources to reach larger audiences (Rodewald, 2001). However, Extension agents believe that their traditional clientele prefer more personal communication (Franz et al., 2010; Telg, Irani, Muegge, et al., 2007). Franz et al. (2010) found Extension agents believed farmers preferred to receive information via farm visits, one-on-one meetings, demonstrations, field days, and on-farm tests. Similarly, Telg, Irani, Hurst, et al. (2007) found Florida Extension agents’ most preferred communication method with clientele was word of mouth. Extension agents also favored personal communication in less optimal situations, such as times of crisis. Telg, Irani, Muegge, et al. (2007) found the most effective communication channels for Extension agents in crisis situations were face-to-face communication, telephone calls, on-site visits, and cell phones when communicating with clientele.

Some studies have found high-technology approaches tend to alienate older clientele (Radhakrishna et al., 2003; Rodewald, 2001). More recent evidence has shown that older clientele, especially those who are farmers, are adapting to technology (Diem et al., 2011). However, Extension agents continue to believe that their traditional and older clientele are unable and unwilling to use technology (Diem et al., 2011). Rodewald (2001) found Extension agents’ clientele preferred printed information sources, even as technology continued to advance. Radhakrishna et al. (2003) also found clientele preferred newsletters, publications, and field tours when receiving information. Licht and Martin (2007) found clientele preferred personal consultations for reliable, timely, and local information regarding their problems. Farmers in that study admitted they received the bulk of their information from mass media but still relied on interpersonal communication for more reliable information (Licht & Martin, 2007). Franz et al. (2010) also found farmers preferred hands-on learning, demonstrations, farm visits, field days, discussions, and one-on-one methods of receiving information, with order indicating the most preferred method.

Extension agents must locate information to be dispersed before they can provide clientele with the information. Extension agents have been required to use multiple information sources and mediums to serve clientele and develop new programs (Conglose, 2000; Radhakrishna & Thomson, 1996). The way Extension agents search for information to serve their clientele and

programming efforts has changed. Rodewald (2001) found Extension agents preferred printed and online sources when seeking out information for clientele; however, 13 years later, Bailey et al. (2014) found Extension agents primarily used the Internet as a source of information even though they associated less credibility with this source. Bailey et al. (2014) also discovered Extension publications, research journals, and university specialists were viewed as the most credible sources by Extension agents when seeking information for clientele. Trustworthiness and quality were considered the top factors when assessing informational sources but were also the leading challenge (Bailey et al., 2014; Brain et al., 2009). Additionally, the daunting task of cyphering through all of these mediums, while monitoring source credibility, has created new barriers for Extension agents when searching for information (Bailey et al., 2014). Technology and lack of time have become barriers when searching for information (Bailey et al., 2014).

Extension agents are becoming progressively exposed to controversial public issues. Extension agents are often sought out by the public and university officials to facilitate dialogue and educate the public as controversial issues arise (Patton & Blaine, 2001; Welch & Braunworth, 2010). The very nature of these issues carries risk and often results in explosive and emotional decisions being made by those involved (Goodwin, 1993; Welch & Braunworth, 2010). Extension agents have developed a role in mediating controversial issues through Extension's "interdisciplinary nature and credibility within communities" (Welch & Braunworth, 2010, p. 2). Agents have moderated these types of conversations in the past, but they have also utilized the contrasting viewpoints method. Both methods have their advantages in de-escalating situations.

Extension agents traditionally moderate the conversation surrounding contentious issues (Schumaker & Lloyd, 1997). However, agent bias and credibility have been identified as concerns by clientele (Welch & Braunworth, 2010). Extension agents' previous research and clientele relationships can imply a degree of bias to the onlooker. However, these relationships and Extension agents' research portfolio also reinforce the Extension agents' credibility (Welch & Braunworth, 2010). Extension agents prefer a proactive approach when contentious issues arise, but reactive responses may be unavoidable (Shumacher & Lloyd, 1997). The moderator's role becomes increasingly complex because different views and solutions to the problem exist between parties (Welch & Braunworth, 2010). The educational meetings implemented to resolve issues sometimes follow tense situations within the communities, which allow for comments to be made, questions to be answered, and concerns to be addressed (Shumacher & Lloyd, 1997). Nonetheless, in regulating the educational meeting format, ensuring adequate resources, removing bias, and establishing their role in the meeting, Extensions agents are often able to successfully serve their clientele during tense situations (Shumacher & Lloyd, 1997).

Extension agents have also utilized another effective method to aid clientele while still distancing their involvement from the controversy (Goodwin, 1993). This method, referred to as the contrasting viewpoints method, allows Extension agents to provide all of the empirical evidence concerning the issue to clientele, addressing value judgments and belief structures. The

contrasting viewpoint method is designed to encourage clientele to consider all perspectives of the issue, rather than encouraging them to think a particular way (Goodwin, 1993). This method enables Extension agents to de-escalate the situation and allows clientele to leave the educational activity more informed; this method is not designed to arrive at a decision. Goodwin (1993) found one hour of an educational activity helped moderate the attitude of a well-educated group regarding an emotional, controversial issue. While this appeared to be an effective method in addressing contentious issues, when incorporated by opponents inversely, this method is vulnerable to being abused. The contrasting viewpoints method still fosters an educational tool that allows all information to be accurately presented when addressing contentious issues (Goodwin, 1993).

Many obstacles impede Extension agents in the pursuit of facilitating controversial issue conversations. Extension agents' roles are becoming more complex as they are sought out to address contentious issues that encompass a tense and emotional situation (Goodwin, 1993; Patton & Blaine, 2001; Warner et al., 1998). Furthermore, the occurrence of these controversial issues appears to be on the rise (Patton & Blaine, 2001). Extension agents often face challenges sifting through copious amounts of resources and identifying credible information to share with clientele (Bailey et al., 2014). This study sought to explore how Extension agents communicate about contentious issues with their clientele, while also assessing attitudes and challenges that arise when communicating about contentious issues. As new challenges arise for Extension agents, such as the prevalence of contentious issues, the Land-grant university system, agricultural and natural resource industry, and the public will need research-based information to guide the conversation.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Human communication revolves around verbal and nonverbal communication between two or more people (Stone et al., 1999). The human communication process focuses on three primary types of communication: expressive, accidental, and rhetorical (Stone et al., 1999).

Expressive communication involves messaging that encompasses the emotions and the well-being or feelings of another person/object (Stone et al., 1999). Expressive communication does not necessarily imply intention or forethought but is thought to reveal peoples' true feelings. Accidental communication usually occurs as a result of unconscious behaviors and often includes poor planning. This type of communication involves unintentional messages being received via verbal or nonverbal communication. In contrast, rhetorical communication is goal-oriented and intentional (Stone et al., 1999). Rhetorical communication is designed to create a specific meaning in the mind of the receiver—a persuasive method of communicating. Like expressive and accidental communication, rhetorical communication has been embedded in the American culture (Stone et al., 1999).

Since its inception in the 1900s, the Cooperative Extension Service has always served the role of educating others (Conglose, 2000). Extension agents have been encouraged to use a rhetorical communication approach. Rhetorical communication is used by Extension agents to spread useful and practical information to clientele, with the idea that the knowledge will be applied in their clienteles' lives (Conglose, 2000). When addressing contentious issues using methods like contrasting viewpoints, Extension agents attempt to persuade clientele to acknowledge all perspectives by presenting a variety of information (Goodwin, 1993).

As controversial issues arise, emotional discussions often occur and result in expressive dialogues (Goodwin, 1993). These types of expressive communication characteristics usually escalate as blame is shifted to each party involved and emotions quickly intensify (Welch & Braunworth, 2010). However, Goodwin (1993) found that an educational program using the traditional rhetorical communication method was able to moderate the emotions during a controversial issue amongst clientele.

With emotions taking hold during controversial discussions, the role of the Extension agent must be precise as they help clientele understand the issues (Schumaker & Lloyd, 1997). Extension agents' problem-solving roles require them to serve an intermediate position between universities and the public, ensuring that correct information is being disseminated. Accidental communication can result in disaster (Warner et al., 1998). Entering these controversial discussions requires detailed planning to control conversations and help reduce the tension. While poor planning and communication can lead to chaos, unintentional efforts can certainly intensify the problem (Schumaker & Lloyd, 1997). The human communication process reinforces the need for Extension agents to utilize rhetorical communication, control expressive communication, and prevent accidental communication when addressing contentious issues. When situations go wrong, how these problems are addressed can mean the difference between disaster prevention and trust-building, and a crisis developing (Telg & Irani, 2012).

### **Purpose**

In this study, researchers sought to explore how Extension agents communicate about contentious issues with their clientele, while also assessing Extension agents' attitudes and challenges that arise when communicating about these issues. This study was guided by the following research objectives:

- RO1: Determine attitude toward communicating about contentious issues with clientele by agent type.
- RO2: Identify the challenges faced when communicating about contentious issues with clientele by agent type.
- RO3: Determine the most effective methods to communicate about contentious issues with clientele by agent type.

## Methodology

Florida Extension agents ( $N = 350$ ) were selected as the population for the study. Comprehensive Internet access and the smaller population created conditions enabling researchers to conduct a census via an online survey. The inquiries for this survey comprised a portion of a larger study designed to gauge the needs of Extension agents regarding agricultural and natural resources policies and controversial issues. We have previously discussed the needs of Extension agents regarding policy from this larger study (Rumble et al., 2018). Therefore, the instrument, population, and data collection methods were those used in our previous research (Rumble et al., 2018).

We conducted a series of interviews with key informants to inform survey development. The interviews provided information regarding current conditions surrounding contentious issues and were used to formulate inquiries for this study. Preliminary interviews encompassed Extension personnel holding various position levels and with a variety of subject-matter specialties.

The survey instrument included researcher-developed questions. Questions asking about attitudes, challenges, and methods used to communicate with clientele about contentious issues were the focus of this manuscript. Respondent attitudes toward communicating about contentious issues were measured using a five-point bipolar semantic differential scale with six items. The construct was reverse coded, so positive adjectives were assigned a five, and negative adjectives were assigned a one. Respondents could indicate challenges they faced when communicating about contentious issues via an 11-item check-all-that-apply question with the option to utilize a write-in “other” category. The effectiveness of different communication methods was evaluated with a five-item Likert-type scale where 1 = *Very Ineffective*, 2 = *Ineffective*, 3 = *Neither Effective nor Ineffective*, 4 = *Effective*, and 5 = *Very Effective*. Demographic questions including race, sex, age, years with Extension, and agent type were also asked at the end of the survey.

A panel of experts reviewed the survey questions to confirm face and content validity. Expert members of this panel included the Associate Director of the UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education, the Dean of Extension from the University of Florida, and an assistant professor also from the University of Florida. All panel members possessed extensive survey development and content knowledge. The census technique utilized for the survey allowed the researchers to mitigate coverage and sampling errors often associated with such research (Dillman et al., 2009).

The tailored design method by Dillman et al. (2009) was utilized to construct the survey dissemination methodology for this study. Five days prior to the launch of the survey, a pre-notice letter was emailed from the University of Florida Dean of Extension to all Extension agents within the state. Researchers sent four email reminders following the first contact in mid-June. The first and second reminders were emailed seven and 16 days after the initial contact, respectively. Due to a holiday, a third reminder occurred 12 days following the second with a



final notification sent eight days after the third. Closure of the survey occurred 24 hours following the last notice. An online survey company maintained the email originating the first two reminder notifications, yet the resulting response rate was not acceptable. The third and fourth reminders utilized a mail-merge approach from university staff email to ensure that notifications did not transfer to receivers' junk mail. A final response rate of 35.7% resulted, with 125 Florida Extension agents responding to at least 50% of the survey questions. Some of the 125 respondents skipped random questions; in these cases, their responses were treated as missing data. Percentages were calculated based on the total number of participants or agent type.

The subject matter may have contributed to the response rate, as some prospective participants indicated they felt the survey did not apply to them. Time of year may have also influenced the response rate, as the primary survey period occurred in June when many Extension agents may have been away from work for conference or vacation. Furthermore, the utilization of online surveys typically results in lower response rates compared to paper-based surveys (Monroe & Adams, 2012; Nulty, 2008). Nulty (2008) found that online surveys had an average 33% response rate. Nonresponse bias can threaten external validity and was accounted for through comparing the population to known demographics of years of Extension service ( $\chi^2 = 3.648, p = .60$ ) and programmatic areas ( $\chi^2 = 6.132, p = .19$ ) (Miller & Smith, 1983). Population data for the selected demographics matched the respondent populace. Seven agent types were utilized to group the respondents: Agriculture (AG); Natural Resource (NR); 4-H, Family and Consumer Science (FCS); Horticulture (HORT); Sea-Grant (SEA); and Agents of Unspecified Type (UN).

The data were analyzed using SPSS® 22 statistical software. Descriptive analyses were calculated to determine Florida Extension agents' attitudes toward communicating about contentious issues to clientele. A mean attitude score was calculated for each agent type. Descriptive analyses were also conducted to determine the challenges Extensions agents faced when communicating about contentious issues to clientele and the effectiveness of communication methods. Crosstabs were utilized to organize data by agent type.

**Table 1. Respondent Demographics (N = 125)**

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Sex</i>		
Female	50	42.4
Male	68	57.6
<i>Age</i>		
20-29	12	10.0
30-39	22	18.3
40-49	19	15.8
50-59	48	40.0
60 -69	19	15.8
<i>Programmatic Area</i>		
Agriculture	37	29.6
Natural Resource	5	4.0
4- H Youth Development	15	12.0
Family Consumer Sciences	16	12.8
Horticulture	39	31.2
Sea-Grant	6	4.8
Unspecified	7	5.6
<i>Years in Extension</i>		
1-5	33	27.7
6-10	22	18.5
11-15	19	16.0
16-20	17	14.3
21-25	9	7.6
26 +	19	16.0

## Results

### RO1: Determine Attitude Toward Communicating about Contentious Issues with Clientele by Agent Type

Respondents were asked to indicate their attitude when communicating about contentious agriculture and natural resource issues with clientele (Table 2), where high values indicated positive attitudes and low values indicated negative attitudes. Overall, respondents' attitudes were more positive than negative ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = .53$ ). Agriculture agents had the highest mean attitude ( $M = 4.15$ ,  $SD = .48$ ) toward communicating about contentious agriculture and natural resource issues with their clientele, followed by Sea-Grant and Family Consumer Science agents. 4-H agents had the lowest mean attitude score ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = .58$ ), but their attitudes were still more positive than negative.

**Table 2. Attitudes When Communicating about Contentious Issues**

<b>Agent Type</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>SD</b>
Agriculture	36	4.15	.48
Sea-Grant	6	4.11	.27
Family Consumer Science	14	4.00	.41
Natural Resources	4	3.96	.28
Horticulture	39	3.91	.61
4-H	13	3.72	.48
Unspecified	7	3.57	.58
Total	119	3.96	.53

Note: Responses based on a semantic differential scale from 1 = *Difficult* to 5 = *Easy*

## **RO2: Identify the Challenges Faced When Communicating about Contentious Issues with Clientele by Agent Type**

The challenges respondents faced when communicating about contentious issues to clientele were also examined (Table 3). Availability of false or misleading information ( $n = 104$ , 83%) and complexity of issues ( $n = 104$ , 83%) were the top challenges identified when examining all agent types. Complexity of issues was the greatest challenge faced by Agriculture agents, Sea-Grant agents ( $n = 6$ , 100%), and Natural Resource agents ( $n = 5$ , 100%; tied with availability). Availability of false or misleading information was the greatest challenge faced by Family Consumer Science agents ( $n = 15$ , 94%), Horticulture agents ( $n = 35$ , 90%), Unspecified agents ( $n = 6$ , 86%), and Natural Resource agents ( $n = 5$ , 100%; tied with complexity). The greatest challenge to 4-H agents ( $n = 9$ , 60%) was the timeliness of receipt of information. The other challenges identified by respondents included internal conflict or disagreements, inaccurate perceptions among clientele, emotional processing of issues, political pressure, and religious doctrine.

**Table 3. Challenges Faced When Communicating about Contentious Issues**

<b>Challenge</b>	<b>AG n(%)</b>	<b>NR n(%)</b>	<b>4-H n(%)</b>	<b>FCS n(%)</b>	<b>HORT n(%)</b>	<b>SEA n(%)</b>	<b>UN n(%)</b>	<b>Total n(%)</b>
Availability of false or misleading information	31(84)	5(100)	7(47)	15(94)	35(90)	5(83)	6(86)	104(83)
Complexity of issues	35(95)	5(100)	7(47)	14(88)	32(82)	6(100)	5(71)	104(83)
Political agenda	17(46)	4(80)	3(20)	12(75)	29(74)	5(83)	4(57)	74(59)
Translating issues into lay terms	16(43)	4(80)	6(40)	9(56)	19(49)	2(33)	3(43)	59(47)
Timeliness of receipt of information	14(38)	2(40)	9(60)	4(25)	20(51)	2(33)	5(71)	56(45)
Being non-biased	20(54)	2(40)	5(33)	6(38)	20(51)	1(17)	1(14)	55(44)
Cultural difference	17(46)	3(60)	4(27)	7(44)	15(38)	4(67)	3(43)	53(42)
Getting and keeping attention	13(35)	1(20)	5(33)	5(31)	19(49)	1(17)	1(14)	45(36)
Lack of clientele trust	9(24)	0(0)	1(7)	2(13)	15(38)	1(17)	1(14)	29(23)
Language barriers	5(14)	1(20)	3(20)	3(19)	12(31)	0(0)	1(14)	25(20)
Other challenges	0(0)	0(0)	3(20)	1(6)	1(3)	2(33)	0(0)	7(6)

Note: AG = Agriculture agents, NR = Natural Resource agents, 4-H = 4-H agents, FCS = Family Consumer Science agents, HORT = Horticulture agents, SEA = Sea-Grant agents, UN = Unspecified

### RO3: Determine the Most Effective Methods to Communicate about Contentious Issues with Clientele by Agent Type

Respondents were asked to indicate the level of effectiveness of several communication methods when communicating about contentious issues with clientele (Table 4). Respondents found direct communication to be the most effective; this included one-on-one communication, phone calls, workshops, and group meetings. Electronic forms of communication were found to be less effective, according to the respondents. Email was identified as the most effective form of electronic communication. Respondents were given the option to provide other methods of effective communication. Other methods included cable TV, radio, newspapers, school enrichment classes, and site visits.

**Table 4. Effective or Very Effective Methods for Communicating about Contentious Issues**

Method	AG n(%)	NR n(%)	4-H n(%)	FCS n(%)	HORT n(%)	SEA n(%)	UN n(%)	Total n(%)
One-on-One, in Person	37(100)	5(100)	15(100)	14(88)	39(100)	6(100)	7(100)	123(98)
Phone Call	37(100)	5(100)	15(100)	13(81)	37(95)	6(100)	7(100)	120(96)
Workshop	36(97)	5(100)	13(87)	15(94)	38(97)	6(100)	6(86)	120(96)
Group Meeting	36(97)	5(100)	15(100)	15(94)	35(90)	6(100)	6(86)	118(94)
Email	35(95)	5(100)	12(80)	13(81)	35(90)	6(100)	5(71)	111(89)
Newsletter	24(65)	4(80)	8(53)	8(50)	18(46)	3(50)	3(43)	68(54)
Website	24(65)	2(40)	9(60)	9(56)	20(51)	4(67)	6(86)	74(59)
Blog	13(35)	1(20)	7(47)	2(13)	13(33)	2(33)	3(43)	41(33)

*Note:* AG = Agriculture agents, NR = Natural resource agents, 4-H = 4-H agents, FCS = Family Consumer Science agents, HORT = Horticulture agents, SEA = Sea-Grant agents, UN = Unspecified

### Conclusions and Implications

In this study, we explored how Extension agents communicate about contentious issues with their clientele, while also assessing Extension agents' attitudes and challenges that arise when communicating about these issues. Extension agents often find themselves moderating conversations about contentious issues (Goodwin, 1993; Patton & Blaine, 2001; Warner et al., 1998), and thus, it is important to understand their methods, attitudes, and challenges so that their efforts can be properly supported.

Collectively, Extension agents participating in this study reported attitudes toward communicating about contentious issues that were more positive than negative. Agriculture and Sea-Grant agents had the most positive attitudes toward communicating about contentious issues. This may be explained by the number of contentious issues that overlap their program areas, such as GMOs, immigration, animal welfare, water quality and quantity, climate change, and sea-level rise. 4-H agents had the lowest mean attitude toward communicating about contentious issues. This finding may suggest that the complexity of contentious issues may be perceived as beyond the scope of youth programming. Additionally, it is likely that clientele of Agriculture and Sea-Grant agents inquire more regularly about contentious issues than 4-H clientele.

However, there is an opportunity for 4-H to play a more significant role in contentious issue discussions and education with their clientele. Involving youth in conversations and education about contentious issues could help to develop a generation that approaches contentious issues from a systematic problem-solving perspective while maintaining emotional control (Goodwin, 1993).

The Extension agents participating in this study reported that the availability of false or misleading information and the complexity of contentious issues were challenging. These findings amplify the difficult tasks Extension agents are facing as they vigorously search for trustworthy and quality information to provide their clientele (Bailey et al., 2014). These challenges also likely impact agents' ability to communicate with clients who have been misinformed or who have difficulty understanding the scope of an issue. Availability of false or misleading information and complexity of issues were the top issues identified by most agent types, with the exception of 4-H agents. The top challenge among 4-H agents was the timeliness of receipt of information. The complexities of these issues and difficulty in locating reliable and timely information stress the need to improve information seeking and dissemination practices and for continued research to support Extension agents (Bailey et al., 2014; Brain et al., 2009).

Extension agents in this study reported direct communication channels to be most effective when communicating about contentious issues to clientele. The most effective methods for communicating about contentious issues were one-on-one in person, phone calls, workshops, and group meetings. Several other studies have found that Extension agents favored personal communication methods when communicating with clientele (i.e., word of mouth, telephone, farm visits, one-on-one, demonstrations, field days, and on-farm tests; Franz et al., 2010; Telg, Irani, Hurst, et al., 2007, Telg, Irani, Muegge, et al., 2007). Additionally, several studies have found clientele preferred personal communication methods (i.e., newsletters, publications, field tours, personal consultation, demonstrations, one-on-one methods, and farm visits; Licht & Martin, 2007; Radhakrishna et al., 2003). Our findings, paired with prior literature, confirms that Extension agents are meeting the needs of their clientele and recognizing the communication methods that work best. Extension agents in this study found non-electronic methods of communication more effective than electronic methods (i.e., websites, newsletters, blogs). Email was identified as the most effective electronic method of communicating. Little difference was found in the reported effectiveness of communication types among agent types.

### **Recommendations**

The general role of Extension agents is to enhance the lives of their clientele and communities (Warner et al., 1998), suggesting that Extension agents help to make things better or aid when problems arise. Thus, they will continue to play a role in moderating controversial conversations. All Extension agents should be trained in contentious issue topics and management.

Specifically, training for Extension agents should provide practical, timely, and balanced information about key contentious issues. Training should highlight the role of contentious issues in the jobs of all agent types and the lives of Extension clientele. Training should also prepare agents to facilitate controversial conversations; de-escalate tense situations; and adjust to different temperaments, group sizes, relationships with the parties involved, and knowledge levels. Rhetorical communication methods and the contrasting viewpoints method should also be a part of the training (Goodwin, 1993; Shumacher & Lloyd, 1997). Additionally, training could highlight opportunities to proactively address contentious issues in educational programming, such as programming with youth. It may be appropriate to break agents out by type during the training, given some variation in attitudes and challenges observed in this study.

Extension agents reported direct communication to be most effective in communicating contentious issues, and thus, efficiency and techniques for these different communication methods should be explored. Some direct and personal communication methods would require frequent travel. Administrators could explore funding opportunities that may support more direct communication with clientele. Alternatively, if resources to support direct communication are limited, Extension administration may need to consider the costs and benefits of including new communication methods as a part of training to reach clientele.

Future research should examine the contentious issues with which Extension agents are currently dealing and the difficulties associated with moderating each of them. Researchers should also examine how Extension agents are moderating each contentious issue and which methods work best for each client type. Future research should assess what training Extension agents receive to address contentious issues, how moderating contentious issues affects agents' job satisfaction, and how moderating these conversations impacts Extension agent turnover. Additionally, researchers should determine what external factors hinder agents when addressing contentious issues. Researchers should also examine the actual methods Extension agents are using to communicate contentious issues to determine which methods are more effective. Future research should continue to document methods being used to facilitate contentious issues and share those findings with others to help improve future efforts.

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