Innovative Outreach Methods for Adult Education in the 21st Century: Knowing Your Audience and Moving From the Centerpiece to the Sideline

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Outreach has taken on various forms during the past 10 years, and because technology has become such an integral part of teaching, changes continue to occur at an even greater speed. The pace of life for educators has us reaching for the newest technology and calling ourselves innovative if we embed a YouTube video or a couple of iClicker (a participant response system that allows you to poll the participants and display the results; Macmillan, New York, NY) questions into our existing PowerPoint presentation. We plan our programs and entice participants to attend with food and Continuing Education Units (CEUs), the perpetual carrot on a string for most education programs, and hope the weather prohibits our clientele from doing something they view as more valuable. But what if our programs were viewed by people as the most valuable use of their time? How can we make that transition from a boring necessity to an investment in their future?

We believe the most critical component of an effective outreach program is knowing your participants. As educators, we have to ask ourselves: 1) what information do my clientele want or need, and 2) how does this particular group of participants want to receive the information? Once we know the answer to both parts of the equation, we can begin to discover innovative ways to meet those needs. Our purpose in this article is to challenge educators to evaluate the way they approach outreach by learning about their participants and tailoring programs specifically focused on the needs and learning styles of their clientele.

Traditionally, educators have used proven techniques, such as newsletters or popular press articles, demonstrations or field days, and communication via telephone or face-to-face interactions, to relay information to our clientele. However, there are challenges that come with these traditional educational methods, namely, time and money constraints. Budgets for Extension educators, especially in the current economy, are low and continue to decline. Furthermore, gas prices are high, and when coupled with the vast geographical areas that Extension educators cover in most western states, traveling to workshops and field demonstration sites can become very expensive. Depending on the University Administration’s priorities, educators may face increasing pressure from tenure and review committees to produce publications and obtain grant dollars for research that takes precedence over workshops and ranch visits. Ranchers and land managers are also feeling the pinch financially and usually have a full off-ranch schedule of political and agency meetings that they are required to attend, effectively limiting both money and time to travel to education opportunities.

The constraints faced by both educators and clientele have inspired the development of many new tools and technologies that can be used to assist in delivering information to our participants. Webinars can be an inexpensive and effective way to transfer information directly to a client’s home at a convenient hour. If well designed, they offer opportunities for client–educator interaction and follow-up for more information. Smart phones are another new technology that has truly changed the way individuals receive information. For example, in very remote areas, it may be difficult or expensive to get high-speed Internet to the location. However, if a cellular signal is available, smart phones allow quick access to e-mail, the Internet, and numerous applications. These features allow ranchers to stay on top of e-mail and news, even when out in the field or traveling on the road. Social networking is another tool that is not just for personal use. Professional organizations are using Twitter and Facebook to disseminate information and news flashes. Once an organization is recognized as a reputable source by clientele, the news can spread quickly over long distances with little to no added input on the part of the organization.

Nevertheless, technology is not synonymous with innovation and often the most innovative programs meld cutting-edge outreach techniques with traditional delivery methods. Although technology can stretch limited dollars and be very