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A survey was made in Clark County, Wisconsin, of small businessmen's knowledge and perception of university extension. The businessmen appeared most knowledgeable about Extension programs offered through mass media, but less knowledgeable about local staff affiliation and relationship to the University of Wisconsin. They participated in Extension programs to the greatest extent through the mass media, considered traditional programs important (with the possible exception of leadership development) but also desired programs geared specifically to their own needs and interests. They also tended to have favorable attitudes toward Extension programs, personnel qualifications, and the involvement of the University of Wisconsin in problem solving. Community improvement, marketing, and business management were the leading choices among program areas desired. Moreover, 517 were willing to pay a specified fee for such programs. Implications regarding information dissemination and educational methods were stated. (ly)

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# Resource Report

September 1967 / Extension Service / College of Agriculture / University of Wisconsin

## Small Businessmen's Perceptions of University Extension

Mohammad A. Douglah and Arvid D. Dopp\*

in cooperation with the Extension Resource Development Unit

### Introduction

The small businessman plays a significant role in the economic and social development of his community, especially in towns with 10,000 population or less.

There are approximately 4.5 million small businesses in the United States, constituting about 95 percent of the total number of businesses. About 40 percent of the total business volume is done by small firms which employ 40 percent of the working force. <sup>1/</sup>

Businessmen generally occupy key positions in the community power structure. Consequently, their attitudes, thoughts and actions exert extensive influence on the social and economic development process. Obviously, the involvement of businessmen in continuing adult education programs will not only help them satisfy individual needs and interests, but will ultimately contribute to the total welfare of their communities.

University of Wisconsin Extension, founded on the philosophy of making the total resources of the University available to the people of the state, continuously seeks new ways to more effectively serve the needs and concerns of businessmen. To execute this function efficiently, an accurate assessment of businessmen's perceptions of University Extension is essential. This report is an attempt

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<sup>1/</sup> "Success and Failure Factors in Small Business." *Small Businessmen's Manual, Small Business Administration, Washington, D. C. 1964 pp. 13-14.*

in this direction. It is based on a study <sup>2/</sup> conducted in Clark County, Wisconsin, which had the following objectives:

1. To determine businessmen's knowledge of University Extension, its personnel, activities and functions in the county.
2. To determine businessmen's knowledge of and degree of participation in Extension educational programs and activities.
3. To determine businessmen's attitudes toward University Extension, its present and future prospects, and qualifications of its personnel.
4. To determine businessmen's expressed needs in selected subject matter areas.

### Methodology

Clark County, population about 30,000, is located in west central Wisconsin. Approximately 800 processing, wholesale, retail and professional businesses supply goods and services to the people of the county. A list of these businesses, located in 18 towns, villages and hamlets, was compiled through a detailed examination of current telephone listings for each community. Tavern and nightclub operations were eliminated. From the remaining listings a randomly chosen sample of 246 businesses was selected. A questionnaire was constructed and pretested in Adams-Friendship, Wisconsin. The revised questionnaire was mailed to owners and/or managers of the selected businesses in Clark County. Of the

<sup>2/</sup> Arvid D. Dopp, "The Extension Service as Perceived by the Businessmen of Clark County, Wisconsin." M.S. Thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, 1966.

76 percent of the questionnaires returned, 67 percent were usable for data analysis. The remaining 9 percent were returned by respondents who did not feel competent to answer the questions, had recently gone out of business, or refused to answer.

## Summary of Findings

### Description of the Businesses

Nearly three-fourths of the firms surveyed in Clark County are locally owned and managed by the owners. Less than 20 percent, mostly cooperatives, are managed by non-owners.

More than one-third of the businesses had a gross income of \$25,000 or less. Only 5 percent grossed between \$75,000 and \$100,000 while one-fourth reported gross incomes of \$100,000 or more.

Less than one-fourth of the firms surveyed were classified as agribusinesses.\* Almost one-half of the businessmen reported doing at least 50 percent of their business with the farm population.

### Knowledge of Extension Activities and Resources

To determine businessmen's knowledge of Extension's activities, structure and resources, a series of questions were posed (Table 1). A "yes" indicated positive knowledge on the part of respondents; "no" or "don't know" responses indicated lack of knowledge.

Analysis of these findings indicates that businessmen were quite knowledgeable of Extension personnel's role as disseminators of educational information, especially through mass media. More than four-fifths of the respondents knew that the county Extension office had access to literature through bulletins, leaflets, etc. Three-fourths were aware that county Extension staff write articles for local newspapers.

A reverse trend, however, is noted in businessmen's knowledge of Extension structure and resources. More than one-third of those who replied did not know that Extension personnel are county employees. Forty-five percent were not aware of assistance available from University of Wisconsin specialists. Almost one-half did not realize that county staff members have access to the total resources of the University. Less than one-fourth of the respondents knew that county Extension staff are members of the University of Wisconsin faculty. Fifteen percent thought they are not, and 62 percent did not know this fact.

\* Agribusinesses have been defined, for the purpose of this study, as those which are organized and directed primarily to serve agriculture and its needs.

Table 1 Knowledge About Extension  
(Order and Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

	Yes		No		Don't Know		Total
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	
Does the county Extension office have bulletins, leaflets, etc., available?	131	84	1	-	24	16	156
Do county Extension staff conduct tours, meetings, etc.?	120	77	2	1	33	22	155
Do county staff members write news articles for local papers?	118	77	9	6	27	17	154
Are county staff members available for consultation?	114	74	2	1	38	25	154
Do county staff have radio programs in the county?	94	61	4	3	55	36	153
Are Extension staff employees of the county?	93	61	7	5	51	34	151
The possibility of obtaining help from a U.W. specialist for a business problem?	84	55	6	4	63	41	153
Do Extension staff have access to total U.W. resources?	82	53	2	1	70	46	154
Are county staff members of the U.W. faculty?	35	23	23	15	96	62	154

### Participation in Extension Activities

These businessmen participate most frequently in Extension programs and activities through mass media (Table 2). Nearly two-thirds of the respondents said they read Extension news articles, followed closely by 61 percent who reported listening to Extension radio programs.

Telephoning the Extension office is the most frequent type of personal contact. Forty-one percent have used Extension services through this medium. Attending Extension meetings and visiting the Extension office show sharp declines (29 and 28 percent respectively) in participation. This drop-off is also noted in the businessmen's participation in demonstrations or tour attendance.

Table 2 Participation in Extension Activities  
(Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

Type of Contact	No.	Percent
Read Extension news article	99	65
Listened to radio programs	95	61
Obtained Extension bulletins	78	51
Called Extension office	65	42
Attended Extension meetings	45	29
Visited county Extension office	44	28
Member of Extension office visited business	29	19
Attended Extension demonstration	27	18
Attended Extension tour	16	10

## Attitudes Toward Extension Programs and Personnel

Businessmen were asked to indicate how important they felt it was that Extension continue to provide educational experiences in nine selected program areas. Their perceived degree of importance was rated on a four point scale, 1 being unimportant and 4 very important. All program areas except Leadership Development were considered important (Table 3). However, in terms of degree of importance, Youth Development, Efficiency in Agricultural Production, and Management on the Farm and in the Home were ranked at the top. Programs in the areas of Family Living and Public Affairs Education ranked lower.

The fact that Leadership Development was considered relatively unimportant deserves consideration. Enhancing the leadership potential of participants in Extension activities is considered a direct or indirect objective of most Extension programs. The fact that it is such an integral part of all Extension programs is perhaps the reason Leadership Development was not recognized as an important separate entity.

Table 3 Rank Order of the Importance of Extension Program (Areas as Indicated by Respondents)

Program Area	Rank	Average Importance	No.
Youth Development	1	3.80	151
Efficiency in Agricultural Production	2	3.72	150
Management on the Farm and in the Home	3	3.67	152
Conservation and Natural Resources	4	3.63	151
Marketing of Farm Products	5	3.42	146
Community and Resource Development	6	3.41	151
Family Living	7	3.32	150
Public Affairs Education	8	3.19	148
Leadership Development	9	2.28	146

Businessmen were also asked their opinion on how well these Extension programs have met the needs of the people for whom they were intended. More than half of the respondents considered the programs very successful in this respect. Only 12 percent felt Extension programs had not met client needs adequately. Although these findings portray a favorable attitude, it is significant that more than one-third of the businessmen surveyed said they didn't know if the programs had met clientele needs.

Clientele perceptions of Extension's ability to provide professional help to them is critical to the acceptance and success of any program. Although 39 percent of the businessmen reported that University specialists could be of help to them in their business, 43 percent did not know if a University of Wisconsin Specialist could assist them (Table 4). About one-fifth felt that an Extension Specialist could not help them at all.

Table 4 Attitudes Concerning the Ability of Extension Specialists to Help Businessmen (Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

Could Specialists Help?	No.	Percent
Yes	61	39
No	28	18
Don't Know	66	43
Total	155	100
No Information	5	
Total Number of Cases	160	

Businessmen were also asked their attitudes concerning the qualifications of county Extension personnel and University of Wisconsin Specialists. More than one-third of the businessmen felt county personnel were well qualified to help them and one-half felt that specialists were well qualified to assist them (Table 5). But again, many businessmen expressed doubts (48 and 42 percent) about the qualifications of Extension personnel.

Table 5 Attitudes Toward the Qualifications of County Extension Personnel and University Specialists (Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

How Qualified are Personnel	County Personnel		Specialists	
	No.	%	No.	%
Well	54	37	75	50
Not well	12	7	5	3
Not at all	11	8	7	5
Don't know	73	48	61	42
Total	150	100	148	100
No Information	8		12	
Total No. of Cases	158		160	

Thirty-seven percent of the respondents felt that the University of Wisconsin should extend more help to businessmen (Table 6). A relatively

Table 6 Attitudes Toward the University of Wisconsin Extending More Help (Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

Should U.W. Help More:	No.	Percent
Do more	56	37
Doing all it can	28	19
Don't know	66	44
Total	150	100
No information	10	
Total No. of Cases	160	

small proportion (19 percent) felt the University was doing all it could but 44 percent were not sure.

### Suggested Program Areas and Willingness to Pay

Businessmen were asked if they would participate in several specific program areas if available through Extension. At least half of those responding indicated a desire to participate in any one of the suggested program areas (Table 7). More than three-fourths of the businessmen reported they were willing to participate in programs for community improvement purposes. Two-thirds expressed a desire to participate in marketing and business management programs.

**Table 7** Willingness to Participate in Different Programs  
(Percentage Distribution of Respondents)

Suggested Program Areas	Willing to Participate	
	No.	%
Community Improvement	99	78
Marketing Programs	79	66
Management of the Independent Business	86	66
Money Matters and Credit	82	64
Employee Maturation	70	55
Methods and Materials: How to Meet Change	61	50

Businessmen were then asked if they would pay a specified fee\* to take part in these programs. The respondents were split almost evenly--51 percent were willing to pay and 49 percent were not.

it is equally essential that they recognize the authenticity of the professionals who make this information available. Research findings support the notion that an individual's perception of the competence and authoritativeness of the communicator influences his acceptance of and readiness to act upon the content of the communication. Therefore, any efforts to bridge the existing knowledge gap businessmen have regarding Extension personnel's affiliation and relationship with the University will strengthen the businessmen's concept of Extension personnel competence and credibility, thereby enhancing the chances for greater participation in and acceptance of Extension programs.

2. Businessmen participated in Extension programs to the greatest extent through mass media, but to a limited extent through other methods of contact. Mass media are an effective tool to create awareness of and interest in Extension programs. However, the type of educational programs required to meet the needs of businessmen cannot be extended via mass media alone. Personal contacts through in-depth educational experiences, office consultations and similar experiences are effective methods and more likely to result in behavioral changes in this particular clientele.

3. Although businessmen considered traditional Extension programs (agricultural production, youth, etc.) important, they also desired programs geared specifically for their needs and interests. This suggests that businessmen in a rural county still feel that programs for agriculture deserve major educational emphasis in Extension planning. Businessmen realize that educational programs for farmers result in more productive farmers, which in turn affect their business. The businessmen recognize their need for educational programs to provide the knowledge, skills and attitudes they must acquire to cope with the challenges of the complex nature of today's business.

4. Attitudes of businessmen toward Extension programs, personnel qualifications and the involvement of the University in problem solving are quite favorable. However, a significant number did express uncertainty regarding these "issues." This is a result of the lack of awareness and understanding of some businessmen concerning the Extension role of the University. Efforts should be made to increase businessmen's awareness and level of understanding of the overall Extension functions of the University and the specific educational programs that are or could be made available to the business community throughout the state.

\* The specified fee used in this study was \$15-25.

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on Adult Education Implications

Implications drawn from this study are most applicable to the businessmen of Clark County, Wisconsin. However, Extension educators in counties with similar conditions can also benefit from these implications.

1. Data in this study indicate that businessmen were most knowledgeable about Extension programs offered through mass media, and least knowledgeable about local staff affiliation and relationship to the University of Wisconsin. While it is important for businessmen to know what methods Extension uses to disseminate information,