



How Can I Increase the Number of Participants in my Program?

Jenna Condo, Marketing Specialist

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Program Evaluation Specialist

Challenge

Some excellent extension programs have limited participation from the targeted audience. To broaden the impact of these excellent programs in the community and expand extension's reputation, county educators want to increase that participation. But how?

One approach is to develop a sound marketing plan. Marketing is a process with specific actions designed to interest potential clients and to persuade them to buy the services or product offered. How does that translate when the product is education?

For Extension, a marketing plan develops by identifying the benefits and features of a program as well as any myths surrounding the program from *potential* participants from the target audience, current educators/instructors and current participants. It is based on a type of an evaluation of the program.

A Method to Identify the Benefits, Features, and Myths of your Program to Use in Marketing It.

Conduct several focus groups with members of the target audience who have *not* participated in the program thus far. Get their views of the program as if you had it on the drawing board as a potential program you want to deliver to that target audience.

Using focus groups has many advantages.

- You gather data quickly
- You learn the language people use to define their needs and what they want in a program. This is *language you can use in the marketing of your program*
- People really enjoy the experience of being in a focus group
- You demonstrate Extension's concern for their needs

A Case Study

Below is an example of how to proceed if you wanted to gather information about a 4-H teen program that you want to expand. You could gather information from potential participants, from current participants or current instructors, but the example below centers on the focus group strategy and questions to use with potential participants. The process is easily adapted to other program areas.

Focus group strategy

1. Request potential participants from the target audience come to an open house and/or to participate in a focus group to evaluate a program for teens. Indicate why it would be fun. Do not identify the program as 4-H; be generic.
2. At the focus group, present the program to see if the program is a good idea. In the presentation,
 - provide the strengths and weaknesses
 - include what this group will get out of such a program
 - provide the cost of the program

3. To find out if their needs are met in such a program, either in a survey at the focus group or in the focus group, elicit answers to:

- Who would be attracted to this program?
- What made it seem attractive?
- What do you think you would get out of it?

This information gives you the perspective of the target audience.

4. Next, find out the competitors of such a program, the other things this audience does. If other programs, what is the competition offering? What are the underlying benefits, joys, elation that is found in the competition?

This information can help you describe *your* program because you will get the audience's use of certain vocabulary and their line of thinking. This information is rich and can also suggest benefits perhaps missing in your program. Ask:

- In what other programs do you currently enjoy participating?
- What else do you like to do with others your age? With adults? With senior citizens including any grandparents?

5. In order to find out their attitudes about 4-H, separate it from the program above. Say:

- 4-H conducts programs for teens in this area. On a piece of paper here in the middle of the table, write down all the words that come to mind when you think of the 4-H program. (Give them time to do this.)
- Then say: Chose a word from your list and tell the group how you came to choose that word. After he/she finishes, you might engender discussion within the group. Say, "If someone agrees or disagrees, you can respond." After that, go back to having others choose a word from their list and telling the group how they came to choose it. Judge when the group has had enough of this topic, and collect the sheets: you will have the other words chosen as well, but without a description.
- Teens like to diss one another verbally. So it is wise to remember that when working with teens in a focus group, add to the introduction, that they can disagree with each other, but they can't 'put someone down.' If you put that in the intro, you can then remind them of it if the situation calls for it.

6. Recruiting the appropriate people for the focus group is very important.

- bring in the target audience you want not just any participants that are convenient to recruit.
- consider diversity and asking people not currently in your program. You might find out their interests are different than those in the current program.

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu

References

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