

Reports to the People: A Way to Communicate Extension Impact and to Build Community Support

Introduction

One of the ways success of Extension programs is conveyed is through an annual county report called "Report to the People." This report should reflect a mixture of true impact as well as recent educational efforts in which impact has not been realized. Furthermore, participation numbers and other activities of interest to particular stakeholders and decision makers in each Kentucky county are to be included.

A consistent look has proven to be beneficial for packaging Extension efforts and accomplishments to share with legislators and other stakeholders beyond the county level. Therefore, Program and Staff Development provides an *Extension Today* "Report to the People" template for all counties to use. All counties are expected to use this uniform format and contribute annually to the statewide database used for many reporting and accountability requests. (The template for the county Report to the People may be located at <http://psd.ca.uky.edu/reportstothepeople>.)

The purpose of this guide is to help county Extension staff use their success stories as a foundation for *Reports to the People*.

A Stakeholder Approach

Kentucky Cooperative Extension utilizes a stakeholder approach for reporting efforts and communicating impacts/successes of programming. A stakeholder is any individual or group within or outside the organization who has a stake or interest in the organization or a particular program. The stakeholder approach implies that various people view an organization's performance or program's effectiveness in diverse ways. Stakeholders may include the following, as well as others:

- advisory council members
- county officials
- local and state legislators
- other USDA agencies
- civic groups
- Extension administrators
- taxpayers
- grant providers
- volunteers.

All too often, we assume that all stakeholders are alike, and we make decisions about the report's content, format, and style before determining the audience. Before beginning to write and make decisions about whether to write a newspaper article or create a tri-fold brochure, ask yourself these important questions about the report's audience:

- Who are the stakeholders we are trying to reach?
- What are the characteristics of that audience?
- What do they want to know?
- What do we want them to know?
- What type of document are they likely to read?

All of the factors of the answers to these questions play a role in helping you make decisions about content, style, and format. Just because the local weekly newspaper is willing to print your report doesn't necessarily make it the best way to reach a certain audience. As county agents, you have multiple stakeholders. Consider the answers to the questions above before beginning to write content.

Using Success Stories as a Foundation

Reports to the People should communicate **impact/successes**, not just the number of participants at various educational programs or activities. The Success Stories written and submitted by Extension staff to the Kentucky Extension Reporting System (KERS) are for promoting program accomplishments. The success stories are employed to create documents which serve dual purposes - to inform internal audiences of noteworthy accomplishments and external audiences of how Extension is addressing local needs.

The success stories should be an integral part of developing the Report to the People. While the text of these reports eventually becomes a part of a state impact database, the same text may be edited to form the basis of your county's Report to the People. It will be easier to prepare a Report to the People using this method, in which the most impactful/successful programs in each program area are highlighted.

Success stories should relate back to the county's MAPS (Major Areas of Programming) in the Plan of Work. Reports to the People should follow the same model. Early in the program development process, county Extension staff entered into an agreement with local volunteer leadership to direct resources toward a set of MAPs. Thus, the Plan of Work becomes a contract of sorts, articulating intent to focus on the issues or needs that were determined to be of highest priority.

Recall the logic models created by specialists at the state level for your program area(s) and reflect on the levels of outcomes your Extension program(s) accomplished (see Table 1). While some county Report to the People documents focus on accomplishments by program areas, others summarize county-wide accomplishments resulting from the Extension team's efforts directed toward each of the county's major areas of programming (MAPs) from the Plan of Work. The Report to the People document is a team report and should address the objectives listed in the annual plan of work.

Table 1. Levels and Types of Impacts/Outcomes

| Level of Impacts/Outcomes | Short Term (Lowest Level) | Intermediate Term | Long Term (Highest Level) |
|---|--|--|--|
| Timeframe Achieved | Generally within 1-3 years | Generally within 3-5 years | Generally 5-10 years or more |
| Types of Impacts/Outcomes Realized at each Level | *Learning that Occurred* -Awareness of something new -Knowledge gained -Attitudes changed -Skills learned -Opinions learned/developed as a result of the program -Aspirations gained -Motivations | *Action Taken, Practices Completed* -New behavior -Practices performed -Decision-making; decisions made as a result of program participation -Policies changed/created -Social action taken | *Conditions Changed* -Social -Economic -Civic -Environmental |

The type of information stakeholders want to know will vary by program. While dollars spent and number of participants might be important to some stakeholders, others are interested in **impact**. Stakeholders want to know what changes occurred as a result of our programs; i.e. what are people doing different as a result of being engaged in Extension programs. Stakeholders are interested in changes in behavior, and dollars saved. Only then can they make a fair assessment of the value of Extension. Don't try to tell the reader about everything that happened over the past year. Instead, feature no more than a couple of significant accomplishments for each MAP.

Focus on MAPs

Counties are encouraged to focus Annual Reports to the People toward relevant stakeholders and the MAPs those stakeholders helped identify. (Do not use the acronym "MAP" with stakeholders since they will not be familiar with it.) As we encourage teamwork throughout the system, it is important to communicate unity among staff in the reports that are written. Certain programs should not be perceived as being owned by particular agents. Extension staff should be depicted as an interdisciplinary team whose individual expertise can be applied to address a broad array of issues and problems.

Hints and Suggestions

Transforming success stories into the Report to the People should not be laborious if you have written them with the intended audience in mind. However, success stories will require some editing.

Here are some hints and suggestions that will improve the readability of the Report to the People.

- Keep it brief.
- Eliminate jargon.
- Avoid acronyms unless you explain what they mean.
- Check for wordiness. Use short sentences and simple words when possible
- Convert MAP titles to everyday language.
- Use qualitative as well as quantitative data. Use success stories and testimonials to add richness to numbers and statistics.
- Make numbers come to life by displaying them in tabular or graphic form. Pie charts, bar graphs, and line graphs add clarity.
- Add photographs where appropriate. Use captions to explain what is happening in the pictures.
- Leave white space. Don't feel that you have to fill up every square inch of the page.
- Use a multi-column format.

Delivering the Goods

For a document produced only once a year, it makes sense to invest some time and money in its production. A report to major stakeholders should be viewed as something of importance, not something to be "cranked out" begrudgingly. The Report to the People will be viewed by county officials, school administrators, and/or legislators. What type of message does the document convey if clip art is crooked, grammar is unacceptable, it includes inappropriate or poor quality photographs, or the printing is difficult to read? Invest the time to make a quality document to make a good impression. Most counties now have the necessary equipment and software to produce an attractive report. Learn to use the advanced features of appropriate software and equipment.

County Extension programs are encouraged to be creative in the way they share success of their programs and to develop additional methods for delivering their impact and efforts to stakeholders.

Counties have found success in sharing program efforts and outcomes through additional avenues, such as newspapers, printed reports, radio programs, television appearances, and visits with county judges and commissioners, civic and service clubs in their communities.

In addition to the Report to the People format, there are a number of options for presentation. Make sure you select a format that is appropriate for the audience you are trying to reach. Ask yourself, "Is this the way my intended audience likes to receive information?" Listed below are some of the formats that may be considered for a written report.

- 8 1/2" X 11" Formal Report - Suitable for use with advisory councils and perhaps some elected officials. A standard header is available in the Extension Style Manual for this type of report. There are a number of commercial report covers and binding systems that can enhance the appearance of these reports. Don't just staple the upper left corner. Sometimes a four page report can be printed on 11" X 17" paper and folded, eliminating the need for staples or binding. Use of columns increases readability.
- Newspaper Feature - Some local newspapers print annual reports from the Cooperative Extension Service at no charge. Others may do so for a fee. If this option is selected, talk with the paper about style and format. They will usually be glad to help you with the report. You will have little ability to tailor the message to specific audiences when using the newspaper.

Three Panel Brochure (Approximately 3 1/2" X 8") made from 8 1/2" X 11" paper - This format is convenient to carry and provides a busy reader with highlight data without lengthy explanations. If the goal of the publication is to provide a "thumbnail sketch" of Extension's activity, this may be a good choice. Brochures can also be hand carried to civic groups or be left at key distribution sites across the county. This format is relatively inexpensive so more copies can be produced. A layout sheet for three panel brochures can be found on the [College Marketing Resources site](#).

- Multi-Page Tabloid - These often run the gamut on format and expense. Some are printed on newsprint, others on glossy paper. Some are single color, some are full color. Again, keep audience considerations at the forefront of format decisions.
- PowerPoint, Video, Slide Presentations, Displays - There are a number of ways of communicating the desired message other than through printed materials.

Often, more than one type of report may be necessary. Regardless of the method selected, make sure what is produced is a high quality product. Again, put yourself in the shoes of the recipient and ask yourself, "What does this say about Extension?"

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