

A Job Well Done: Clients Satisfied With Extension's Service¹

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Introduction

During 2004, the Florida Cooperative Extension Service (FCES) provided a wide range of information to the state's residents. The information included family nutrition, production of crops and livestock, landscape maintenance, as well as disaster preparation and recovery. Residents were given solutions for recurring problems as well as guidance in lifestyle changes. Some Florida residents shared knowledge gained by attending courses and others stressed improvements in Extension's services. Brochures, newsletters, and web sites are some of the ways Extension is striving to keep its customers informed of the latest information. Extension's goal is to continue to have its customers satisfied with its services.

Extension benefits when customers are satisfied. Customers who experience high-quality service are more likely to recommend Extension to others, less likely to seek services from competing organizations, and less likely to complain to other clients or external agencies (Zeithaml, et al. 1996). Customers who rate the quality of Extension's services positively also are more likely to report being *very* satisfied, and these customers are likely to develop strong loyalty to Extension (Terry & Israel 2004).

To assess the quality of the service provided by Extension, a customer survey is conducted annually. In 2004,

professional staff in eleven counties recorded the names, telephone numbers, and addresses of people who called, visited for educational information, or who attended in-depth programs during the spring or summer. After recording the contact information, a sample of persons from each county was randomly selected to participate in the survey. Clients were contacted by mail or telephone. The information from the survey is used as part of the FCES' ongoing effort to improve program quality and information delivery.

Survey Results

Whether Florida residents attended a workshop or demonstration, called on the phone or dropped by the office, they were impressed by the quality of the information Extension provided. Based on the results of the survey (Figure 1), nearly all clients said the information was up-to-date and accurate, delivered in time to be useful, relevant to his or her situation, and easy to understand. An example of the comments received was, "the information was specific to my request. [It was] explained in a precise and understandable manner."

At the time of the survey, 85% of the respondents had used the information provided by Extension (Figure 2). One respondent described how the educational material had been used to further the knowledge of the life cycle

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of butterflies in a second grade class. Another respondent obtained information on trees, bushes, and plants. She obtained helpful and easy instructions on the selection and care of plants. Others made statements such as, “no other areas were open to me to learn and discuss diabetes. The internet was a help but being able to hear examples, to be able to discuss ‘the small stuff’ and to learn outcomes and interactions of other diseases took away the frightened feeling I had and gave me the confidence that I know how to battle diabetes now.” There also were some who were not quite ready to use information because of the disruption to their lives from the hurricanes in 2004 or for other reasons.

A very large percentage of the respondents were satisfied or very satisfied (95%) with the service they had received (Figure 3). Respondents described Extension as “always there with accurate information and a wonderful professional attitude” and encouraged Extension to “keep up the good work with knowledgeable staff and up-to-date information.” One respondent stated that she was taught how to pay bills and is now working toward buying a house.

More than two-thirds of the respondents (70%) shared the information with someone else (Figure 4). One respondent stated, “the information was extremely helpful because so many people wanted to know the name of these trees behind my home and no one seemed to know until I took a sample to your Extension office.”

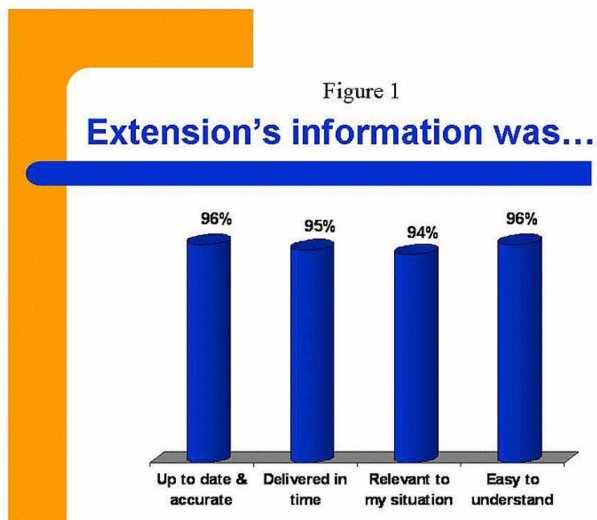


Figure 1.

When asked how Extension might improve its services, many Florida residents suggested offering programs on additional subject areas, both outside and inside of the home. Their concerns were from basic health needs to lawn care. There were also some concerns that the information is not being advertised enough. One respondent suggested

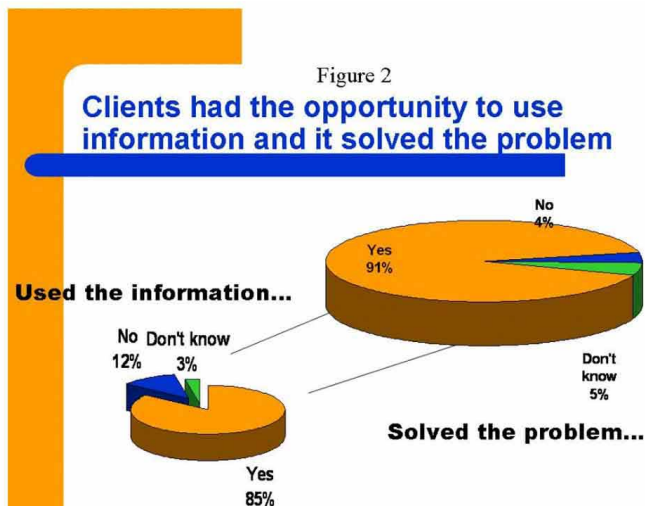


Figure 2.

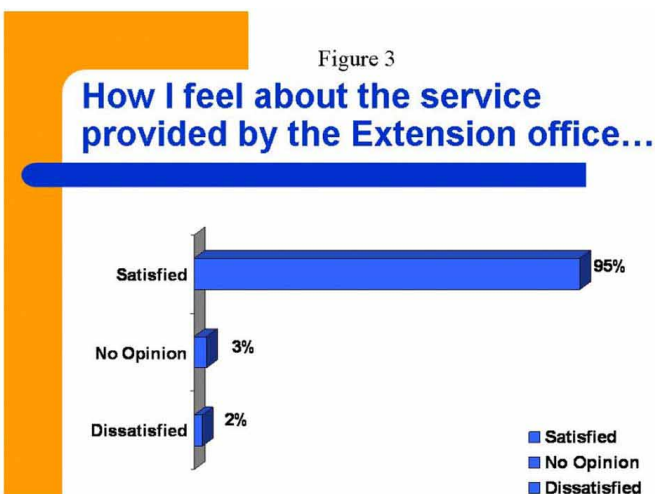


Figure 3.

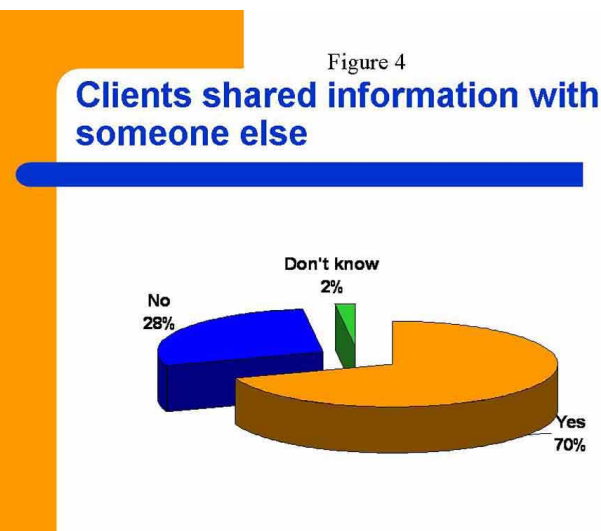


Figure 4.

that the Extension office publish advertisements in local

newspapers announcing upcoming events and offering public help. Many newcomers to the area either never or belatedly learned that they must get on the Extension service's mailing list to stay informed. Advertisements might help reach potential users, but these depend on the cooperation of newspaper publishers. Another option mentioned by clients is to have advertisements in schools and libraries. Others wanted classes on Saturday afternoons. For others, they wanted classes repeated more often and to be informed of any new information coming out. Study guides in Spanish would also help. These are some of the improvements that the Extension office could make, but overall respondents were very satisfied with the timely, useful information and the friendly, competent service they received from their county Extension office.

Satisfaction from 2000 to 2004

Customer perceptions about the quality of services have remained at high levels since 2000 (see Israel & Fugate 2001). Likewise, overall satisfaction is essentially unchanged (98% satisfied or very satisfied in 2000 and 95% in 2004). The results in Florida also are similar to those reported for Extension clients in South Carolina and Texas (Radhakrishna 2002). The persistence of these high levels of satisfaction is both a reason for celebration and a challenge to Extension faculty to continue this trend.

Implications for Extension Faculty

In order to maintain high levels of satisfaction, a customer-oriented strategy should focus on 1) delivering educational programs and services that meet customers' desires (instead of simply being adequate), 2) emphasizing the prevention of problems, and 3) effectively resolving problems that do occur (Zeithaml, et al. 1996). Using suggestions from customer surveys and developing procedures to improve educational programs and services can help prevent problems. Likewise, when customers express discontent with services, immediate action is needed to resolve the problem. While customers who experience problems that are resolved have lower satisfaction than those without a problem, letting a problem fester can result in customer dissatisfaction.

Important aspects of the service delivery process for meeting customer desires also include the relationship between Extension faculty and clients, as well as the quality of the information provided (Winsted 2000). Working to ensure that the customer receives information in a timely manner and tailoring it to his or her specific needs demonstrates a genuine interest in the customer. Exhibiting concern for

clients *and* being competent can have a powerful effect on customer satisfaction. Extension's success and survival depends on delivering quality educational programs and services to its customers (Zeithaml, et al. 1996).

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