

Strategies for Conducting Community Forums¹

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Overview

Community forums are wonderful vehicles for obtaining input from county or area clientele groups about the needs, issues, problems, and/or future directions for Extension programming. A community forum can supplement secondary data/statistics (analyzed needs) by enabling educators to learn the expressed needs/issues/problems of their clientele groups and stakeholders. The first article in this series, *Community Forums: An Effective Program Planning Tool (PD059)*, provides more detailed information about the value and benefits of, and two methods for, conducting community forums. This second article in the series presents key strategies for conducting community forums as well as ways to avoid potential pitfalls that hinder the effectiveness of community forums.

There are some essential tasks that must be completed in order to plan, conduct, and utilize information obtained from community forums. In order to properly plan a community forum it is recommended that a:

- steering committee be formed to get broad representation and buy-in for the forum;
- marketing plan be developed for compiling the list of invitees and publicizing the forum; *(Note: to get panelists, pre-select by invitation; or invite a few and give selection of remainder to the committee; or have the committee select all of the panel participants.*
- neutral location be selected that is accessible to the most invitees;

- facilitator is selected who can set the stage, explain the procedure to be followed;
- date be selected that does not interfere or conflict with major community/area events;
- method, name tags, and sign-in sheets, be instituted to document participation in the forum *(Note: Have the sign-in sheets available as people come in, and make sure it is staffed throughout the meeting because sometimes media people come late);*
- method, such as having a transcriber or video/audio recorder, to document the information shared.

Success of community forums may also be contingent upon support from local formal and informal leaders in the community. Educators, with help from the steering committee, must solicit support from influential people in the community in order to gain broader participation. If possible, educators can build in incentives for participation such as door prizes, drawings, discounts on programs or publications, etc.

Also, in the first article of the series, several implementation strategies were shared. The primary strategy is to have a skilled, highly trained, experienced, independent facilitator who can solicit input from attendees, deal with dominant and hostile individuals, move the forum forward in a timely manner, generate questions and discussion, and perform other pertinent functions inherent in the facilitator role.

There are some potential problems and situations that can occur when using the community forum method that educators must

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plan for. Below are some pitfalls that educators may encounter when conducting community

forums and some strategies that can be planned for in advance to eliminate or minimize the problem.

Potential Problems	Strategies
Key leaders and/or representative clientele may not be in attendance, which will limit true broad-based input.	Do not conflict with other events going on in the community/ area. Give adequate advanced notice. Make personal contact with key leaders and/or representative clientele to invite them. Have key leaders and/or representative clientele agree to serve as panelists.
Domination by individuals or groups may skew data/information collected.	Use a well-trained, independent facilitator who has diplomatic skills to politely interrupt the dominators and solicit discussion from others.
Individuals may be reluctant to express concerns/feelings in a group setting.	Encourage individuals to share on the open microphone, but also have comment cards available for people who want to remain anonymous. The facilitator can read their comments to the entire group.
Hostile individuals or groups may disrupt the process or create a negative atmosphere.	Use a well-trained, independent facilitator who has mediation skills.

Finally, attention must be paid to preparing the report on the forum. The information should be summarized and the frequency of same/similar needs, issues, problems, and opportunities noted should then be prioritized. The report provides documentation that can be used within Extension and/or by local agencies, public officials and organizations in planning strategies to deal with critical local issues. An important step that is often omitted involves sharing the report with all forum participants. This can be achieved via a newspaper article, newsletter, or mailing to forum participants. This simple gesture confirms that participants have been heard. Educators should also inform key individuals who were unable to attend. One could create a product such as video, press clips, or meeting notes/proceedings that are sent to absent, but interested parties (ASCD 2003).

More important, educators must use the information obtained to set priorities and plan their programs. Educators should again communicate with forum participants to share how the programs are addressing the issues revealed during the forum.

To summarize, considerable time and energy must be spent to effectively plan, implement and respond to community forums. However, the rewards are well worth the investment of time and energy expended. Community forums can be one of the most powerful methods of gaining a more in-depth understanding of the needs, problems, issues and opportunities in a community.

References

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