



University of Idaho
Extension

Family and Consumer Sciences

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The Communicator keeps county educators updated with current research information

The Situation

University Cooperative Extension programs were established at land grant universities to provide a statewide network to move research information off campus and into communities where it could be put to good use. Extension specialists are charged with the responsibility to keep county personnel apprised of current research developments that can increase the effectiveness of their programs.

However, communicating that information is an ongoing challenge for Extension, particularly in geographically large states like Idaho, with a small, widely dispersed population. Gathering county personnel to a single location for in-service training is expensive in travel costs, as well as time away from attending to local needs.

Our Response

Since 1970, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) Extension specialists at the University of Idaho have published a monthly newsletter, *The Communicator*, to provide a steady stream of current research information to FCS personnel around the state. The original format was a paper newsletter mailed out to county educators. Since 2002, *The Communicator* has been published electronically, with newsletters arriving by email, and a searchable archive available on the University of Idaho FCS website, <http://www.uidaho.edu/cals/fcs/news/communicator>.

Program Outcomes

The focal audience of *The Communicator* remains the 23 University of Idaho FCS county educators around Idaho. However, the electronic format allows an expanded readership without additional cost, now reaching over 200 readers in Idaho and around the nation with ten issues per year. Others who receive

The Communicator include FCS junior high and high school teachers, University of Idaho alumni and faculty, and family-serving professionals of various disciplines.

In Winter 2012, the University of Idaho FCS Extension specialists surveyed the educators in counties around the state to see how well this electronic newsletter system was meeting their needs. County educators were asked to think back over the 10 issues of the past year in answering several questions about their use of *The Communicator*, and its impact on their work.

Communicator Use: Those reporting *Communicator* use in a majority of the issues of the year (5 or more) were grouped together as consistent newsletter users. County educators are loyal readers of the newsletter, with a sizeable majority reading articles in their program area (75%) and articles outside of their program area (75%) for most issues of the year. Extension educators tend to read the issue promptly, with 60% reading most issues within two days of arrival. A majority of educators consult *The Communicator* on the web regularly, with 56% going to the web for 5 or more of the issues over the year. Consulting archived issues is less common, but still a regular occurrence, with 31% going back to 5 or more old issues in a twelve month period.

Communicator Impact: UI county educators report that *The Communicator* is helpful in their work, finding that the content strengthens their knowledge base in the broad field of FCS in most issues over the past year (69%), and even more strengthening their knowledge in their specific program area (75% for most newsletter issues). Most also find the newsletter to be helpful in their written work (57% found help in 5 or more issues for the year), and a near majority

found the content to be helpful in communicating with stakeholders (47% found the majority of the issues to be helpful).

County educators also found *The Communicator* content to be helpful in program planning (47% find help in the majority of issues for the year), and a similar number were helped in program delivery (44% found 5+ issues to be helpful). The newsletter was least helpful in program evaluation, with only 20% finding help from most of the issues.

Educators were asked what they liked most about *The Communicator*, and comments offer insight into its utility. The most frequent comment was that the content was current, timely, and up-to-date (10 respondents). Others commented that the publication source was trustworthy, that the newsletter was convenient and easy to use, and the archived issues were easy to access and search. In the words of one educator, "I enjoy it and read it every month."

These survey results suggest that the electronic newsletter format serves University of Idaho Extension county educators well, providing a resource they can count on to keep them up to date on new developments in the field of Family and Consumer Sciences. It is also an important programming tool for them, supporting them in planning, delivery, and communication about their work.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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