

A Program Note on:

BUILDING NEW AUDIENCES: FROM THE GROUND UP

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ABSTRACT

"From the Ground Up: A Seminar for Home Builders" is an Illinois program planned to improve the quality of new homes by increasing builders' knowledge regarding current trends and changes in home construction. An indirect benefit of special importance to Extension professionals is that of reaching an audience relatively new to Extension programs. The purpose of this paper is to share some of the program efforts and to encourage other states to adopt similar programs with the hope of improving new housing and building new audiences.

INTRODUCTION

"They don't build them like they used to..." is a frequent commentary on the quality of construction for new homes. Unfortunately, many builders *still* build them like "they used to." Despite changes in the economy, family structure, lifestyles, and energy requirements, many home builders continue to construct homes the way they did twenty years ago.

"From the Ground Up: A Seminar for Home Builders" is designed to improve the quality of homes built today by increasing home builders' knowledge regarding current trends and changes in home construction. An added goal is to help home builders make their product more marketable and, hence, more profitable, because home building has recently been in a slump. While home builder associations may conduct shows and seminars, they are usually product-oriented. This seminar is education-oriented.

A benefit we received in presenting this seminar that is of special importance to professionals in Cooperative Extension is reaching an audience that is relatively new to Extension programs. Approximately 85 percent of the 130 participants in the seminar had *never* participated in an Extension program before and almost half were 35 years of age or younger. The purpose of this article is to share some of the direct program benefits.

PLANNING THE PROGRAM

The key to the success of the program was the formation of a planning committee representative of the audience to be reached. Developers, realtors, home builders, architects, utility representatives, financiers, consumers, and county

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and state Extension staff members were represented. Many of these people had little previous knowledge of Extension programs or that Extension is involved in the housing area. This was an opportunity to develop new partnerships for Extension services.

The theme selected was broad enough to reach the primary audience of professional home builders, but did not discourage the individual home builder/consumer from attending. The program consisted of topics designed to acquaint the builder with new and current housing ideas, such as subdivision planning, housing design, trends in kitchens and baths, landscaping, indoor pollution and new heating and cooling technology. The seminar concluded with a session on marketing a home for profit. The speakers were a combination of university, Extension and industry representatives.

The selection of a place and a time for the program was crucial. A convention center/hotel in an area easily accessible, with plenty of parking located at or near the center of a large population base was necessary. A weekday in February was selected for the program because it was the most convenient time to lure home builders away from their work.

A promotional brochure was designed and distributed to housing-related businesses and organizations in the focus area. Over half of the audience learned about the seminar from a newspaper release--the most valuable mass media promotional tool according to a survey that was conducted during the conference. After the release was mailed, newspaper editors were called to ascertain if the release had been received and when they anticipated the item would appear in print. The follow-up phone calls were vitally important in providing newspaper coverage. Information was also provided to local radio and television stations.

The importance of personal contact with professional home building-related organizations to enlist their help was invaluable. Phone calls and letters were directed to representatives of professional associations of home builders, architects, realtors, civil engineers and landscape architects. In addition, brochures were sent to all county Extension offices, junior colleges, power suppliers and financial institutions in the region. Brochures were also given to building suppliers in the immediate area.

Prepared packets that were distributed to the audience included materials about the speakers, other Extension programs and any materials the speakers wanted to provide. A registration fee was charged to cover expenses (speakers' fees and expenses, publicity and printing costs) and to provide a good meal. Local home builders' groups, realtor associations and lending institutions provided the start-up money. Finally, registrants received confirmation letters. Because they were busy, builders needed the reminder.

CONCLUSION

Many late registrants were turned away the week before the seminar because the rooms reserved could accommodate only 130 participants. Over 90 percent of those attending the conference found the program helpful. The sessions on heating and cooling and indoor pollution were considered by the participants to be the most helpful. A similar number reported that the seminar should be repeated annually or biennially. Several audience members volunteered to serve on the next planning committee. Another seminar was held the following year. The second meeting, based on participant feedback, was even more successful than the first program.

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Registrants wanted specific how-to information that they could take back and implement, such as floor plans for smaller homes, low-energy construction techniques, solar designs and new construction materials, practices and products.

Programs such as this help attract and build new audiences for other Extension efforts. Using an interdisciplinary approach to meet clientele needs meant involving Extension staff from Agricultural Engineering, Horticulture, Community Resource Development, Agricultural Economics, and Housing, Equipment and Home Furnishings. This program demonstrates the impact that results when Extension cuts across traditional program lines to help solve problems.

Evaluative research is planned to obtain objective measures of the impact of the program. In particular, the evaluation will focus on whether knowledge and attitudes of home builders are changed. The evaluation will also examine whether energy and other costs are saved as a result of new building techniques learned at the program.