

FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE UWEX OFFICE*

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Introduction: When a client enters the door of the local Cooperative Extension Office or calls the County Extension office, we often assume that the user understands the mission of our organization. After all, Cooperative Extension has been around for over 75 years, exists in all 50 states, 72 Wisconsin counties, and 60 countries. In fact, while Extension has likely affected the lives of most state residents, a minority may truly understand the broad nature of Cooperative Extension programs.

The image that we project as an office can be shaped by a number of factors that we often don't monitor on a regular basis. In fact, it's often difficult for Extension personnel to objectively evaluate the image that they are projecting to the public. All too often, people and organizations say, and may honestly believe, that they want to improve - but they go about it in the wrong way. Too much self-evaluation and too little outside evaluation may mask real problems and opportunities.

In an attempt to discover how the public views your office, consider inviting an external evaluation team (i.e. staff from another county, Extension volunteers, elected officials, etc.) to visit your county office and share their impressions with you. The following checklist might be used as a guideline for evaluating the impressions of first time visitors. This checklist should be completed by each member of the evaluation team and returned to the Extension Office being evaluated. While it may not be possible, an "anonymous" visit by individuals would gain a more honest evaluation than a planned visit.

Issue: Difficulty of seeing ourselves (the UWEX office) as others (customers, residents, elected officials) see us. Our views are skewed by over familiarization, lack of differing perspectives and expectations, and a reluctance to be completely honest with our office colleagues. In addition, our long history may have lulled us into assuming that we will continue to exist because we've been around for so long. Did you know that during the 1980's, 230 of the Fortune 500 companies (46%) went out of business? If our organization cannot demonstrate and communicate reasons for our existence on an ongoing basis, we too will likely disappear.

Methods: Volunteers (faculty/staff, extension volunteers, elected officials, etc.) from two somewhat similar County Extension offices agree to do unannounced exchange visits and to report their findings. They follow procedures and reporting guidelines that are provided in a fully developed manual that is provided to all participants. This insures that evaluations and reports are thorough and somewhat uniform and minimizes training for volunteers. Distribution of the summary report increases office awareness of issues and underscores the offices strengths as well as areas of concern. The information has increased credibility since the evaluation involves legitimate outsiders who have no personal bias and nothing personal to gain from the results.

WHY?: Before you can visualize the future, you need an accurate and honest picture of the present. Tomorrow's design must be based on today's reality. First Impressions provides that unbiased and unique perspective.

I. What was my perception before visiting? What did I expect?

II. Before arriving at the Extension Office, make a contact by phone.

- a. Could you find the listing in the phone book?
- b. Was the phone receptionist helpful and friendly?
- c. Could the phone receptionist explain the purpose of the Extension Office and refer you to the right staff person?
- d. If a staff member was out of the office, how was the absence explained (i.e. "She's at a leader training meeting and will be back Monday morning"), and did they offer to take a phone message?
- e. Could the receptionist provide easy directions to locate the office?
- f. Could you find the office on the World Wide Web? Does the web site provide a good explanation of the purpose of the Extension office? Does the site have any good usable resources? Is there a map with directions to the office? Could you find the contact information of the staff with a good description of what they do?

III. As you approach the Cooperative Extension Office, could you find the building easily?

- a. Stop and ask directions from a few residents...do they know what the Extension office is and where it is located?
- b. Were directional signs needed and/or present?
- c. Was the office building identified with a professional sign and would the sign be visible at night?
- d. If the Extension Office is part of a larger building, is the Extension Office identified as being located here? Is the Extension logo utilized?
- e. Does the appearance of the building add or detract from a professional image?
- f. Were you able to find a parking space? Were the prime parking spots occupied by the staff? Were handicapped parking spots available and well marked?
- g. Were the grounds and landscaping appealing and well maintained?

IV. After parking your car at the building, could you easily locate the Cooperative Extension Office?

- a. If there are other offices in the same building, make the point of stopping at a few and asking for directions to the Extension Office. Do they know where it is?
- b. Were there maps/directions for the building which direct you to the offices, meeting rooms, rest rooms?
- c. Is it clear where to go for information or help?
- d. Are events/meetings in the building publicized?
- e. Is the building handicapped accessible?

- f. Do you feel safe? For some offices, personal safety may be an issue. Is the parking lot a long ways from the office? Is the parking lot well lit?

V. How is the Extension Office identified?

- a. Is the office entrance signed? Is the Extension logo utilized?
- b. Is the Cooperative Extension mission visible?
- c. Is information on Extension events, past program accomplishments, and Extension information posted through bulletin boards?
- d. Is the office clean, attractive, orderly, and in good repair? What kind of an image does the reception area project?
- e. Are desks neat, orderly and professional in appearance?
- f. Are there indications that we practice what we preach: healthy plants, recycling receptacles, nutritious snacks, informational posters on UWEX programs, etc.
- g. Is there access to any virtual resources (i.e. a public computer station with access to UWEX resources).

VI. How were you received when you entered the UWEX reception area?

- a. Was the area close to the main entrance? Was the office accessible to the handicapped?
- b. Did a receptionist or secretary upon arriving recognize you?? How did they offer to assist you?
- c. Were all staff members appropriately dressed for a professional office?
- d. Are there clues as to what is available... i.e. catalogs of bulletins, informational displays, listing of staff (photo's), bulletins & fact sheets, etc.?
- e. If a break room is provided for employees, is it visible from the reception area?

VII. What was your impression of the staff offices?

- a. Was the office well organized and professional in appearance?
- b. Was there sufficient space for support materials and were they well organized?
- c. Was there sufficient space for meeting with visitors in the individual offices?
- d. Was privacy provided for visitors meeting with staff?

VIII. Using your "senses", what does the office feel like?

- a. What did the office smell like (i.e. musty, pig manure, popcorn - smells like the staff is all on break, etc.)
- b. What sounds did you hear? Did the copy machine, computer printer, staff discussions or other activities interfere with doing business?
- c. What did the office feel like (emotional response, i.e. cold/warm, crowded/deserted, inviting, professional, or physical response, i.e. dirty floors, worn carpet etc.)?

IX. List the five most positive things observed about the office:

X. What will you remember most about the UWEX office six months from now?

XI. Other comments that just didn't seem to fit anywhere else:

XII. Describe one suggestion that you would like to see changed in this office in the next 72 hours:

*Based in part on the **First Impressions** program, a community assessment tool developed in the spring of 1991 for communities by Prof. Andy Lewis and James Schneider, Executive Director of the Grant County Economic Development Corporation. This check list also utilized materials from a presentation titled, "Strategic Marketing For University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension System", which was delivered by Dr. William Boldt at the 1993 WEAC conference.