

EDITORIAL *Extension in a changing world*



By Joe McGilberry

In today's world of fast-paced change, the strategies of the past are no guarantee of future success. Just ask any electronics manufacturer who is still selling videotape players in the DVD era.

The Extension Service is no exception. In fact, as a provider of nonformal educational programs for adults and youth, Extension's primary role is to be an agent for change. By helping people learn new skills and assimilate new information, Extension educators help their clients survive and thrive by adjusting to the demands of a changing economy and a changing society.

The key to Extension's success has been and will continue to be based on taking "a dose of its own medicine"—to assimilate new information, learn new skills, and constantly adjust in order to remain valuable to its clients.

As they have done for more than 90 years, Extension professionals will remain alert to the changes in the world around them and create new ways to carry out the organization's longstanding mission.

Consider how today's younger generation goes about getting information. While our traditional clientele of 30 years ago, now in their 50s through 80s, turned first to printed material, their county agents, their neighbors, and local radio and TV stations for information and guidance, today's younger clientele go first to the Web. Rather than stop by the county Extension office for a publication, they type a few words into an

Internet search engine and within a few seconds have access to 100 or more documents on the topic of interest.

The kind of information and guidance people need also has changed. While Extension agents of bygone decades carried in their heads much of the information their clientele needed, that is simply not possible anymore. Today's farmer requires complex information about precision application equipment driven by computers and global positioning systems. They need to know the prospects for the soybean crop in Brazil and the projected demand for cotton in China. As a result, today's Extension educators are more specialized in the information they provide and are taking on the role of conduits to reliable sources of expertise and information.

And it's not just technological change. Families, children, communities, and social structures are vastly different today and are continuing to change. Extension educators are called on to provide relevant and timely information on issues impacting the lives of all Mississippians. They do this through educational programs in areas such as healthy living and lifestyles, nutrition, parenting, youth development, family resource management, e-commerce, and business planning, among others. Other Extension programs address the needs of communities through leadership development, strategic planning and identification of new businesses. Whether at the individual or community level, all Extension programs are designed to help our citizens improve the quality of their lives.

To rise to the new challenges, Extension professionals constantly strive to better understand the needs and circumstances of those they serve. They're reaching out beyond their traditional areas of expertise to tap all the vast knowledge within the university. They're creating new program delivery strategies, including videoconferencing and the Internet, to deliver information and provide education to people wherever and whenever they are available to learn.

Extension must continue to dream big and work hard to sustain the success achieved over its first 90-plus years.

Joe McGilberry retired June 30 following an Extension career spanning almost 30 years, the last four of which were as director of the MSU Extension Service.