

Enhancing the Success of Extension Programs with the Social Exchange Theory¹

Amanda D. Ali and Laura A. Warner²

Introduction

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is based on the principle that human behavior is an exchange of rewards between people (Zafirovski, 2005). It can be applied to Extension programming to promote clientele participation in programs and a commitment to changing their behaviors. The payoffs are the associated benefit or gain the client receives from engaging in the program. Whether an Extension client will engage in a desired practice can be estimated based on the following SET assumptions (Zafirovski, 2005):

1. Extension clients want to gain rewards and avoid costs.
2. Extension clients think about costs and rewards and consider alternatives before acting.
3. In interactions with others, Extension clients seek to maximize rewards and minimize costs for themselves. Since the rewards and costs involved in interactions with others may not be known, individual behavior is often guided by the expectation of high rewards and minimal costs.
4. The individual standards used to evaluate rewards and costs differ among Extension clients and can vary over time.
5. Social exchanges are regulated by norms (justice, reciprocity).
6. Trust and commitment develops from experiences between Extension clients and Extension professionals/ organizations, which help sustain relationships over a longer period.

SET and Extension

Behavior change is an important measure for assessing the success or failure of a program (Warner, Galindo-Gonzalez, & Gutter, 2014), and Extension is a successful change agency (Rogers, 2003). Behavior changes also improve lives and lead to meaningful impacts (Warner et al., 2014). However, encouraging individual behavior change is a dynamic process that occurs over time (Warner et al., 2014). Understanding the rewards and costs that Extension clients seek to gain or avoid (as dictated by the SET) can help increase the likelihood of a successful Extension program and behavior change adoption.

It is difficult to determine a person's reaction to a program or their adoption of the desired behavior change. Since individual behavior change is important for assessing the impact of an Extension program, the goal of Extension agents should be to ensure that the likelihood of behavior change is high. Therefore, the program itself should be holistically designed to maximize the probability that clients will make the desired change (McGregor, Parker, LeBlanc, & King, 2010). To do this, focus should be placed on identifying the needs of Extension clients and including

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2. Amanda D. Ali, PhD student; and Laura A. Warner, assistant professor; Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

them into the program design. This way, the desired behavior change is presented favorably and clients perceive the greatest possible rewards for that behavior change. In turn, this increases the probability that the program will achieve its desired outcome. This is done by applying social exchange techniques during the planning and needs assessment stage of Extension programs.

SET and Program Participation

When Extension clientele perceive greater costs than benefits for an interaction, motivating participation in the interaction can be challenging. Given the assumptions of SET, individuals are motivated to act based on perceived rewards. There are several ways to increase perceived rewards, reduce perceived costs, and ensure that the rewards outweigh the costs of individual participation (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). For example, SET can be applied to Extension programs when conducting needs assessment surveys.

To increase perceived rewards (Dillman et al., 2009), an Extension professional should

- offer clear information on the purpose of the survey and how the data collected will be used to design a program that benefits the respondents;
- ask for advice and appeal to Extension clients' desire to be helpful;
- keep the survey brief and communicate respect for clients' time (for example, asking only what is needed to inform program development);
- ensure the questionnaire is interesting and relevant to clients' needs;
- provide a tangible reward (such as a voucher to a store related to the program);
- inform the Extension client that the survey is only open for a limited period; and
- express genuine gratitude (such as a hand-written thank-you note).

To reduce perceived costs (Dillman et al., 2009), an Extension professional should

- ensure client-response is convenient (for example, allow Extension clients to choose between paper and electronic formats at a time of their choosing);
- use appropriate and respectful language (for example, avoid technical jargon among a non-technical audience);
- ensure the questionnaire is clear and concise; and

- request sensitive information only if necessary.

To ensure that the rewards outweigh the costs, trust must be established. The assumptions of the SET indicate that trust and commitment are established through long-term relationships. Trust is essential because it assumes that a person's future obligation (e.g., completing a survey) will outweigh the costs of doing so. The establishment of trust fosters greater perceived rewards and reduced costs and increases the likelihood a person will complete the desired action. There are key ways trust can be established (Dillman et al., 2009):

- inform clients that the request is from a legitimate authority (for example, using Extension logos and branding on communications and partnering with organizations or public figures);
- offer a token of appreciation in advance (for example, send an Extension calendar along with a pre-notice of your request);
- communicate the importance of the task (for example, explain how the request fits the overall mission of the Extension organization at the county and/or statewide level); and
- ensure confidentiality of information provided.

SET, Program Recruitment, and Commitment

Program success relies on retaining client participation and minimizing attrition (McGregor et al., 2010). SET techniques are well-suited to ensure participant commitment to the program. For example, an Extension professional's water conservation program is implemented to raise awareness about proper irrigation practices within a small community. However, residents are not interested in engaging in the program. To encourage participation, the Extension professional should identify residents' perceived benefits and costs of engaging in the program and work to develop trust (McGregor et al., 2010).

The Extension professional might find that residents value reducing their monthly water bill and being role models within the community. But, most are constrained by time or find it is inconvenient to make changes in their landscapes. The Extension professional could engage community members in designing a program that recognizes water conservation and creates a sense of pride for participating. To enhance perceived rewards and decrease costs, the program should emphasize potential savings and highlight water conservation practices that take minimal time.

By engaging community members and designing a program that emphasizes their unique values and concerns, the program can create positive feelings (enthusiasm, satisfaction, pride) and contribute to building cohesive long term social relationships (Lawler, 2008). Incentives for program participation can be adjusted/combined to foster further participation and commitment (Pritchett, Fulton, & Hine, 2012). If participants believe there are more rewards than costs, behavior change, such as reduced irrigation or adoption of irrigation best practices, will result.

Summary

SET focuses on the exchange of rewards between individuals, and its techniques and assumptions can be applied to Extension programming to promote participation and commitment. Some general guidelines Extension professionals can use to apply SET to programs are listed below:

- Determine clients' needs and values to ensure a clear understanding of social exchanges (guided by norms) that might be expected from long-term interactions.
- In the planning stage of the program:
 - identify and address needs,
 - involve a plan to increase perceived rewards. For example, offer information on the survey, and provide tangible rewards (monetary incentives) or intangible rewards (supporting group values and showing gratitude),
 - reduce perceived costs by making participation convenient, ensuring a clear and concise questionnaire, and offering solutions that resonate with clients.
- Ensure that rewards outweigh the costs of individual participation. For example, build trust and commitment and obtain sponsorship by a legitimate authority. Also, check in with clients frequently to ensure the program is successfully doing so.
- Encourage interactions between Extension agents and clientele to establish trust and commitment between both groups.

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