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Scanning the Environment

Abstract

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In generating the 1988-91 Cornell Cooperative Extension plan of work, a central and recurring theme said that scanning the external environment was an absolutely essential stage in planning. This scanning confirmed hunches and examined what was really happening in the lives of people as well as determined what they wanted for the future. By assessing potential competitive niches, an organization examines what it can do, what it could do, and then what it wants to do.

Scanning Process

Scanning the environment involved faculty, administrators, agents, and association volunteers who serve on association program committees and Boards of Directors. The size and diversity of the system were considered. Association (county) autonomy encouraged planners to suggest alternatives so that both the associations and the system might benefit. Quantitative and qualitative information collected and analyzed served as the basis for determining priorities, identifying strengths, and establishing competitive niches.

Statewide committees composed of agents, faculty, and administrators developed trend and outlook statements based on research results, demographic data and projections, and other forecasts for the future.

Materials were developed to help county management teams, consisting of county coordinators and program leaders from each of the program areas, provide leadership for the scanning process in each of the 57 associations (counties) and New York City. These materials focused on examining six environmental elements:

1. Social. Age, mobility patterns, educational attainment, socioeconomic status, gender, and race.
2. Economic. Employment opportunities, allocation of public dollars, and economic health of the food and agriculture system.
3. Cultural. Lifestyles, worker expectations, consumer preferences, and social structure of the communities.
4. Technological. New technologies, use of technology, potential of technology, and the innovations.

5. Environment. Natural resource issues, housing and the near environment, aesthetic values, and health choices.
6. Political. Identification of local decision makers and their goals for the community, how the community is adjusting to shrinking federal funds, and how political decisions are made.

Inservice education provided ideas for developing a strategy to scan the local environment for the association leadership team of the county coordinator and program leaders. Since association program committees and Boards of Directors have decision-making responsibilities, they relied on the leadership team to determine which options to use for "scanning the environment." The procedural options included:

1. Community Hearings. Community leaders would be invited to present to the program committees and staff their vision of opportunities and issues important to target groups within the county.
2. Content Analysis of News Media. News media would be analyzed for message themes for a period of time.
3. Analysis of Other Educational Programming. Educational offerings provided by agencies, organizations, business and industry, and others would be obtained and analyzed. What was the League of Women Voters studying? What was the community college offering? What was Agway or John Deere providing?
4. Card Sort. Cards with one specific issue each from the trend and outlook statements, such as contaminated water supply, low-weight babies, and markets for crops, would be given to individuals who would sort them into groups and establish priorities.
5. Focus Groups. Interviews with groups would be conducted to gain information, gather a range of opinions, and develop insights into reasons why people think or feel the way they do.

Analysis

Each of the 57 associations and New York City submitted qualitative information gathered from the scanning process used in each association. Statewide demographic data, research results, and forecasts were analyzed along with the scanning data. By identifying major themes and highlights, an initial category system was established. An inductive content analysis yielded a set of categories that served as a framework for establishing statewide issues. A draft summary of the statewide issues was shared with representative agents, faculty, and administrators. After reviewing the information, these individuals found the summary accurate and credible.

Six issues were identified in August 1986 to provide the systemwide framework for programs during 1988-91. These issues were:

- Developing human potential.
- Enhancing the environment.
- Increasing agricultural profitability.
- Improving nutrition and health.
- Increasing economic development.
- Strengthening individual, family, and community resources.

These issues were introduced systemwide in September 1986. They were challenged in December 1986 when a Commission Report¹ draft that was shared throughout the system identified a different, but related list of issues. Based on verbal and written comments presented to its panel of experts, the commission subsequently modified its list of issues to be consistent with those identified by Extension through the scanning process.

Some of the scanning information represented different or emerging themes. For example, at least six counties suggested that solid waste be discussed because landfill sites were becoming increasingly scarce. Today, solid waste disposal is on the agenda of all county and city governments. The identified issues served as the basis for situation statements to be used in the next stages of program development.

Benefits from Scanning the Environment

The issues identified from the scanning process became the guiding force behind program decisions. They have served as foci when discussing the program, identifying goals for the system, developing staffing options, and considering the organization of association program committees. A statewide marketing effort has emphasized these issues and they're used when communicating with other faculty, public and private leaders, and targeted audiences.

Preliminary evidence suggests that the identified issues represent the top priorities of New York's counties. When Nassau County government recently identified six issues from their planning process, four were consistent with those identified by Cornell Cooperative Extension. Staff from the Cornell Cooperative Extension-Nassau County were invited to join countywide task forces that are addressing the issues.

Summary

"Scanning the Environment" was an important addition to the planning process. The input received from a variety of people outside of the system set the stage for what followed. The visions of the public helped shape the horizons of the staff. The public at large, potential clients, and staff questioned what could be and then began to create options. The scanning integrated facts, figures, hunches, intuitions, threats, and opportunities. The analyzed data then served as the guiding vision for the program responses for the period from 1988-91.

Footnote

1. "Report of the Commission on the Future of the Cornell Cooperative Extension System" (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 1987).

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