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**Cooperative extension programming must adapt to changing industry
Specialists can address changing demands and new audiences through online communications
channels, according to a new review in *Applied Animal Science***

The dairy industry has undergone consolidation in recent decades, with fewer producers more intensely managing larger herds. At the same time, many land grant universities have scaled back their extension programs. Although some traditional activities are still viable, adoption of technology has provided dairy extension specialists new ways to reach their clientele.

“Dairy extension specialists have served as a source of unbiased information for producers throughout the existence of the Cooperative Extension Service, and that is still important today,” Dr. John K. Bernard of the University of Georgia, Tifton, said. “Specialists are frequently asked for information on evaluating new technologies and to provide decision-making tools to help producers better operate their businesses.”

Smaller producers generally rely more heavily on extension services than large producers do because they have less access to private consultants or agribusiness technical consultants. However, there are now only half as many dairy extension specialists in the southeastern US as there were in 2000, and most of the remaining specialists have split appointments with research or instructional duties.

Adopting new communications channels is one way extension specialists can reach their clientele. Youth programs are an important component of extension programming, but volunteer leaders usually have full-time jobs and may not have a strong dairy background. Social and electronic media provide a way to train, assist, and communicate with those volunteers outside of their normal work hours.

In one recent survey of producers, more than a quarter of the respondents said they never attend extension meetings because of time constraints or the location of the meetings. Increased access to the internet on farms, however, provides new ways to reach producers. Digital articles and concise videos have proven to be successful. Bernard cautions, “Whatever the outlet, it is important that the information provided is unbiased, based on scientific evidence, and relevant to the needs of producers.”

New clientele have also emerged in recent years. Consumers are not traditionally considered extension clientele but most do not have access to good information about modern dairy production practices. As

more producers engage with consumers through agritourism, on-farm events, and open houses, extension specialists have an opportunity to work with them to develop and provide educational materials for consumers.

Dairy extension specialists face a rapidly changing industry and they must continually identify and prioritize the needs of their clientele while fulfilling their other research or teaching obligations. The adoption of digital media allows them to provide timely and accurate information to producers who may not be able to attend traditional meetings.

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NOTES FOR EDITORS

“Invited Review: Dairy extension programs in the southern region: Finding novel ways to meet the needs of our producers,” by J. K. Bernard (DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15232/aas.2018-01781>), *Applied Animal Science*, Volume 35, Issue 1 (February 2016), published by FASS Inc. and Elsevier Inc.

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