

An Expanding Role for Extension Agents in the New Millennium: Helping Clients Evaluate Non-Extension Information

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Abstract

In the past, consumers in rural areas depended on Cooperative Extension agents for reliable information because they had less access to television and other sources of information as did consumers in urban areas. However, with the explosion of technology and the new accessibility of information via Internet and satellite dishes, rural and urban consumers are getting a plethora of information from a variety of sources. Although these sources are convenient and easy to use, consumers should be aware that these resources may contain deceptive or misleading information. As in the past, Cooperative Extension agents must continue to provide consumers with research-based information, but the new challenge is to help consumers evaluate the quality of information originating from all technology sources to ensure that they are receiving reliable and accurate information. This article provides useful tips for Cooperative Extension agents and consumers to evaluate the wealth of health and nutrition information that can be obtained from the Internet, television, magazines, and other sources in the mass media.

Since 1914, Cooperative Extension agents in every part of the country have labored tirelessly in an effort to help people help themselves. They have, since the beginning, provided reliable information based on research from land-grant universities and other scientific communities. In the past, this service was absolutely essential because many rural areas did not have the accessibility of information of urban areas, leaving Cooperative Extension agents with this responsibility. Today, with the explosion of media technology via satellite dishes and the Internet, most people in rural areas now have almost the same access to information as those who live in urban areas. As this fact becomes well-established, Cooperative Extension agents must

closely examine their role and assess how they might best serve the changing community. They can no longer be content with just being providers of research-based information from universities and other government agencies. Agents must also sift through and evaluate information from other sources for their clientele. This is especially necessary in the areas of health and nutritional information.

Americans are assuming increasing responsibility for their personal health and well-being. Consumers are actively seeking information about all aspects of their health. This new commitment to gaining knowledge is beneficial in many ways for American consumers, who are making a conscious effort to take good care of their bodies, minds, and spirits. As a result, Americans are becoming a more informed and more literate nation as far as health issues are concerned. However, as it is with all trends that catch the public's fancy, certain groups of society will look at this growing awareness as a way to make money. The media is one of those groups. In many cases, unbiased information can be gleaned from popular media sources, but consumers are wise to be cautious. The media has learned that presenting health information attracts a large number of viewers and readers. This, in turn, increases potential advertising revenue from health-related businesses. These businesses may be providing misleading information and claiming unproven cures about their products in an effort to make more money. Consumers need to be aware of how businesses can potentially benefit from a story with a particular slant.

Quacks and con artists are aware of the large number of potential victims that can easily be reached via television, popular magazines, and the Internet. Many people, desperate for a cure or a desired outcome, let their guard down and become easily exploited. Readers may be misled by articles in magazines that claim "miracle" breakthroughs in vitamin or dietary supplement research. The trouble is, these "miracles" have yet to be replicated by other research and, often, they never will be. Many times an ad for a vitamin, dietary supplement, or drug will run right next to a story about this same vitamin, dietary supplement, or drug, making it tempting for the consumer to buy the new product immediately. This type of misleading and sometimes fraudulent material has made the information highway a very dangerous road indeed when it comes to health and nutrition information.

As Cooperative Extension agents drift through the sea of information they face many challenges, but their response must be twofold. First, county Cooperative Extension agents must educate the public about how to evaluate information available to them for validity, reliability, and accuracy. Second, agents must take advantage of rapidly advancing technology to quickly disseminate information to the public, and to interact and communicate with their clientele on a frequent basis. As Extension agents rise to this challenge, they must continue to show their characteristic flexibility in adjusting to new technologies (Vines & Anderson 1976).

In Kentucky, the Cooperative Extension Service has begun to combat the problem of information overload. At the request of agents, the Family & Consumer Sciences Extension at the University of Kentucky published a newsletter which dealt precisely with how to evaluate health and nutritional information in the media. Because they realized that many consumers turn to sources other than their personal physician, agents felt that there was a growing need to warn the consumer about media manipulation. The newsletter focused on the areas of Internet sites, popular magazines, and television, since these seemed to be the main sources of information for modern-day consumers.

Internet

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), more than 22 million Americans sought health and medical information on the Internet last year (FTC 1999). The FTC monitors the system, but there are too many sites to check for adequate supervision. While the Internet is a convenient resource for health information, surfers must always be on their guard. Many health Web sites and chat lines exist only to promote a product. Be especially aware of the many ads that claim to cure or significantly improve diseases such as cancer, obesity, and hypertension. A majority of the time, these ads contain untrue and deceptive medical claims (Flashman 1997). In fact, the Internet is so rife with misleading health information that U.S. Surgeon General David Satcher cautioned Web users, saying "It is not always easy to distinguish between health information on the Internet that is based in science and information that is intended to help sell a product" (Londin 1999).

There are now hundreds of Web sites out there offering health information on the various search engines. To save consumers time and to protect them from being misguided, the Kentucky newsletter recommended three Web sites. The first, Tufts University Nutrition Navigator accessible at <http://www.tufts.edu/nutrition/information.html>, rates health-related Web sites and gives them scores according to how well they inform the public about health issues. The scores are based on each site's accuracy, breadth, and usefulness. By checking how a given Web site fares, the consumer or county agent can find out if it's a good place to find answers to health questions. Also recommended is <http://www.healthfinder.org> operated by the Department of Health and Human Services, which covers a broad scope, offering resource information and links to other sites.

Consumers and agents might also want to look up Intellihealth, a Web site from Johns Hopkins University located at <http://www.intelihealth.com>. This site offers comprehensive health information with a variety of searching categories available that provide information about physicians, prescription drugs, hospitals, diseases and disorders, and medical journals. This site is certain to provide reliable information about most health inquiries that consumers have. An advantage of this site is that Web users can find general information about their health concerns,

as well as receive more specific information about where to find doctors in their area specializing a particular field of interest.

When searching for health information on the Internet, it's important to read the site's disclaimer statement. Almost all Web sites have a disclaimer which relieves them of any liability. The Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service recommends using sites operated by the government, medical associations, universities, or reputable organizations. These sites provide information as a public service with the main goal of educating the consumer.

Magazines

Like sites on the Internet, not all popular magazine articles are created with the sole purpose of informing. As in any business, their first priority is to make money. In fact, many magazines run health information stories to attract certain types of advertisers in order to increase revenues. The American Council on Science and Health published a study in 1995 which ranked 20 popular magazines for quality of nutritional information and accuracy. *Consumer Reports*, *Parents*, and *Better Homes & Gardens* were ranked as the top three popular magazines for coverage of nutritional information in 1994 (Woznicki 1995). In a follow-up study looking at magazines for 1995-1996, *Parents* dropped from the "Excellent" to the "Good" category and was replaced by *Good Housekeeping* in the top three (Woznicki 1998). These rankings let consumers know which magazines are the most informative and accurate. However, as the second study shows, the ratings change over time so the consumer should keep abreast of the current evaluations to insure they are getting the most accurate information possible for that year.

Television

From commercials to newscasts to infomercials, the American public is bombarded daily with information regarding health on TV. Similar to the Internet and magazines, viewers would be wise to use caution as they listen and watch health messages from their television screen. For example, many of the commercials that advertise prescription drugs are required to tell both the benefits and the most critical risk information of the drug as a part of the advertisement. However, because of the time limitation of the commercial, the consumer cannot possibly receive all of the pertinent information about the drug.

In 1997, The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued an official guidance for drug manufacturers. The guidance provides suggestions on how pharmaceutical companies and advertisers can give "adequate provision" or other ways of telling the consumer during a TV commercial where they can find further information about the drug. Some of the suggestions made by the FDA are:

- provide consumers with a toll-free number so that they might inquire about obtaining the package label information;
- refer consumers to a printed ad or brochures that would provide more in-depth information about the drug;
- refer viewers to physicians or pharmacists for more information about the drug; and
- provide an Internet address where a viewer might find the package labeling (Nordenberg 1998).

As both Cooperative Extension agents and consumers watch the latest prescription drug ads on TV, they should remember to consult a doctor for information about the possible dangers of taking a particular drug or read the drug manufacturer's warning label to see if it is an appropriate form of treatment.

Consumers who get their health information from the television news should also be wary of stories that report on the latest news breaks in the medical field. Many times reporters build up recent studies which have yet to be replicated and may even conflict with other medical research. This can give false hope to those who suffer from the conditions being reported on (Schwitzer 1999). Many times it is simply too soon for anyone to know the long term effects of recent breakthroughs.

Another note of caution is to be wary of health and fitness products (vitamins, dietary supplements, drugs, exercise equipment, fat reducers) advertised on infomercials. Infomercials are short programs on television which appear to be a news story or a broadcast concerned with information about health care. In reality, they are designed to sell a product, not provide the viewer with unbiased health information (Infomercials 1999). The Federal Trade Commission does not pre-screen infomercials and will only investigate them if they feel that they mislead consumers. Do not be deceived by these paid advertisements. Infomercials that promise overnight cures for health or beauty problems may not be advertising reliable products and often they can not back up their claims. Since many infomercials are designed to look like normal TV programs, it may be hard to distinguish between bogus and validated health information (Infomercials 1999).

Here are some tips to help consumers spot an infomercial:

- Look for the sponsor of the program; infomercials must state at the beginning and the end of the program who is paying for the advertisement. This method, of course, does not protect the consumer who turns on the television mid-program.

- If the commercials within the program sell products related to the program, you are probably watching an infomercial.
- Watch out for programs which feature testimony from celebrities or other professionals. They are probably being paid by the company to promote their product (Infomercials 1999).

The media can be an excellent source of information, but one must be careful to evaluate the quality of the resources being used. Both Cooperative Extension agents and the public should be aware of the scams and misleading information in the mass media. If either the agent or a person in the agent's county has any questions with regard to nutritional information, they should contact a registered dietician for additional assistance. And, as always, everyone should consult with their doctor before making medical decisions.

Printing a newsletter with information like the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service did is one partial solution. However, consumers must develop an internal radar system that will clue them into the warning signs that they are being deceived. As the media manipulators become more and more subtle, consumers have to become more savvy. County Cooperative Extension agents are allies to the public in this fight and can aid them in developing those radar sensing skills. They need to use their creativity to come up with new ways to help inform the public and evaluate the available information. If the past is any indication of how they will perform, we are in good hands.

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