

How Consumers Prepared for the Year 2000: Preliminary Findings

Cathy Faulcon Bowen

Abstract

This article describes a key component of a Year 2000 outreach effort directed at households by Penn State Cooperative Extension. Objectives were to:

- Provide a brief educational booklet, *Consumers and the Year 2000 (Y2K)*, for extension educators to use in responding to requests for information about the year 2000.
- Determine if a simple-to-read publication would motivate consumers to take some action to prepare their homes for an emergency.
- Determine what actions consumers would take to prepare for the year 2000.

A booklet, *Consumers and the Year 2000 (Y2K)* was a key component of this educational effort. Consumers' responses on a Y2K evaluation card indicate that most had taken some action to prepare their homes for an emergency. The most common actions were storing appropriate foods and water.

Introduction

Consumer attitudes about the Year 2000 (Y2K) ranged from nonchalant to extremely nervous. The media did a good job of raising public awareness of possible disruptions that could be triggered by the inability of computers and computer chips to recognize the year 2000 as 2000 rather than the year 1900. This glitch is the result of computer programmers' practice of representing the date with only two digits rather than four to save computer memory and money.

Federal government agencies and other organizations (civic, public, educational) devoted energy and resources to make consumers aware of matters associated with the date change. Private companies included Y2K updates in monthly billing statements to let customers know what they

had done to prepare for the date change. Many of these statements also assured customers that all is well and there is nothing to fear about the company's operation in the future.

The year 2000 presented an opportunity for some to profit from the need for information about the Y2K virus and to play on fears of the uncertainty surrounding the date change (McGuire, 1999; Jaeger, 1999; Mom's Remedies, 1999). Those in the business of education saw the year 2000 as a "teachable moment" -- a time to inform consumers about basic household emergency preparations and other sound household management practices that should be used all the time. Penn State Cooperative Extension determined that an educational effort was needed to respond to consumer questions and concerns about the year 2000 date change. As a result of the educational effort, Extension received extensive media coverage on its Y2K program. The remainder of this article describes a key aspect of the educational effort developed and implemented by Penn State Cooperative Extension.

Objectives

The objectives of the program were to:

- Provide a brief educational booklet for extension educators to use in responding to questions and requests for information about the year 2000.
- Determine if a simple-to-read publication would motivate consumers to prepare their homes for an emergency.
- Determine what actions consumers would take to prepare for the year 2000.

Methods

A brief booklet (four pages of content), *Consumers and the Year 2000 (Y2K)* was developed for use and distribution by Penn State Cooperative Extension. The booklet was based primarily on sound emergency management practices used by the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the American Red Cross. However, the information was condensed to the essentials and put into a user friendly format to encourage consumers to read it and to take actions in their homes. The premise was that key actions taken in the home would help consumers manage during an emergency period and help them handle the emergency with more confidence and less panic. Also, with adequate household preparations, the demand on community organizations and local emergency management agencies would be decreased during an emergency period.

The booklet, *Consumers and the Year 2000 (Y2K)*, was distributed at educational sessions and mailed to citizens who requested a copy by telephoning their local Cooperative Extension office.

Copies were also distributed by large employers, and community and civic organizations. For example, hospitals and churches requested copies to distribute to employees and congregations. By July, 1999, 75,000 copies of the booklet were printed. In addition, the booklet could be accessed on the Internet at the Family and Consumer Sciences Web site for Penn State Cooperative Extension: <http://AgExtEd.cas.psu.edu/FCS/cb/resources.html#Y2K>

To determine the usefulness of the booklet, an evaluation card was developed. The card was 8" x 5" with a 4" x 5" tear-off reply section. The card was postage paid and returned to a central office where data could be analyzed. County agents and staff were asked to distribute the cards with the booklets. Initially, each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties was provided 100 cards to distribute with booklets. More cards were available to county agents upon request. In addition to standard demographic questions (age, gender, education), users were asked to what extent they had read the booklet and to describe two (2) things they had done as a result of the information contained in the booklet. Another question asked if respondents had attended a Y2K workshop sponsored by Penn State Cooperative Extension. Responses were anonymous. Thus, there was no way to identify and follow-up those who did not respond.

Results

Cards returned by mid-September 1999 (115)[1] indicated that most respondents were female (79%), age 50 or older (75%), and had a high school education or beyond (90%). Fifty-six percent (56%) of the respondents indicated that had read the entire booklet while seventeen (17%) indicated they had read parts of the booklet. Half of the respondents (50%) had taken some action to prepare their households for emergencies. The majority of the respondents (56%) had not attended a Penn State Cooperative Extension sponsored Y2K workshop. This suggests that the booklet was mailed to their home or received from another source such as a church or an employer. Because of the information contained in the booklet, most respondents who had taken action indicated they stored food and water for emergency purposes. Another item listed frequently by respondents was sharing the information in the booklet with family and friends.

Summary

In today's time-crunched society, keeping information brief and in a user-friendly format is important if we want to reach consumers. Even when consumer interest is strong on a particular topic, brevity and the manner of presentation may be a requirement for use.

The majority of the respondents (56%) indicated that they had read the entire booklet, *Consumers and the Year 2000 (Y2K)*. Also, 50% of those responding had done something in their homes to prepare for emergencies because of information in the booklet. Yet, only 44% had attended a Penn State Cooperative Extension workshop on Y2K where details

about the year 2000 and how to prepare for an emergency were covered in greater detail. This suggest that consumers can be motivated to act when information is presented in ways that do not seem overwhelming or too time demanding.

Note 1: It is not possible to document the actual number of cards distributed by county agents and staff at the time the 115 cards summarized in this report were returned. Therefore, a response rate cannot be determined. [\[Return to text.\]](#)

References

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Author

Cathy Faulcon Bowen is an Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist in Consumer Issues at The Pennsylvania State University.

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