

Understanding the Challenges Surrounding Contentious Issue Conversations: Florida Extension Agents' Perspective

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Introduction

- Agent's roles have become more complex and they are more involved with contentious issues (Patton & Blaine, 2001; Warner et al., 1998).
- Agents either facilitate conversations or provide clientele information (Goodwin, 1993; Schumaker & Lloyd, 1997).
- While they struggle to balance their personal lives, agents struggle to find credible and trustworthy information (Bailey et al., 2014; Enslie, 2005).

Conceptual Framework

- The human communication process focuses on expressive, accidental, and rhetorical communication (Stone et al., 1999).
- *Expressive* communication includes messages encompassing emotions and the well-being of others.
- *Accidental* communication includes accidental messages and is a result of poor planning.
- *Rhetorical* communication is a persuasive technique (Stone et al., 1999).

Discussion/Recommendations

- Contentious issue conversations matter because the expressive nature of contentious issues are emotional and affect the people they work so hard for (Stone et al., 1999; Welch & Braunworth, 2010).
- Contentious issue conversations are unpleasant and agents lose enthusiasm to facilitate them, leading to burnout (Enge et al., 2011; Enslie, 2005).
- Agents are struggling to find trustworthy and quality information to provide their clientele (Bailey et al, 2014).
- Universities need to improve informational practices.
- Future research should focus on addressing questions surrounding contentious issues.
- The human communication process reinforces the need for Extension agents to utilize rhetorical communication, control expressive communication, and prevent accidental communication when addressing contentious issues.

Methods

- 125 Florida Extension agents responded to an online survey.
- Attitudes were collected on a six item bipolar semantic differential scale.
- Construct was reversed coded so positive adjectives received a five and negative received a one.
- Challenges were collected via a 11-item check all that apply question.
- SPSS 21 was used to calculate descriptive analyses.

Results

- Communicating about contentious issues were *important* ($M = 4.52, SD = .73$), *essential* ($M = 4.30, SD = .85$), and *meaningful* ($M = 4.21, SD = .72$).
- Communicating about these issues was also *difficult* ($M = 2.66, SD = 1.03$).
- Most challenging obstacles faced when communicating about contentious issues were *availability of false or misleading information* ($n = 104, 83.2\%$), and *complexity of issues* ($n = 104, 83.2\%$).