Introduction

• Agent’s roles have become more complex and they are more involved with contentious issues (Patton & Blaine, 2000; 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; Enke, 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 (Rage et al., 2011; Enke, 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 ($n = 104, 83.2$%).