

Approaching Farm & Business Visits for Extension Educators

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- **Visits are important**
 - **You learn about the county and community**
 - **Key people get to know you professionally**
 - **You are delivering important messages:**
 - You care enough to make time to meet key people, listen and learn about your community.
 - You are interested in what they do, think, and care about in their farm/business/community activities.
 - You want to make a positive difference in your community.
 - You are presenting yourself as a professional with Ohio State University Extension.
 - Farmers and other business owners are busy people. You will find that they appreciate you taking time to talk with them. They will often say they have been meaning to call, and your visit provides an opportunity for them to ask their question(s).
- **Do them early** (when you begin your job) & continue to make time throughout your career.
- **Getting started**
 - It is nice if others help introduce you to the county. Hopefully the Area Leader or other coworker will take you out to meet some key people in the community. If they do not offer, ask! (They may not have had a new person for a while and had not thought about developing a plan to introduce you to the county.)
 - Identify key people on your advisory committee and schedule your first visits with them. Ask them if they would introduce you to another person you should meet.
- **Who to visit?**
 - **Ag Leaders, Lenders, Cooperatives** and more.
 - **Take your business card** to the local cooperative, feed store, and related agencies. Find out who is the general manager; who works with farmers in what capacity. Who are their primary customers? What are their priorities? Their frustrations? What opportunities do they see for how you might work together?
 - **Visit the local lenders** who work with farmers. This may be Farm Credit, Ag Credit (their offices may be in another county) or local banks that work with farmers.



- **Agricultural Agencies**
 - Farm Service Agency Committee and office staff
 - Soil & Water Conservation District Board members and office staff
 - Natural Resources Conservation Service staff
 - Disaster Services Agency personnel
- **Farm Group leaders**
- **Extension Advisory Committee** members
 - Overall Extension Advisory Committee ag representatives
 - Dairy Service Unit Committees, Livestock Committees, etc.
 - Landscape Association, Fruit Committees, Marketing groups, etc.
- **Farm Bureau**
 - Organization Director and staff
 - Board Members
 - Ask if you can attend the next County Farm Bureau Meeting in your county. Introduce yourself and ask for input and program collaboration possibilities.
- **Anyone considered well respected/influential/a mover & shaker in your program area**
 - How do you identify these people?
 - Ask your office coworkers, neighboring county ANR Educators, the past Educator (if they were a good one!), or your mentor.
- **Other visit possibilities**
 - County Commissioners (your office should host/arrange this meeting)
 - Produce or livestock auctions, farm markets
 - County Auditor (works with CAUV and Ag Districts)
 - Humane Society (may work with livestock issues)
 - Colleges or Branch campuses with departments potentially related to your work
 - Media connections: Newspapers, Ag reporters, radio stations, television stations, etc.
- **When?**
 - Convenient for you & the farmer or other person
 - Be cautious about going to meet for the first time when things are really busy
 - Planting/harvest time
 - Make visits early in the day
 - Scheduled vs. Drop-in
 - Most people would prefer a scheduled visit. Either method can work well:
 - Call before going that day, or
 - Schedule well ahead



- **What/How?**
 - Mute your phone
 - Introduce yourself, make eye contact, shake hands.
 - Remember this is about them, not you, so keep it brief!
 - Leave a business card
 - Get a business card from them if available
 - Learn who people are
 - Learn about their farm/business/ job
 - Learn about their family, if appropriate
 - Listen for educational program possibilities
 - Listen to their questions/concerns (you do not have to give answers on the spot, you are collecting information!)

- **Possible Questions:**
 - How has OSU “XYZ” County Extension made a positive impact here in the past 5 years?
 - In your opinion, what are the important programs that should be continued?
 - What are the 3 biggest challenges facing agriculture in “XYZ” County in the next year/ 3 years/ 5 years?
 - What role do you see OSU Extension in XYZ County playing in this issue that we were just talking about?

- **Perils and Pitfalls**
 - **No one knows everything;** do not try to provide an instant answer to every question or issue that is identified.
 - “I don’t know the answer to that, but I would be happy to find out and get back to you.” will earn you more respect than creating an answer that might not be correct.
 - **Follow through with any commitments** you make in a timely manner
 - Information, fact sheets, bulletins
 - Follow-up visit with a specialist, etc.
 - **Do not encourage or engage in negative discussion** about your predecessor, coworkers, your office or other individuals and agencies.
 - There will always be someone who does not care for him/her/them.
 - There will always be someone who does not care for you!
 - You will not get an unbiased picture from a 3rd party with a negative attitude about what might have or have not happened.
 - Do use what you might hear to make your program/ work more professional and positive.
 - Talk privately with your Area Leader, Associate Director or mentor if there is a potential issue that might need to be addressed.



- **Dress appropriately** for the visit.
 - You are a professional and are representing The Ohio State University. To be treated as a professional, you should present yourself professionally. Dress appropriately for the scheduled visit.
 - It is a good idea to keep at least a pair of boots and a jacket appropriate for an on-farm consultation in your car, especially if you have to dress up for another event.
 - Farm/in-the-field visits:
 - Boots/heavy work shoes, not white tennis shoes!
 - Disposable boots for livestock farms
 - No sandals or flip-flops
 - No shorts
 - No tight-fitting clothes including leggings/yoga pants
 - No low-cut shirts or pants
 - Button up your shirt
 - Pants: you should be able to bend down comfortably to look at plants, short animals, etc. without exposing skin that someone else really does not want to see.
 - “Bling” free pants, no holes or rips/tears.
 - All of the items above are applicable to both males and females!
- **Safety Issues – on-farm**
 - Do not go into any pens/pastures/fields/buildings without the permission of the host.
 - Do not enter pens/pastures/areas with male breeding animals.
 - They can be very aggressive without provocation.
 - Be cautious when entering pens/pastures/areas with females who have young animals.
 - They can be very territorial about protecting their offspring.
 - Be cautious around moving equipment. Make sure equipment operators know where you are at all times.
 - This equipment is often loud, making it difficult to hear voices.
 - Some equipment has multiple “blind spots” (a skid loader, for example) that make it difficult for the operator to see others.
 - Assume the operator cannot see you.
 - Do not enter bins with grain or silos with stored feed.
 - Stay at least 25 feet away from the open faces of bunker silos.
 - Carry sanitizing wipes in car to be able to clean up when leaving farm, if needed.



- **Farm visit safety issues**
 - **Make sure your office staff knows where you will be and what time you expect to return:**
 - Location (address) of the farm or site.
 - Name(s) of the person/family you are meeting with.
 - General purpose of visit; i.e. general get acquainted visit, business/management/succession consultation, sweep a crop for insects, crop production issue, facilities evaluation, etc.
 - Contact number for person/family you are meeting with.
 - If your visit will be longer than anticipated, let your office staff know.
 - **General**
 - Most visits can and should be made during office hours.
 - Carry your fully charged cell phone with you.
 - Keep your vehicle in good repair, full tank of gas, good tires.
 - Carry a good county map.
 - Even if you have some navigational device, a good map helps you visualize exactly where you are, and works without a signal!
 - Compasses in cars are very, very helpful when navigating back roads.
 - Park smart: solid ground, easy to pull out of, in a well-lit area out of the main traffic pattern; not in front of the milkhouse on a dairy farm.
 - **If you feel uncomfortable** about the person you are going to visit or the situation:
 - Why is the visit being made? Is it necessary?
 - Can the objective be accomplished through a visit to your office, during office hours?
 - Talk with your Area Leader/coworker/mentor about the situation.
 - If a site visit must be done, ask someone to accompany you: a coworker, mentor, advisory committee member, specialist. Share with them your concerns before you make the visit.
 - Many good discussions can happen in a pickup truck looking at various areas/fields on a farm.
 - *However*, if you do not feel comfortable about getting in a vehicle with the person you are visiting, tell them that you will need to be returning to the office for a previous commitment so you will follow them in your vehicle.
 - If something uncomfortable happens on a visit, report it to your Area Leader immediately.
- **Approach visits with a good attitude and sense of humor.**
- **Go with your gut & use common sense when it comes to safety concerns.**

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