

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnership, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

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Gaining Trust with Small Farmers

Background

How do you choose a banker, realtor, insurance agent? Is your decision primarily based on the company they represent? If the company is well respected but the representative was too busy to provide you with personalized service would you still want to do business with that person? Would you do business with someone whose company had a reputation of favoring a group in which you did not belong? In pondering these questions you have placed yourself in the "shoes" of many small farmers. They are asking similar questions about United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Services and other agencies, and the employees that represent them.

This fact sheet outlines methods of gaining trust to successfully increase adoption rates of small farmers. In some instances you may need to work on a one-on-one basis to establish trust. Other instances may be more conducive to working with small farmer groups. You will have to evaluate the community you want to work in to make that determination. In everyday interpersonal relationships, developing trust usually takes a lot of time. It can, however, be worthwhile to invest that time, as it can mean gaining broader community support, and increasing the number of participants in USDA and NRCS programs.

There are numerous reasons why small farmers do not trust government employees. A set of repeated criticisms are that government programs primarily benefit large producers, farmer cost-share rates are too costly, farmer operates under unfair lending practices, USDA provides unfair treatment, and so on.

Understanding the history and negative feelings that some small farmers have can help you diffuse their perpetuation

Communication and Culture

Traditional methods of communicating with small farmers usually do not work when trust has not been established. Traditional communication methods include brochures, direct mailings, news articles, and meetings. Special mailing lists also may not be effective if trust has not been developed.

Before you attempt to communicate or try to build trust with small farmers it is important that you simply listen to them. Listen with the understanding that you can not solve all the problems they face. Listen for those problems you can solve and those you can bring to the attention of another agency or community group. Keep the farmers informed about what you can do to help them solve "their" problems. It is more important to discuss the problems they identify and, if possible, address those problems before they will be open to listening about natural resource problems. They may view conservation issues as a low priority.

Small farmers are generally not risk takers. They typically need to see and understand how an activity that you are asking them to do is advantageous. If possible, showcase your successes by inviting them to a demonstration farm or field day. Visually showing them how you can assist on their farm can foster a working relationship.

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Sometimes all you need are before and after pictures to show a small farmer how you can provide assistance. There are resources in the agency that can help you communicate your message more effectively with this group. The state public affairs specialist and/or outreach coordinator probably have some ideas on specific verbal and nonverbal communication techniques that help build trust. The most important action that you can do is treat everyone with the highest respect.

A farmer's socio-economic background and culture should influence your approach to establishing a relationship based on trust. For example, if the farmer has limited education and resources, your approach in talking with him should be different than if he were a physician with a hobby farm. If you are trying to work with an American Indian farmer, obtaining some basic knowledge about the culture will enhance your chances of establishing trust. The Social Sciences Institute is a source for cultural information. It is also helpful to find out about the farmer's values and beliefs. Questions relating to financial goals, stewardship, and risk tolerance will shed light on the farmer's values.

Build trust through leaders and organizations

Cultivating a relationship with a community leader is another avenue to pursue when trying to gain trust. This person could be a formal leader such as an elected official or clergyman or the person could be an informal leader such as a community activist, 4H leader, teacher, or head of a local nonprofit organization. You can work with that person who in turn can accompany you when you work with the small farmers. (Please refer to the fact sheet on Identifying Community Leaders for more information.)

The same principle holds true for organizations. Inventory your county to see what organizations have an established track record with small farmers. Find out where small farmers go to receive information. Take your message to those organizations, try to get on their meeting and/or local church agenda, make a radio address, or write an article for their newsletter. These organizations can help you build a relationship with small farmers. Participating in collaborative efforts, partnerships, and alliances are practical ways to get assistance for your efforts.

Basic Do's and Don'ts of Gaining Trust

Do's

1. Be truthful
2. Adhere to deadlines
3. Honor commitments
4. Avoid unfamiliar language (jargon)
5. Encourage questions/feedback
6. Demonstrate a desire to improve customers' quality of life
7. Provide timely, dependable, and excellent service
8. Have a pleasant work style
9. Be equitable and fair in all work activities
10. Make follow-up visits when possible
11. Show the benefits
12. Be visual

Don'ts

1. Don't be a know-it-all
2. Don't be apathetic
3. Don't be impatient with the process
4. Don't talk down to the customers
5. Don't be stiff and unnatural
6. Don't be distant and impersonal
7. Don't be unorganized and unprepared
8. Don't hedge or use double-talk
9. Don't pressure customers' into a decision
10. Don't trivialize customers' concerns
11. Don't underestimate the person
12. Don't be disrespectful

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