

# **Creative Conversations: The Un-Meeting as an Approach to Agricultural Extension Communication**

## **Authors**

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## **Introduction**

The agricultural industry faces increasingly complex challenges that require innovative solutions. Often these solutions exist in the minds of those who face these challenges head-on: Extension agents, producers, and industry representatives. However, traditional meetings to discuss issues and solutions can be dominated by few voices and limit diverse engagement, be overwhelming with lengthy presentations that overshadow the concerns and interests of the stakeholders, and they often have a top-down approach that increases the power distance between those in the room (Huff, 2017). However, an “un-meeting” poses simple solutions to these communication challenges that can encourage diverse and active participation from all voices in the room by focusing on concise presentations that develop participant-driven discussion (Gilliland, et al., 2019).

## **Un-Meeting Theoretical Underpinnings**

The facilitation of an un-meeting involves five key steps that may be repeated based on the meeting's needs: 1) explaining the un-meeting process; 2) ignite sessions, where speakers briefly introduce a topic; 3) brainstorming sessions where participants write reflections, and facilitators analyze them; 4) small breakout groups where discussions are guided by the reflection analysis; and 5) a summary report of the key takeaways once groups reconvene. Typically, un-meetings focus on one major topic, with ignite sessions covering related sub-topics. To simulate effective small-group discussions, an un-meeting should aim for 150 participants (Augustine et al., 2023).

Effective un-meetings maximize participant engagement and interdisciplinary discussion (Nooraie et al., 2022). The ignite sessions follow a "4X4" format, where experts present four-minute talks on significant issues, with four presenters per session (Augustine et al., 2023). These short presentations focus on main problems and ideas, sparking participants' thoughts. Participants then write reflections on cards, which facilitators collect for immediate analysis (Gutter et al., 2020).

Facilitators, proficient in both the topic and qualitative analysis, categorize similar reflections and group them into larger themes. Analyzers should peer-debrief to ensure accurate categorization. The themes identified from this analysis guide the breakout discussions. Each breakout room has a facilitator to promote, but not lead, the discussion, while a co-facilitator records the conversation (Gutter et al., 2020). Participants can choose and move between breakout rooms based on their interests.

These steps—ignite sessions, brainstorming, and breakout discussions—can be repeated to cover more topics. Once the meeting concludes, facilitators analyze the breakout session notes to extract insights that inform future research, practice, and policy.

## **Applied Methods**

The state directors of Extension and Experiment Stations organized a statewide agriculture summit using the un-meeting format, bringing together producers, Extension agents, and agricultural stakeholders to identify innovations, support producer growth, and set priorities for the agriculture industry (Kaufman et al., 2024). Approximately 100 participants attended the summit (Kaufman et al., 2024). The un-meeting format was repeated three times throughout the day, featuring three ignite sessions with four speakers each, who had four minutes to address specific topics.

The first ignite session covered key agricultural issues in the state, leading to breakout discussions on environmental concerns, financial feasibility, legacy planning, and land use competition. A team of 10 facilitators, composed of faculty, Extension administrators, and graduate students, was selected for their expertise in the topics, facilitation experience, and qualitative analysis skills. They met prior to the summit for preparation and used large adhesive mats to organize participants' notecards, which were also recorded for further analysis. Facilitators analyzed the cards into four themes that guided the breakout groups. They also wrote participants' comments verbatim in electronic documents aligned with the identified themes.

In each breakout group, a faculty member or Extension administrator facilitated the discussion, while a graduate student recorded notes. Facilitators read aloud notecard topics to spark conversation, capturing participants' thoughts on large notepads at the front of the room. Following the summit, facilitators analyzed data from the notecards, notetakers' notes, and the notepads used in breakout rooms. The results were compiled into a white paper and shared with participants and Extension leadership.

## **Limitations**

Various limitations were identified, including a lack of participant tracking, facilitator variability, geographical limitations, lack of verbatim data, and potential groupthink. The inability to track precisely which participants were in each breakout room impacts data interpretation, as it is unclear how the composition of each group may have influenced the discussions and outcomes. The geographical location of the summit limited who could physically attend the meeting, potentially excluding critical perspectives from stakeholders who were unable to participate due to distance or event timing. Last, meeting venue space limitations defined the number of breakout session topics that resulted from ignite sessions.

## **Recommendations**

To maximize the effectiveness of un-meetings, it's crucial to consider facilitator expertise, team size, and using ignite sessions for focused outcomes. The success of an un-meeting largely depends on the preparedness and expertise of facilitators, who should not only be knowledgeable about the main topic but also familiar with sub-topics and qualitative data analysis. This ensures they can properly analyze participant input and facilitate breakout discussions effectively.

Given the fast-paced nature of un-meetings, a large team of facilitators is important. Extra facilitators can assist with logistical needs, ensuring the meeting stays on track and that the summit summary is prepared. Extension programs should ensure sufficient personnel to manage logistics, especially in larger meetings.

While un-meetings may be repeated to cover more sub-topics, limiting the process to three cycles of ignite sessions and breakout discussions keeps the conversation focused and

manageable. Following these recommendations can help Extension professionals maximize un-meetings to foster innovation and actionable outcomes in the agriculture industry.

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