Free No More

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We have for many years in the U.S. Department of Agriculture been running a huge vanity press, I believe, catering more to the whims of authors and their administrators and the political appointees rather than first considering markets for the publications themselves.

This vanity press, not exclusive in USDA, but also prevalent among federal, state, and local bureaucracies, has escaped scrutiny in the past. It has been justified loosely as furthering knowledge and reporting on taxpayer investments. That rationale has had legitimacy, but with the realities of tighter budgets and accountability, USDA's operation is an inviting target the budget cutters have not failed to hit.

One of the first targets: USDA's agency called the Economic Research Service. As a result, ERS was first in USDA to adopt user fees across the board for its numerous publications, beginning May 1, 1982. So it may be instructive to make some observations about how this new program has come to be adopted. Then I would like to offer some non-budget logic in doing away with the free distribution of USDA publications in general, contrary to the precepts of many information people and others in agriculture.

The Policy Considerations

In the summer of 1981 ERS proposed to achieve a fiscal year 1983 budget cut of over $1 million by charging for its

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reports, beginning October 1, 1982. The department and the office of Management and Budget (OMB) approved. ERS had decided that its monographs and periodicals alike would share in achieving the reductions, rather than selecting some reports for elimination altogether.

Also, the economics agencies urged the department to propose legislation to permit them to charge for publications and keep the fees, not permitted under printing regulations managed for Congress by the Government Printing Office (GPO). That could provide incentives in selling reports and an alternative to reliance on established government sales agencies. The 1981 farm law did, in fact, carry such an enabling provision, but only for USDA's economics and statistics reports.

ERS decided not to try that option immediately but to use existing sales programs, primarily through GPO. No financial advantage was seen in setting up a separate, duplicative, agency program, but this option would be studied for possible use if experience with GPO proved unsatisfactory.

The decision to begin the program prior to FY 1983 came after it was clear that: (1) no FY 1982 pay raise supplemental would go forward, (2) no strong negative reactions would surface from congressional budget hearings, and (3) the department's public affairs office would issue a policy statement instructing all USDA agencies to adopt user fees for their publications.

Three implementing decisions were to limit free availability to 1,000 copies of each report (down from a former free press run averaging 5,000 or more), to be conservative on mailing out free copies but relatively generous in handing them to requesters, and to set up a new inhouse mail list system to keep tight control of agency postage and handling costs.

Getting Started

In the fall of 1981 an information evaluation committee was established in ERS to review the entire information program, including print, computer dissemination, and radio-television. The committee relied on an Information Division study detailing all printing and distribution costs of ERS in FY 1981 for each of the 32 periodicals and 125 research monographs produced annually. That report put costs at $1-1/2 million.

Providing Limited Free Copies

ERS decided to give copies to the news media, land grant and other university libraries, heads of social science departments at land grant schools, specified USDA officials, Members of Congress, foreign embassies, and other designated cooperators.

Additionally, all Outlook and Situation reports became limited to no more than 32 pages to reduce postage costs associated with free mailings; monographs could run longer.

What We Have Learned

At the risk of making observations before the program is fully operating and all the pluses and minuses become obvious, I think several things are apparent.

All information managers, regardless of federal, state, or local affiliation, will be facing budget stringencies and needing to resort to some program alternaties similar in scope to what I have just described. If information managers are indeed to be managers in fact, we simply must get on top of the monetary realities of our programs. It is not nearly as fun as writing and editing or producing a good TV spot, but close budgeting and projecting of funding alternatives will be done for information programs. Would you rather have your budget people make the proposals to audiences of their choosing, at times more propitious to their own welfare? I would take the time to acquire the intimate knowledge necessary to be able to present my own case. Two years ago my division became involved directly with funding estimation and projection. That groundwork has helped me greatly in managing the changes I have described.

Something else has come in handy. From the start we proposed that the agency adopt a few simple rules that were flexible enough to change later if necessary. Approved, this idea made explanation and adjustment easy, without meticulous review and justification procedures.

Another fortunate factor was that we were inclined to, and were encouraged to, delegate the execution of the user fee program within information management as much as possible. We had to get it going on six-month notice. So of necessity the style became management by exception. In

retrospect this was an ideal course, because by far the most inquiries we received were for explanations rather than justifications, the mechanics rather than questions of policy. Our initial efforts, to make sure the people who answer telephones would be fully conversant about the whole user fee program, paid off. It was also fortuitous that we began this program under a new administrator who was all too willing to let us develop it fully ourselves, or until we got into a lot of trouble, whichever came first. Finally, we benefited from a lack of guidelines and regulations in place from bureaucratic layers above and beyond.

Early on, we surmised that much of the static in adopting such a program would come from internal sources. It did. But it was moderate, not overwhelming, because the research professionals were clued into what was going on right from the start. This did not prevent grumbling, but after a while it became obvious there was general acquiescence to the concept and its execution. Professional staff fears of great criticism from outside groups have yet to materialize.

The Pluses and Minuses of Being First

Several advantages are obvious. My agency got its advertising and subscription solicitations to user groups well ahead of any other USDA agency. We benefited from the novelty of approaching people with a fresh proposition. Another advantage was that we set policies and procedures that would probably, if not copied by the larger USDA organization itself, be "grandfathered" in. And quite importantly the esprit factor was there. My staff knew they were innovating rather than reacting, and this had the effect of promoting thought instead of despair in the face of budget cuts.

There are some disadvantages, the significance of which will not be learned for some time, because of the newness of the program. But obviously if ERS stumbles in its user fee program for publications, it will be glaringly obvious. It will be easy to say I told you so, especially for people who were unsympathetic from the start and still are. Our flexibility in being able to adjust to unseen changes may in itself be unsettling to some people on our staff or in the agency who inherently dislike being in a changing situation characterized by trial and error. Most of us yearn for an ordered existence. Admittedly, there are downside risks too in an

every-agency-for-itself approach. Diseconomies will inevitably arise.

But Is Agriculture Unique?

Some will criticize our embracing the program as being contrary to the philosophy in agriculture of free, purposeful dissemination of information. Not only contrary, but heretical, since that's a prime reason agriculture has kept improving its productivity while other American industries have faltered; right? Absolutely, but let us not equate publications with the totality of information, a common lapse pointed out frequently by electronic media proponents. Furthermore, I believe the program will lead to better, more relevant publications, and it will lead to our working more with the mass media to get our messages out. Other federal and many state agencies have charged for their publications for many years without apparent detriment. Why should USDA remain unique? To date, there has been no great outcry from people who had been getting publications free. Most gripes have come from professors and librarians.

The pay-for-publications programs, as implemented by USDA across the board, will do something more. Relative sales volumes will lay out, for managers to see, the rankings of publications according to what the market decides they are worth. Previously such an indicator was missing or subjective.

Yes, but if the whole federal government charges for its publications, won't the recordkeeping, the marketing, and all the associated chores wind up costing more than the sales volume will return? Given the small press runs of most reports that have been produced in the Department of Agriculture, it might indeed be cheaper to give them away than charge for them. But agencies are not run and are not funded based upon their contribution to the whole government. Each must justify its own existence, if necessary in competition with other similar agencies. A life boat mentality? For sure, particularly in the case of federal information projects, not all of which will be around next year or the year after, I'll wager. After all, competition is what makes the private sector work. It is high time, I submit, that the government in general and USDA in particular try some.