Action Goals of Extension Communication: New Perspectives

Joseph Seepersad

There are many ways to classify the tasks and activities of extension staff. A recent report (Electronic Task Force Report, 1985) categorizes extension functions as information delivery, educational delivery, and problem-solving. Swanson (1983), in a similar vein, felt that there were two important dimensions to agricultural extension—a communication dimension and an educational dimension. the Communication dimension or function involves the transfer of useful information to extension's clientele whereas the educational dimension has to do with helping them to use the information to achieve their own goals.

Thus, there can be hardly any doubt that communication is integral to all informational and educational activities in extension. Much of this communication can be classified as "persuasive communication" (Hollander, 1971; Pearson and Nelson, 1982) because it consciously aims at modifying the knowledge level, attitudes, beliefs, values, and ultimately the behavior or extension's audiences. In the past, the major concern of extension has been the adoption of innovations; for example, Lambie (1984, p. 32) stated that "The major function of most extension practitioners is to facilitate the adoption of new ideas and practices." However, there can be other action goals of persuasive communication and it will be useful for us to reflect on whether those are also relevant to extension and, if so, pinpoint the implications for the planning and execution of extension programs.

Action Goals of Persuasive Communication

Pearson and Nelson (1982) have listed four action goals of persuasive communication:
1. *Adoption*—acceptance of a new idea, attitude, or belief as indicated by behavior. For example, adoption occurs

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Joseph Seepersad is Lecturer in Agricultural Extension, University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad, W.I.

when a farmer is actually using an improved crop variety
that has been recommended by an extension agent.

2. *Discontinuance*—convincing an audience to stop doing
   something they do now, for example, smoking, driving
   under the influence of alcohol, or using a very toxic
   pesticide. Your action goal is achieved when your
   audience stops doing those things.
3. *Deterrance*—getting the audience to avoid some type of
   action. Thus if you don't smoke now, don't start; or,
   don't ever use that pesticide because it is extremely
   hazardous to your health.
4. *Continuance*—convincing an audience to continue doing
   something they already do and is perhaps best exem-
   plified in the exhortation, "Keep up the good work."

Implications

More Specific Messages

Is it really important to define the action goals of extension
in those ways? Aren't those goals really two sides of the
same coin? For example, one may argue that trying to con-
vince people to stop using a dangerous pesticide may really
be part of a broader strategy to get persons to adopt safe
methods of using pesticides. In this case, it may not be dif-
ficult to see how the discontinuance goal fits into a possible
broader adoption goal.

With the other two examples mentioned above, adoption
goals may not be readily apparent. Perhaps, the adoption
goal is safe driving habits—in the case of driving under the
influence of alcohol, or a healthy life style—in the case of
smoking. However, each of these adoption goals involve a
wide range of behaviors and our messages are likely to be
watered down and, therefore, less effective in influencing the
desired change if goals are defined in those ways.

Thus one big advantage in clearly separating our action
goals is specificity in our messages and, as every good com-
municator knows, the more specific we can make our
messages the more likely we are to achieve our desired
results. So it is perhaps better to focus on a "no smoking"
campaign with messages focusing on the dangers of smoking
(discontinuance) if that is our primary concern at the time
than to use a strategy which emphasizes the importance of a
healthy lifestyle or other similar adoption messages. In many

cases, too, because of the severity or urgency of a problem, discontinuance of the use of a product or practice may be the primary goal regardless of whether or not satisfactory alternatives exist.

Better Needs Identification

Another implication is that the scope or range of needs we usually include as a basis for our programs are likely to be widened if we accept that extension communication is not only concerned with adoption messages. In fact, this point has already been raised by some writers (e.g., Rogers, 1983) and it now remains for us to explicity address this in our programming efforts. Rogers pointed out that change agents should not feel that their job is accomplished when adoption occurs; they should follow up with reinforcing messages to ensure continued use (continuance) of the innovation.

There is, perhaps, a more important role for messages related to continuance. Nowadays, there is a growing emphasis on developing programs on things people already do well, i.e., their strengths (Patton, 1985). Why is this important? First, programs are likely to be more successful when they are built on what people know already and are confident with. Second, continuance messages will reinforce our audience's strengths and, thus, boost their self-esteem and confidence.

Deterance is another action goal that is quite relevant to extension communication. This goal, too, will demand some reorientation in our customary way of looking at needs. During needs assessment, we usually look mainly at the good things happening elsewhere because these constitute opportunities from which members of our audience are likely to benefit. We do not really explicity take into account those things that may be detrimental to the welfare of our audience. Our audiences need to be prepared to face such "threats" if they exist; if not, they are likely to succumb because of misinformation, lack of information, or some other reason.

More Accurate Planning

Finally, distinguishing among different types of action goals will allow us a greater degree of sophistication in planning extension communication. Pearson and Nelson (1982) point out

that adoption and discontinuance require the audience to change behaviors, while deterrance and continuance ask the audience not to change behaviors. Further, they add, "it is easier to persuade people to continue their present behavior and to avoid new behavior than it is to persuade them to quit their present behavior and start new ones." (p. 354). The first two will, in general, involve more communication effort than the last two and, thus, we'll have to plan accordingly.

Conclusion

A question that may arise is, Will this not make our job more difficult now? I don't think so. Some of these goals are implicit in a lot of activities we already carry out. In fact, the perspectives that are offered here are likely to make our task easier since it gives us a better framework for categorizing and organizing the diverse activities with which we may be involved.

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