

Improving Agricultural Communications

Richard Floyd

The mission of any government agency today is to do more, do it better—and do it with less.

*(Congressional legislative aide,
Atlanta, December 1984)*

A funny thing happened when I wrote to several communicators across the country and asked what they thought is the No. 1 problem in covering agricultural research.

All the answers were different.

I also asked the communicators what they (or their institutions) were doing about the problems. Again, most of the answers were different but there was a stronger commonality.

Agricultural communications seem to be at a crossroads, only partly because of dwindling financial support. There was agreement that getting stories on the "wires" is growing more important because it means instant acceptance by print and electronic media, which cite shrinking capabilities for outside information such as ours.

Our competition with information about medicine, space, engineering, and other major societal fields is growing keener. And, finally, there is a new information specialization which is segmenting some of our old targets and establishing new ones. For example, think about today's television, cable television, new publications, and broadcast programs spotlighting special audiences, and note the rifle approach.

It is time, then, to look at our own information programs.

Richard Floyd is communications director of the Agricultural Experiment Station at Oregon State University. This presentation was part of a roundtable discussion at CASE's Research Communications Conference, April 2-3, in San Francisco.

What is the No. 1 Problem in Covering Agricultural Research?

Universities

Joe Marks, agricultural news director at the University of Missouri, said the No. 1 problem is "finding the good stories and not getting bogged down in all the others (I ought to learn to say 'no' more often)."

At Purdue, Eldon Fredericks, who heads the agricultural communication service, said the most important problem in covering agricultural research is keeping it relevant to the interest of the public. "Then—not exclusive to agriculture—we need to deal with the long-term nature of science and avoid the 'breakthrough' reporting."

In California, several communicators decided the No. 1 problem is the declining use of agricultural information in our mass media, particularly newspapers.

And Cornell's Christopher Whittle agrees, in part, with them. "Lack of interest by the media" is first on his list. "Very few have science editors or other writers who cover agriculture as a beat. Other forms of science research, medical and space, appear more interesting to readers in general."

Whittle also lists failure of agricultural research writers to emphasize the significant payoff of the research (What does it really mean?). Too many agricultural communicators, he said, appear to be writing their stories for the researcher rather than for the reader. And, finally, too many researchers are reluctant to really explain the significance of their research in terms that the public can readily understand and appreciate.

Dick Fleming, who heads agricultural communications at the University of Nebraska, has a different problem—time.

"There are lots of stories that we don't find out about until the last minute. Because of news deadlines, we sometimes can't get a story out to the marketplace as fast as we'd like." He also adds another problem, "We don't have enough people to cover all the areas as well as we'd like."

Bob Bruce, director of the university's information program at Nebraska, has a different idea about the No. 1 problem. It's audience. "For too long, we've accepted the idea that agricultural news is only of interest to farm writers, farm jour-

nals, farm broadcast programs. And we've locked ourselves into the politics of making sure all the county agents and specialists (and all the other internal bureaucracy) have the information at their fingertips before we can tell the rest of the world."

Metropolitan Newspapers

A reporter's biggest problem, said Ward Sinclair, agriculture writer of *The Washington Post*, comes in knowing what actually is news when a research report comes out.

"Too often, I have found, press releases accompanying reports make spurious claims about the newness of the work. Too many press releases related to research have a 'second coming' air about them that is quite misleading," Sinclair said.

Science writer Hill Williams says *The Seattle Times* is not really interested in his covering agricultural research. "I do use some stories from both eastern and western Washington, but probably not as many as we should. I think the rationale is that the farms are east of the mountains (which isn't really true) and that we don't need to do too much." One problem in any field, he said, is hearing about what is going on.

San Francisco's Dave Perlman said, "We don't do much at the *Chronicle* in agriculture." He covers basic research but not very often, he said. Does he find that agriculture is competitive with medicine and other fields in submitting information? Yes, said Perlman.

Farm Magazines

Glenn Lorang, based in Colorado Springs as regional editor of the *Farm Journal*, said the No. 1 problem in covering agricultural research is that there is no single No. 1 problem.

"The closest I can come to defining one is with the term: commitment. There must be continuous eyeball-to-eyeball, brain-to-brain contact with your audience and with your sources."

For Dick Yost, editor of the *Oregon Farmer-Stockman*, the problem is a little different. "My biggest problem is simply finding out what's going on. I spend as much—if not more—time tracking down story leads as I do writing stories," he said.

What Are We Doing About It?

Universities

Whittington says Cornell is applying ample staff of technical science writers and other types of communication support to cover all bases. They also apply enough dollars and other resources to get the job done, he said. "As a result, we don't feel we have a problem here in communicating the message," he said.

He also said Cornell has had for some time a first-rate agricultural science magazine aimed at opinion leaders, a steady flow of news, and feature releases that get coverage nationally.

"We also have close personal contact with science writers, free-lance writers, and others. And we do a series of exhibits, including a large building at the State Fair, to tell the story to large audiences. In addition, we have special events, open houses, forums, meetings, etc., where the media obtain in-depth briefings and knowledge."

"The key, I think, is for agricultural communicators to make the subject of real interest to readers or audiences," he said. "Some of us tend to be too close to the subject to see the story from the other side. The media will only devote a certain amount of coverage to agriculture regardless of how hard we try."

Missouri is stepping up internal communication to improve agricultural communication. Marks meets with his deans at least five times yearly to identify the really good research stories, then uses every conceivable medium, sometimes writing a story two or three ways.

Missouri also has had communications workshops which helped stimulate internal talking, and has launched a publication that goes to alumni and friends of the college.

"The most important thing we do to improve agricultural communications is old-fashioned good will and credibility," said Marks. "We don't say we're professionals at Missouri; we *are*—and we act that way. We give advice to administrators on communicating."

Marks' goal, he said, is to spend more time working with the dean and director, helping them and their staffs communicate science successes to specific audiences. "I believe there is more potential payoff there than in writing for the masses."

At Purdue, they are attempting to refine their audiences.

Fredericks said, "We are working to create a series of one-page, well-written and produced science reports targeted to movers and shakers. If we produce an author or director ag-grandizement piece, we bind those together or deliver them in limited copies to appropriate audiences, annually."

During the next year, California communicators hope to focus more on issue-oriented agriculture stories such as water development, economic problems, marketing concerns, etc., making better use of university people as sources of expertise on these topics.

"We also are going to explore new delivery systems—use of paid wire services such as the California Business wire and the Southern California PR Newswire—and will renew emphasis on working through "the regular news wire services," said communicator Gary Beall. "As you know, getting something on a newswire legitimizes it and greatly enhances its pickup by newspapers."

Metropolitan Newspapers

Sinclair, named farm editor of the year in 1984 by the Newspaper Farm Editors of America, said he felt his task is to tell urban readers what is happening around the country in agriculture and, "I strive to do the best possible."

He gets a large feedback from readers around the country and averages one trip per month to do his reporting.

Williams, Seattle, has an idea for agricultural communicators: Suggest stories that might indicate a trend, that are more than an isolated research result. "This is what makes the best story for readers in and near a city, readers whose main connection to farms is the cost of food, or maybe memories of childhood," he said.

Farm Magazines

The *Farm Journal's* Lorang said that to improve communications you must constantly hone your own sensory and rational skills and add to your experience and background.

He plans to hit the road "to get more eyeball-to-eyeball with my audience—and my sources. I want to get into the right side of the brain with as many farmers, research scientists, and other communicators as possible. If there is a solution to this farm problem, that is where it is."

Yost said he can only try to stay abreast of the needs of readers of the *Oregon Farmer-Stockman*, "giving them accurate information which, hopefully, they can use to improve their farming and ranching efficiency and income."

Summary

Because of new technology and shifting interest of readers, listeners, and screen watchers, we all should step back and examine our information programs, look anew at our relationships with deans and directors, again assess our targets. If there is concern that communication programs may not quite be meeting today's many challenges, use surveys (most campuses have some kind of research survey unit) or do your own investigative reporting to find out if your message and delivery system are right.

And, lest we get too smug: I keep one letter on my desk for quick reference. Written by an editor of a national science magazine, it's an answer to my request for information about problems in covering agricultural research. In its entirety:

"The No. 1 problem in covering agricultural research is that we do not receive a regular flow of information on science-based agriculture research from agribusiness firms and universities. Without it we are unlikely to cover agricultural science."