Communicating With the Audience in Mind

by Robert Agunda

Agricultural communication is a very young discipline and its professionals are still defining their function. An important element that must guide us in our search for identity, however, is knowing who our primary audience really is. Is it the organizations for which we work? Should we focus our attention on the farmers and agribusiness owners, many of whom are highly educated and have, for the most part, many ways of obtaining innovative information? Or should we more properly address the needs of those who are agriculturally illiterate, and whose main source of information about how agriculture affects their lives seems to be us, the agricultural communicators. This author argues that the "poor masses out there" must be our main audience and asks the question: Do we know how to reach them with the information they so vitally need?

Agricultural communication is an interdisciplinary social science specialty that deals with the application of communication techniques and technologies for the advancement of agriculture. Agriculture, in its broadest sense, includes production, processing, marketing, consumption, and nutritional well-being. The agricultural communicator, then, is one who informs people, especially groups of people, about whatever they need to know about agriculture. Howard E. Ray, vice president and director, Agricultural Sciences and Technology Division of the Academy for Educational Sciences, addressed the role of the agricultural communicator at the 1985 Conference on International Agricultural Programs and Agricultural Communications. He defined it as follows:

> The appropriate role of the agricultural communicator is that of a fully recognized project team member involved in all stages of project planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. During the project design stage, the communicator must articulate the benefits to be gained from effective communication support, the necessity for the communication strategy to be an integral part of project design, and the necessity to allocate sufficient resources to make the communication support fully effective. (Ray, 1985, p. 112)

Ray noted further that the agricultural communicator is more than a media specialist. "The agricultural communicator must be a strategist, organizer, manager, facilitator, coordinator, investigator, and evaluator" (p. 112).

Robert Aqunda is assistant professor, agricultural communication (Department of Agricultural Education), The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.

Ray (ibid, pp. 113-114) identified several concepts critical to project success, the following of which are relevant to this paper:

- Specification of clear behavioral objectives is the first, essential step for developing an appropriate communication strategy.

- A receiver-oriented developmental investigation should determine the characteristics of the target population in order to ensure that messages, media, and presentations are appropriate and acceptable.

- Messages and media presentations should be localized as much as needed to address local conditions as well as the needs and desires of the target population.

- Mass media can seldom, if ever, completely replace staff in the field. Appropriately used, however, mass media can increase staff effectiveness, coverage of the target population, and total program impact.

Implicit in Ray's observations is the function of agricultural communicators in social change programs. That is, agricultural communicators do not merely collect and distribute information indiscriminately; rather, they plan and carry out a communication campaign with a particular audience in mind. The "critical step in planning communication is to identify and categorize all information needs in terms of *who, what, when,* and *why*. The *how* of meeting those needs will become the communication strategy" (ibid., p. 115).

Ray described the role of the agricultural communicator in developing countries. Is the agricultural communicator's role in the United States any different? For example, should agricultural communicators provide direct support for the interpersonal efforts of Cooperative Extension agents and vocational education workers in agricultural programs? In military terms, should agricultural communicators provide "air cover" for Extension workers—the "ground forces?" Perhaps these workers should be working hand-in-glove for progress in agriculture and the well-being of all Americans. If agricultural communication is an integral part of Extension then the agricultural communicator should serve the same audience as the Extension agents. To what extent, however, do agricultural communicators think of this audience as "the poor masses out there?"

Working for the Boss?

Agricultural communication is a very young discipline and its professionals are still defining their function. Indeed, agricultural communicators at the present time are very few and far between. Most are found in the land-grant universities. Some are instructors in agricultural communication; others are communication executives, managing the information and publications departments of these universities and responsible for disseminating research findings to other researchers and the public. Yet others are technicians or media specialists engaged in the mechanics of message planning, preparation, and production for dissemination through print, audio, and audiovisual media.

Knowing the target audience is a crucial factor when determining what research findings to disseminate, how the information is to be prepared, and what medium to use for delivering the information. Currently, the primary audience of agricultural communication specialists seems to be the organizations for which we work—the universities and media institutions. As a result, the media products we create are largely directed at pleasing our bosses. If the boss likes it, then everybody out there will like it. And, if it makes sense to the boss and to our colleagues, then it must surely make sense to the public out there. Is this really the case?

As the profession of agricultural communication continues to grow, we must decide who our primary audience really is. Whom shall we serve? Should we focus our attention on the farmers and agribusiness owners, many of whom are highly educated and have, for the most part, many ways of obtaining innovative information? Or should we more properly address the needs of those who are agriculturally illiterate, and whose main source of information about how agriculture affects their lives seems to be us, the agricultural communicators. If we accept the "poor masses out there" as our main audience, do we even know how to reach them with the information they so vitally need?

The Case for Audience-Centered Communication

"Know your audience" is something all of us learn in basic journalism classes. Peters and Waterman (1983), in their bestseller, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies*, cite "quality and service" as the hallmarks of successful companies:

> The good news from the excellent companies is the extent to which, and the intensity with which, the customers intrude into every nook and cranny of the business—sales, manufacturing, research, accounting. . . ." The excellent companies really are close to their customers. That's it. Other companies talk about it; the excellent companies do it. (p. 157)

Too often, we agricultural communicators fail to consider this fact. We think of our *bosses* as our audience! Agricultural communication is not and should not be public relations. We must go beyond pleasing the institutions for which we work, and first meet the needs of the public. Unlike journalists, however, agricultural communicators cannot merely broadcast information and let it fall wherever it may. Journalists aim their messages at a general audience and use a language and media they assume are standard for that public.

Agricultural communicators, on the other hand, are problem solvers. We cannot make such assumptions. We must target our information to specific audiences. Our responsibility is to find out what agricultural information is needed by a given audience, identify appropriate solutions, and communicate those solutions to the audience.

The Changing Nature of the Agricultural Audience

If professional agricultural communicators had been at work in the 1940s or 1950s, the target audience would have been very easy to identify and reach. At that time, agriculture was viewed essentially as production agriculture, performed largely by rural dwellers. Larry Whiting (1988) describes vividly the rise of agricultural communication in U.S. agriculture:

> In the early days of Cooperative Extension work, in some states there was a popular method for taking educational programs to the rural populace—"whistle stop" education for the masses. Agricultural and home economics professors from the land-grant university would extol the virtues of new hybrid corns or new techniques in food preservation. Trains eventually lost out to the automobile and hard-surfaced roads. Then came radio and television, the personal computer, and computer networking. (p. 19)

Not only has American agriculture witnessed a communications revolution, however. The industry itself also has undergone significant changes—changes that have had significant impact on all Americans.

First, the concept of agriculture has expanded beyond production to include such activities as processing, marketing, and consumption. As a result, the audience of agricultural communication grew beyond the rural populace to encompass citizens across the country.

Second, illiteracy in America, once primarily a problem among farmers, today is most prevalent among nonfarmers. Most American farmers today have a master's degree in science, and virtually all of them has at least a bachelor of science degree.

Today, most farmers have access to alternative sources of information relating to agriculture and no longer depend on the agricultural communicator. Indeed, those left on the farm today are the talented and innovative who view the agricultural communicator as a delayed source of information. Fred Myers formerly of the educational and communications services of the Tennessee Valley Authority noted that "generally, land-grant universities seem to come off poorly when farmers rate them as a source of information" (see a study by Gifford, 1978, p. 55). Keith Kirkpatrick, farm service director of the WHO Broadcasting Company, adds that "Land-grant universities seem to have the reputation for doing a lot of needed research but not always doing the best job of telling farmers how this research can help them" (ibid.).

Undoubtedly, those in production agriculture will continue to rely on agricultural communicators to supply them with certain kinds of information not available from private sources. It seems clear, however, that agricultural communicators must focus attention on the information and communication needs of those who are no longer involved directly in rural production agriculture.

The Audience Is Changing

A third important change relates exactly to that change in audience. In 1950, Americans on the farm accounted for up to 15 percent of the total population. Today, they number only around 2 percent (Ohio Commission on Agricultural Education, 1988). People once employed in production agriculture now work in the processing industries in urban and suburban areas. Correspondingly, many of their interests have changed from a rural

orientation to a more cosmopolitan one. Agricultural communicators must recognize these changing interests and occupations and communicate accordingly.

The fourth factor is the fact that, because the population has largely moved from rural to urban and suburban settings, control of agricultural policymaking no longer rests with those in agriculture but those outside it. Bob Fowler, an information specialist at the University of Arizona, described the situation this way: "I operate in a state where there are only 42,000 farmers in a population of 2.2 million" (Gifford, 1978, p. 53). Gordon Conklin, editor of *American Agriculturalist*, adds: "In New York State, six out of seven of the people who live in the open country are not farmers. . . but they obviously call the political tune in the towns and counties involved" (ibid., p. 61). In short, the future of American agriculture will depend heavily on how ordinary Americans understand how agriculture—and the problems the agricultural industry faces—affect their lives.

Agricultural Illiteracy

The fifth and final concern is that the vast majority of Americans—the poor, the homeless, single parents, youth, the uneducated, and even those lettered in disciplines other than agriculture—are agriculturally illiterate in the sense that they are unable to comprehend effectively how agriculture affects their lives. This is the population identified by the National Research Council (NRC), in its report *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions in Agricultural Education* (1988), for education in agricultural literacy. The NRC defined this literacy as follows: "An agriculturally literate person's understanding of the food and fiber system includes its history and current economic, social, and environmental significance to all Americans" (1988, pp. 8-9).

Although the NRC focused specifically on high school and college students, the vast majority of those needing agricultural literacy probably are not in school. They include the people who have never been to school, who have dropped out, or whose education is in nonagricultural disciplines.

What Do We Know About the Poor?

If we agricultural communicators have the responsibility to inform these people about agriculture, what do we know about the largest group—the poor, the uneducated, and the underprivileged in America? The number of poor people in America is on the rise. A better America will require addressing the basic needs and concerns of this suffering group. In a recent study by The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship, 1988 the Commission said:

> The plain fact is that about half of our youth don't go to college. Some don't want to; their learning needs are not well met by the academic training that most colleges offer. Others have not had access to the encouragement, information, and financial assistance that makes college attendance. . . possible. Particularly in major urban centers, these young people are dropping out of high schools at rates that are not just alarming but catastrophic—for them and for the nation. (p. 4)

If agricultural educators are to provide agricultural literacy in the institutional settings, such as schools and colleges, it may fall to the agricultural

communicators to provide this literacy in the nonformal educational arena. Robert Rupp, former editor of *The Farmer*, says that "Land-grant colleges will need to orient their efforts, and particularly their reports, towards urban users (readers, listeners, viewers), as well as rural. Remember, voters are 96% nonfarm today" (see Gifford, 1978, p. 56). Royce Bodiford, then general manager of KGNC, adds:

> Communications will become more demanding in the agricultural sector as the numbers of rural people who are nonproducers continue to grow, along with the increase in the city populations. The challenge for the agricultural communicator is to reach all segments of the populations. (see Gifford, p. 59)

John Chohlis, manager of communications for the Chow Division of Ralston Purina, Inc., says that agricultural communicators "may have to use a variety of techniques to effectively inform and motivate people at all levels of the agricultural enterprise" (ibid., p. 60). Paul Friggens offered a lengthy commentary on the problem:

> I think also that we need agricultural communicators who can give some perspective and common sense to this whole question of world hunger and food production. . . .I think we need communicators who can report more than just record yields and new biological discoveries and the "gee-whiz" aspects of agriculture. We need to be reporting what vanishing farms and rural slums and shocking loss of our prime farm land mean to the American people. (ibid., p. 63)

Audiences of Greatest Need

These testimonies suggest that agricultural communicators are not addressing the audiences of greatest need. We must investigate who these audiences are and what they need to know. The nature of these audiences is also changing, which in turn has implications for how to communicate to them effectively. Larry Whiting (1988) believes the video industry and satellite technology have great potential for Extension education, but the challenge is to discover which is best for which audience. Understanding the target audience's information needs, their communication characteristics, and their socioeconomic conditions is the first in selecting the communication strategies most appropriate to serving them.

Towards More Audience-Centered Communication

One way to view the role of agricultural communicators is to see them as problem solvers. Effective problem solving begins with an analysis of the situation. This paper has suggested what some appropriate audiences might be. What the specific information and communication needs, constraints, and resources are, remain to be discovered. For some time now, agricultural communicators have tended to amass communication technologies but have paid relatively little attention to whom this paraphernalia should serve. Technology, no matter how cost effective, is not an end in itself, but only a means to an end. It must be used to serve the interests of people.

As Peters and Waterman (1983) stated, "quality and service" are the hallmarks of the successful companies. Those same standards must be applied to those of us in agricultural communication. As excellent companies are successful because they stay close to their customers, we too must identify our clientele and learn how to get and stay close to them. We cannot afford merely to acknowledge in rhetoric that the masses are our clients. We must act responsibly in their favor.

References

Gifford, Claude W. *Advice for Young Communicators.* Suggestions from some of the best professionals. U.S. Department of Agriculture: Office of Government and Public Affairs. April 6, 1978.

National Research Council. *Understanding Agriculture: New Directions for Education.* Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press, 1988.

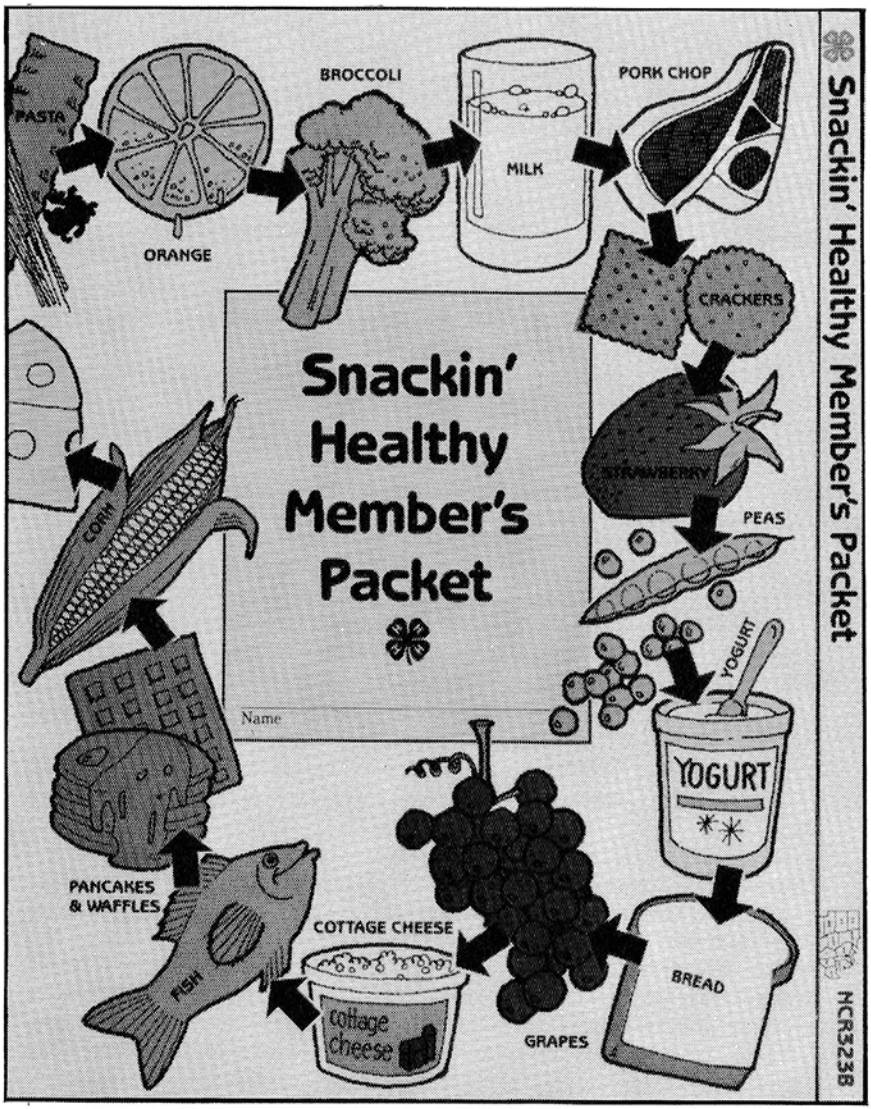
Ohio Commission on Agricultural Education. Report of the Ohio Commission on Agricultural Education. June 1988.

Peters, Thomas J., and Robert H. Waterman, Jr. *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies.* New York: Warner Books, 1984.

Ray, Howard E. *Communication Strategies to Accelerate Agricultural Technical Transfer.* International Agricultural Programs and Agricultural Communications. Proceedings of a February 13-15, 1985, national conference. St. Louis, Missouri. Mason E. Miller, Editor.

The William T. Grant Foundation Commission on Work, Family, and Citizenship. *The Forgotten Half: Pathways to Success for America's Youth and Young Families.* Final Report, November 1988.

Whiting, Larry. The Television Renaissance in Extension Education. *Lifelong Learning: An Omnibus of Practice and Research.* Vol. II, No. 8, 1988.



Outstanding Professional Skill Award **in the Informational Campaigns Category of ACE's 1989 Critique and Awards Program was presented to "Snackin' Healthy", an effort to create awareness among young people of the need for proper nutrition.**

The entry was submitted by Rebecca McKee, 4-H Publications Editor, University of Michigan. Extension services at University of Minnesota and University of Missouri cooperated in the North Central Regional Extension Publications project.

Included among "Snackin' Healthy" materials were a 4-H leader's guide, and a packet of ideas for arts, crafts and take-home recipes; student work sheets; and "Dear Parent" letters. The portfolio cover was designed as a foldout game board.