

# News Days Offer Public Information Opportunities

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Chances are good that your experiment station and extension administrators would welcome more funding and increased public awareness of programs.

Many states have started emphasizing or re-emphasizing news days or other "news" events in the past few years. I suspect the two are not coincidental.

Events staged to keep the news media informed can be an important part of the public relations process. Cutlip and Center in *Effective Public Relations* say public relations is "the planned effort to influence opinion through good character and responsible performance, based upon mutually satisfactory two-way communications" (p. 16).

You will note they say two-way communications. If we incorporate that into events like news days, it means we ought to use these occasions as a feedback or "listening" opportunity. Texas has been running a successful Extension Press Day for 12 years. Mary Mahoney says a key part is a "talk shop," breakfast session where news media people have their chance to speak out. Information staff people and administrators are the listeners. News media representatives may talk about the services of the agriculture information office, but anything is fair game. The session gives news media people a chance to talk about how the Texas Agricultural Extension Service serves the people.

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Mahoney says news media people say the "talk shop" session is the second most popular part of the program, next to interviews with specialists and researchers.

Typically, about 50 members of the working press drive or fly to the Texas A&M campus for two half-days of programs and to make scheduled interviews with extension specialists and researchers. About 350 interviews were scheduled for the 1979 event, March 29-30.

The media people are sent an "interview checklist" about two months before press day. They are asked to name the interviews they would like and the preferred time and date. These are returned to Texas A&M information people, who make up a master list for the interviews.

No doubt about it—the Texas example shows that a press day or news day can generate lots of good copy about your institution. "We see stories that originated from press day surfacing weeks and months after the event," Mahoney says.

But perhaps one of the most important functions a well planned news day can perform is to provide feedback about extension and research programs. Since most of us are in the information dissemination business, it can be a bit painful to ask ourselves if we are communicating. But ask we must. . .if we are to do more than pretend that we are communicating with our key audiences.

Cutlip and Center put it this way (p. 56):

Today, people are swamped and surfeited with information to a point of resentment. They are bombarded with pleas to listen, to buy, to give, to vote, to do this or not to do that. Faster living permits less and less attention to these pleas.

The demands of making a living, taking care of family chores, engaging in recreational pursuits, and fulfilling civic obligations take most of one's available time and energy. There is little time left to listen, less to read and precious little to think. The news media are pitched to these facts of life.

Hence, the effort to tell the story of an industry or institution is born *not so much of the desire for free publicity as of the need to be accurately interpreted*. Unless institutions make that effort, they risk being misunderstood and misrepresented. Many misunderstandings can be traced not only to misinformation but also to lack of information, and this can be the root of needless frictions and aggressions. *Informed support is strong, sure support.*

By promoting good listening—whether at news day events or otherwise—we can help initiate action that is responsible to the public interest and beneficial to the institutions we work for. Public opinion researchers say that most of what we know about public opinion and the principles of persuasion can be boiled down to four guiding principles (Cutlip, 1978):

1. The *identification* principle. Most people will ignore an idea, an opinion or a point of view unless they see clearly that it affects their personal fears or desires, hopes or aspirations. *Our messages must be stated in terms of the interests of our audiences.*

2. *Action principle.* *Unless a means of action is provided, people tend to shrug off appeals to do things.*

3. Principle of *familiarity and trust.* We buy ideas only from those we trust. We are influenced by, or adopt, only those opinions or points of view put forward by individuals or corporations or institutions that we regard as credible. Unless the listener has *confidence* in the speaker, *he is not likely to listen or to believe.*

Our news days and other contacts with the news media must reinforce this confidence and trust. Oftentimes, “trustees” of opinion and judgment are news media people. They may also be political figures, teachers, doctors, and priests, rabbis and ministers. Or, on a smaller scale, the trustees may be key people among the many groups to which people belong (Simon, 1976).

For several years administrators in the Institute of Agriculture, Forestry and Home Economics at the University of Minnesota have been meeting with local community leaders throughout the state. Object of the sessions is to encourage reaction to the institute’s programs. Budget proposals for the coming legislative session are shared with the citizen groups. Our dean says we get the “hard” questions from these people, before the budget proposals get to the legislature. Our administrators say this technique has created credibility and understanding for research, extension and teaching programs.

They try to get these “trustees” of public opinion to these meetings. This could be one reason why our campus has done relatively well from state legislative appropriations. When the Institute’s budget proposals and programs are questioned at the legislature, there is a corps of informed citizen leaders out there who are all primed to contact their legislators.

The fourth principle, *clarity*, says the situation must be clear to use, not confusing. The thing we observe, read, see or hear, the thing which produces our impressions, must be clear, not subject to several interpretations.

For Minnesota news days we select scientists who can communicate clearly to make presentations to the media people. It may

mean some "better" researchers are by-passed, but so be it.

If you have considered having a special day for the news media, you are not unlike me if one of the first thoughts that went through your head was, "What happens if no one shows up?" You know the feeling if you have ever been pushed to call a news conference when your instincts told you there was not much "news" to talk about. (It is for that reason that we call few news conferences.) When we planned our first Minnesota news day in 1977, we decided to bring country editors and the broadcasters to the St. Paul Campus (where the majority of our Experiment Station research is done) to let them look at some of the research projects.

We were not trying to peddle news. Rather we wanted to show the media people some of the more important on-going research projects, give them a feel of what research could accomplish and build relationships.

We wanted to provide background information (*an important part of the public relations process*) to keep the news media informed. We wanted to tell how tax dollars devoted to research were being spent and show how Experiment Station scientists address problems.

Our Extension agents were an important part of the program. They contacted their local news media people and encouraged them to attend. In most cases they shared a ride to the event. All of this gave agents a chance to build some rapport with their local news media and to help explain how county extension offices help disseminate results of Experiment Station research.

We think this is a good example of how Extension and the Experiment Station can work together.

We took the media people on walking tours to six research projects where scientists gave short highlight presentations in laboratories or classrooms.

It was too early in the growing season to go out to the field crop plots, so we had classroom sessions on developing new crop varieties and on nitrogen fixation research. Scientists used slides and other visuals to make presentations. However, the stops that were graded highest were those in laboratories where the media people and agents could look at some of the lab gadgetry and see what the scientists "produced." The reproductive physiology lab was one such stop. Laboratory animals on display ranged from rabbits to hawks. A closed circuit TV set that monitored a bull's sperm count provoked lots of interest. Good showmanship by the scientists with some humor thrown in made this one of the more popular stops. Scientists explained how endangered wild animal species could be protected through semen preservation techniques.

Another popular stop was the ruminant nutrition laboratory, where scientists displayed feeds from such "wastes" as poultry manure, ground bark and cannery by-products.

The evaluation of that first News Day was very positive. Media representatives and agents alike filled in the evaluation form at the end of the day. They said they learned some new things about food and agricultural research. They all said they would like to come back next year to see results of other research projects. Some Extension agents encouraged us to hold news days out in the state at branch research stations.

People also preferred the more action-oriented tours opposed to the classroom presentations.

The 1978 news day was held at the Rosemount Branch Station, about 20 miles from the St. Paul Campus. We tried to implement suggestions from the previous year by going entirely to wagon tours of crop and livestock research sites. We did not draw quite as many media people as before. Several of our county people and news media people who attended the first session had scheduling conflicts.

These were not statewide events—we were only trying to draw media people within, roughly, a 150-mile radius. We thought we attracted enough media people to make it worthwhile. Even though our main objective was not to generate lots of publicity, most editors and broadcasters who attended did some stories based on what they had seen.

The timing (spelled LUCK in this case) with the first news day was great. One of the Twin Cities television stations was just starting a syndicated morning agricultural program called "Country Day." Hungry for good ideas, they attended the news day and ended up using six or eight scientists on the program in the next few weeks.

One newspaper reporter who attended both years did not do any stories. But she viewed both events as a valuable background and learning experience. At both events we supplied media people with summaries of the research projects they toured. Many of them used the material to help write stories.

We were pleased with the results. We started rather modestly by not trying to attract a large number of media from the entire state. When we were planning our first news day our station director said, "Let's plan it on a small enough scale so we don't have a big bust if it doesn't go over." Responses to the first two were strong enough that we are planning to have at least one annually.

Will these events fill the coffers for more research and extension funding? It is obviously hard to make that claim and even harder to back it up. I think events like this can contribute to the overall pub-

lic relations effort by keeping media people informed. Other states are either starting or re-starting events like news days. Back in the 1950s and 1960s Ralph Reeder at Purdue organized an annual media day called "Date With Science."

Reeder says the events were good public relations gestures for the experiment station. They also solidified agent/editor relationships. County agents invited the media people to the event and usually rode with them to the Purdue Campus.

We didn't give the media people a lot of speeches or try to peddle lots of press releases. Our idea was to let them see some of the research facilities in an informal, low-key atmosphere. This gave us an excuse to get editors and county extension agents together. It was also valuable for the researchers, since most of them don't talk to news media people except for events like these.

H.S. "Ace" Tyler is now organizing media events called "Your Food" at Purdue. His object is to communicate the story of food prices to news media people and local leaders. Programs, held in different parts of the state, usually involve about eight to 10 counties and 15 to 20 media people at each. The program starts about 4 p.m. Administrators and agricultural economists give short presentations on the food price situation; the event ends with steak dinner. County agents choose a local leader to bring to the event. That gives a good mix of university experts, media people and local leaders.

At Michigan State, the local news media are given an "interview opportunity" once a month. Topics chosen for the news interviews included how to survive in a snowstorm (a specialist gave a demonstration using a stalled car), maple syrup harvesting and a demonstration of a new mechanical pickle harvester. The news media people come about 11 a.m., and the event is usually concluded by noon. Media people who have time are invited to lunch.

Another public relations event involves Michigan State people. It is a county commissioners' day. County extension people bring county commissioners on campus for tours of research facilities. The MSU agricultural information people shoot photos and send them along with stories to hometown papers.

Nebraska started having news days in 1978. They held one in April of 1978 and had another in March, 1979. They are using much the same technique as Texas does—media representatives come to campus to interview specialists and researchers for stories.

Increased interest in news days and other media events is probably due to at least two factors. Budgets are tighter now; hence

land-grant institutions are looking for more ways to attract and hold support. The news media have also been more interested in food and agriculture since the Russian grain deal in the early 1970s. World food shortages, higher domestic food prices plus increased interest in country living have made agriculture a more dynamic news beat.

### **References**

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