

Working with the Metropolitan Media*

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SOME THREE YEARS AGO administrators of the Agricultural Research Center at WSU became sufficiently concerned over the need for more and better communications with urban audiences that they funded a position in the information office for an agricultural research writer.

They hired me.

In Washington, through the position that I occupy, we are taking a highly personal approach to the metropolitan press. I'm hopeful that this approach will become more popular in College of Agriculture information programs, including our own. Perhaps I should acknowledge at this point what we all know. Some other states preceded Washington in this techniqueand with great success.

You may have heard about the boy who came home with a brand new basketball. He was practicing his dribbling in the living room when his father looked up from his newspaper.

"Where'd you get the basketball?"

The son said he found it.

"Well, why don't you take it down to the playground and shoot a few baskets?" the father asked.

"I'd better not," the son replied. "I might run into the boy I found it from."

That's how I feel making this presentation to this group.

Well, at least I can tell you how we shoot baskets in Washington.

I said our approach was highly personal. That's really the bedrock of our policy for dealing with the metropolitan press.

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If time permits we will cover the following aspects of my work with the urban media:

—Determining urban newsmen's attitudes and needs . . . and tailoring information programs and practices to take advantage of circumstances existing in the news industry.

—Increasing utilization of news releases and photographs.

—Feature writing for selected outlets.

—Liaison with writers and editors.

But first, some brief background. Geography is a great handicap to us in Washington. Pullman is a six-hour drive from the Puget Sound. It is two hours from Spokane. And, technically speaking, these are the only places in the state with metropolitan newspapers. There are two in Seattle, the *Post-Intelligencer* with 198,000 subscribers and the *Times* with 232,000 subscribers. The Puget Sound has one other met, the *Tacoma News-Tribune* with 96,000 subscribers, but I am excluding it from this presentation because WSU has a branch station just outside Tacoma where Earl Otis operates a one-man information shop and I pretty much leave the *News-Tribune* up to him.

In Spokane there are two small mets, the *Review* with a circulation of 83,000 and the *Chronicle* with 68,000 subscribers. In addition there are 17 other daily newspapers with circulations ranging from 5,000 to 42,000 with most running in the 20,000/30,000 range.¹

Although I work with all of the state's dailies, and with the Associated Press bureaus in Spokane and Seattle, I unabashedly concentrate on the four newspapers in Seattle and Spokane.

Determining Needs and Opportunities

As we embarked on this program to improve our communications with the urban press, one of my first tasks was to get to know the newspapers and their editors . . . to determine their interests . . . needs . . . prejudices . . . policies . . . and what-not.

My first step was to begin reading five newspapers every day, both Seattle papers, both Spokane papers, and one of the medium size dailies in the state.

I still do this quite religiously. How can I maintain a keen news sense without reading the papers? Without knowing what editors think is important at the moment?

Next, I visited the urban newspapers, let them know I was on board at WSU as a liaison with their staffs, and to determine how we could improve our relationships.

¹ All circulation figures from the 1975 Editor & Publisher International Year Book, pp265-268. Figures are rounded down to the nearest thousand.

I became acquainted with their staff assignments and began to get to know selected editors and writers, I also found out that two of the four mets that I work with were automatically filing our news releases in the waste basket . . .unopened!

Why?

The *Times* trashed them . . .because they got stung a few times by running a news release in the evening edition only to discover, too late to do anything about it, that their competitor had the same story in its morning edition the same day. They even had the misfortune of putting a WSU release on an early, inside page, only to have the P-I beat them with the same story by a day and a half.

They just weren't interested in having any more of those experiences.

In Spokane we had a similar problem.

Solution . . .an alternating schedule. The *Seattle Times* and the *Spokane Chronicle* get one release. The *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and *Spokesman Review* the next. The editors are happy, and our news is getting in all four newspapers.

I should make it perfectly clear, this alternating schedule is used only for my features. Extension information specialists are not using it. There's a real danger here. We haven't been burned yet. But if we don't apply this alternating schedule for news releases across the board it's just a matter of time until we jeopardize the whole system.

I don't religiously follow the alternating schedule. If I have a feature that stands a significantly better chance at one paper than another I violate the schedule and send it where I think it should go. Similarly, on significant spot news the story goes to the newspaper, or newspapers, that can handle it best.

I try to compensate on the alternating schedule by giving "make-up" stories.

My initial philosophy of how to work with the metropolitan press was reinforced by early contacts with urban newsmen, and led to continued frequent face-to-face contacts, supplemented with telephone contacts when appropriate.

I try to travel once a month, usually a four or five-day trip around the state.

One cardinal rule I've established for my personal contacts — I never walk into a newsroom without having read the latest editions of both my contact's paper and his competitor's. While on the road I buy a copy of every newspaper on the newsstands in every town I visit. And I read them, to expand my knowledge of all of the newspapers in Washington. I even do this while traveling out-of-state.

Do you have any idea how many newspapers you can buy at O'Hare? Kennedy? LaGuardia? National? I get some strange looks sitting with a pile of six or eight newspapers on my lap, especially when I start tearing out pages to take home with me to the office. But it is very helpful to know how various papers are treating the news.

A couple of quick examples of other practices that have come out of my personal visits with newsmen. I found that most of our daily newspapers and the Associated Press have Xerox Telecopiers and that they're willing to receive spot news on them.

So we invested in one, about \$50 a month, which we use only for spot news. We've found that editors are more receptive to these stories than to stories we want to dictate to them. They'll accept and print longer stories, and we eliminate errors, which have a way of creeping into dictated stories. But the machine's probably worth its cost in good-will alone. There isn't a reporter in the world who doesn't literally hate taking dictation on the phone.

The other item is offering pictures upon request. It is too costly for us to send pictures to all newspapers strictly on speculation. So, sometimes, we put a note to editors on the bottom of our release notifying them that such-and-such a photo is available on request. We describe it briefly.

We almost always get some response to this, usually a telephone call, and we get the picture in that night's mail or on the bus.

Writing for Selected Outlets

Another major element of our program is singling out a particular editor, at a particular news outlet, and writing a story especially for him. (In some cases, it's a her.)

The most common targets for this highly selective treatment are the science and business editors on the two major Seattle papers, and the Sunday supplements published by each of those papers. I also wrote a five-part series for the Associated Press² it was a profile of agriculture in Washington State. Only one of the five was about research. WSU was mentioned only once in the other four, and that reference was simply to identify a person being quoted. It was extremely low key, insofar as WSU's involvement was concerned.

The series was published in at least 12 Washington newspapers and one Oregon newspaper having a total paid circulation of 919,087³. We supplied photos, which the AP put on the wire with the features, and many newspapers used the photos. The series received excellent play, in terms of layout, front-page teasers, etc. And AP wants me to write two more series for them.

This series also provides an excellent example of work with the urban newsmen. I know that the *Seattle Times* has space problems. And I didn't

² Distributed on the Associated Press, Seattle Bureau's Washington State wire for release on Jan. 7, 1974.

³ Combined circulation figures from the 1974 Editor & Publisher International Year Book.

trust the *Times*' wire desk to have any interest in an agricultural series. We had very successfully stimulated the interest of others on their staff, but I feared that the "new" mood at the *Times* might not transcend to the wire desk.

So I telephoned a sympathetic contactwho expressed interest in the series. I furnished him a copy with the explicit understanding that he use it only to "sell" his editors on running the series. My agreement with the AP was that the series was theirs alone. If the *Times* had jumped the gun our relations with the AP would have been disastrously injured. But I had confidence in my contact at the *Times* . . . I certainly wouldn't have taken that risk for just anyone . . . and it paid off with an excellent ride in the *Times*.

Let's return a moment to writing especially for certain editors on the metropolitan papers. We've scored in the Sunday supplements which provide absolutely fantastic exposure.

SLIDE #1 . . The Seattle *Times*' Supplement, The Sunday pictorial, has a circulation of 298,000.⁴ Each issue uses several high-quality picture features with excellent color and black-and white reproduction. In this issue we placed a picture feature on a . . .

SLIDE #2 . . para-professional entomologist employed as an experimental aide in one of our branch stations.

SLIDE #3 . . We received four full pages.

SLIDE #4 . . And were delighted and plan to repeat with other appropriate stories. Thus far we've demonstrated that the door is wide open.

Another type of writing for a single outlet. Often when I'm planning a trip to Seattle, I try to cook up a story to lay on someone in person. When our wheat crop stats were first announced one year, I enlisted one of our economists and did a story on the urban impact of wheat harvest in Washington . . . how the \$265-million crop, farm value, was really worth \$460 million in the state's economy because of multiplier effects, and traced the economic benefits through 24 segments of the state's economy.

About 7:30 a.m. I walked in to the Seattle *Times* and asked to see Boyd Buchard, the business editor. They're an evening paper. Their business page was about to be locked up. I knew he didn't have time for pleasantries. So I didn't bother with them. I just said, "Boyd, I'm in Seattle on business and thought you might be interested in this story."

He asked whether the P-I had it.

I said: "No."

He said: "Thanks."

I said: "Goodbye."

That was the extent of our conversation. When I went to lunch in Tacoma I picked up the first edition of the Seattle *Times*. And there was my story, on the business page, without so much as a comma edited or a word removed.

⁴ 1975 Editor & Publisher International Year Book, pp 267, rounded to nearest thousand.

Similarly, I work with the science editors. In fact, the science editors are my most frequent and most successful contacts. Often I telephone them to discuss a possible story. If I'm releasing something especially to them I avoid the word "exclusive" because technically a public agency can't put out an exclusive. But the only way anyone else gets one of these "specials" is if they see it in print and ask for it. That has happened, but not often.

But, as I said, if I'm going to write especially for an editor, I call and discuss a story possibility with him before I invest time and energy in writing it for him. I've found them very receptive to this, and I think their expression of interest at this stage helps put them in the right psychological frame of mind to use it when they see the copy. You might say it puts them behind the psychological 8-ball, but it will not substitute for poor writing, or guarantee use.

A word about release dates. So far I have had only one violation of a release date. Now release dates are in disrepute among many AAACE editors, but I not only advocate them, I insist on them, for featured material that's released to more than one outlet. Spot news goes out "for immediate release." But failure to use release dates on features to multiple outlets invites many editors to discard the releases. While some contend that if an editor would rather trash a good release than take the chance of following other papers with it, that's his problem.

It is, but it's also our problem. If we are content to just push releases out the door, and don't care whether they find a home, then OK. But if our purpose is to get our releases used we'd better make ourselves amenable to the problems of the papers that we want to print them.

Liaison

An increasingly important aspect of our service to metropolitan papers is best classified as liaison work. And I believe in the future that more of my effort ought to be expended in this direction and a little less towards writing my own stories and sending them to these newsmen and newswomen.

We have some excellent examples of the benefits of liaison work. And we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that no matter how well we write a story when it arrives in a news room on our letter-head stationery it's suspect. But the same story with a staffer's name on it has acceptability. The same kind of acceptability that the AP bug carries.

Consequently, I'm delighted to serve as a resource person for newsmen and newswomen throughout the state. Sometimes I try to interest them in doing a story, making a trip to Pullman, or whatever, and sometimes I'm in the position of responding to a request generated by events in the day's news.

This sometimes is frustrating work. I had a science editor call wanting information on natural poisons in potatoes...alkaloids. I told him we

surely had plenty of experts; I'd have one call him right away. I called one of our good horticulturists. He said he'd call the reporter. I emphasized as plainly and as strongly as it is humanly possible to do that he should call right then.

More than a week later I received another call from the writer. "Did you ever find anyone who can answer my question on natural poisons in potatoes?"

Oh, boy!

I gave him the guy's number and let him call the scientist himself. He did, got the information he needed, wrote a very good story quoting a WSU scientist, and was very nice about the whole thing. Now, in those circumstances, I telephone the writer back and find out whether our scientist has fulfilled his promise to call. Or, if that's not convenient, I check back with the scientist and make sure that the writer got what he needed.

I feel strongly enough about the worth of this type of liaison work that I encourage writers and editors to utilize me as a resource for information on all of agriculture.

In this capacity I don't hesitate to point writers at the most appropriate source of information, even when it is not WSU.

Earlier we discussed personal contacts with various newsmen. Now, under the banner of liaison work I'd like to give an example of how important these can be.

On my last trip to Seattle I was visiting with the editor of *Northwest*, the P-I's Sunday supplement, hoping to pave the way for an article or two on the history of our experiment station as part of our State Agricultural Experiment Station centennial effort.

With great alarm I learned that the magazine would not be open to *any* historical material during the coming year. It took a lot of pumping to get the answer. The P-I had assigned a star reporter to work full-time for six months, researching and writing 52 Washington history pieces to be carried in *Northwest* as the P-I's contribution to the bi-centennial. At that time it was a super-secret project, no one outside the P-I staff was supposed to know about it.

The reporter, Walt Evans, was working out of his home and the P-I had thrown up a tremendous defense to keep Walt's many news contacts from getting through to them. He has an unlisted number. They wouldn't give it out.

Only by virtue of my knowledge of his special assignment was I able to get the newsroom to even tell Walt that I wanted to see him. Walt called me that night at my motel and we discussed his project briefly . . . agreeing to meet the next day. Then, I frantically prepared a pitch for him to include establishment of the Agricultural Research Center in his series. He bought it, and visited the WSU campus to gather material.

I also "sold" him on doing a possible second ag research feature, which

he's investigating, and on possibly two general agriculture features for the series. Sometimes I work almost as hard for agriculture in general as I do for agricultural research.

The important factors in this liaison success story are that I learned of Walt's project only by virtue of a personal visit with an editor. She would never have divulged his project to me on the telephone. I doubt that she'd have divulged it to me in person if we hadn't had previous conferences, and I've written for *Northwest*, and we had developed at least a little rapport.

Further, Walt probably wouldn't have returned my call if we hadn't already had a well-established working relationship. He knew when he got my message that I wanted to discuss his project, that I wouldn't be wasting his time. At least to that point I never had.

So these personal contacts can pay off in ways that we couldn't begin to foresee.

Now, here're some slides showing what can result from this kind of liaison work. Last September I got a telephone call from Tom Read, science editor for the *Seattle P-I*. His editors had assigned him to do a feature on research in Washington State that was aimed at finding new sources of food. His editors had read about such exotic, potentially new food sources as protein extracted from alfalfa for human consumption.

At WSU we simply aren't into that type of research. But with the help of Dr. Lowell Rasmussen, our associate research director, I was able to help the writer twist his assignment to write about what we **are** doing to increase the food supply.

The result, Read made a 580-mile trip to visit the WSU campus and outlying stations, where he interviewed scientists. I made the appointments for him and briefed the scientists on his needs.

He went home and wrote a six-part series⁵ which was kicked off...

SLIDE #5 ..on page 1 of the *Sunday P-I*, 247,000 paid circulation,⁶

SLIDE #6 ..illustrated with a four-color picture by one of their staff artists,

SLIDE #7 ..accompanied by two features inside on Page 3A.

SLIDE #8 ..Subsequent features were promoted with Page 1 teasers,

SLIDE #9

SLIDE #10 ..and good rides inside. This feature on page A3 is about work

SLIDE #11 ..one of our scientists is doing to increase protein in plant foliage.

SLIDE #12 ..Another Page 1 teaser.

SLIDE #13 ..And a feature about one of our scientists who is using a computer to simulate water movement in the soil. His research is on how plants use water. It could result in tremendous increases in wheat yields.

SLIDE #14 ..And a feature about one of our scientists who is learning how to feed wood to cattle, in place of grain.

SLIDE #15 ..We provided the photo.

⁵ Published beginning in the Sunday, Oct. 13, 1974, edition, The Seattle Post-Intelligencer.

⁶ 1975 Editor & Publisher International Year Book, pp267, figure rounded to nearest thousand.

SLIDE #16 . .The second to last day was this feature on a scientist who has worked out a no-plow system

SLIDE # 17 . . for planting potatoes. It increases yields and reduces air pollution.

SLIDE #18 . .And the final day on Page 10A, still in the front section of the paper,

SLIDE #19 . .this feature on forest grazing research which could result in mountain pastures carrying more cattle per acre.

For those who are interested, I have some brief comments on the philosophy behind what we're doing.

Dr. James Nielson, director of WSU's Agricultural Research Center, talks a lot about accountability. Last year his presidential address to the American Agricultural Economics Association centered on that subject.

He noted the growing demand for accountability. Congress demands it. The Office of Management and Budget demands it. State legislators demand it. State offices of budget demand it. Even the public demands accountability.

There are many built-in mechanisms to ensure whatever degree of accountability may be desired by the people who control the various sources of our revenue.

But the mechanism for accounting to the real source of most of our budgets, the public, is often overlooked and usually under exercised.

That mechanism is communication with the public. I'm not talking now about conveying to the public information that will be useful to citizens in the sense of educating them in how to use research or extension programs. I'm talking about educating the public in the knowledge that it does, however indirectly, receive something for the money it invests in agricultural research . . .that agricultural research benefits them, enriches their lives, and their pocketbooks, and is worthy of their support.

I suspect that some would argue whether this is accountability or public relations.

I would prefer to call it accountability. But I also would argue that accountability to the consumer is not only good public relations, it is the **best** public relations.

More than 78% of agricultural research in the State Agricultural Experiment Stations is funded from Tax dollars, both federal and state. And extension is virtually 100% funded by tax dollars.

Never has it been so important to account to the public for its support of these programs. While inflation has diminished the service we can provide for a dollar, it also has increased public pressure to cut government spending and to eliminate research that does not promise clearly-defined benefits.

Fortunately, never has there been a greater opportunity to account to the public through the metropolitan news media, especially in those of our programs that have to do with food, or the environment. Never within my

memory have the news media been more interested in agriculture, more open to well-written, well-placed stories on agricultural research, more open to well-thought-out, well-placed suggestions for stories that newsmen can write themselves.

But to gain acceptance with editors, and even more importantly, to fulfill the objective of providing accountability to the public, our stories have to spell out the consumer angle. We **can not** leave it to editors, or to consumers, to extrapolate research results into consumer benefits. We must write for consumers, emphasizing consumer interests.

Or, as Senator William Proxmire so aptly put it: "I believe very strongly that the academic and scientific communities have an obligation to the layman to be able to communicate, in plain simple English, what their objectives are, what they hope to find out, and what the potential benefit could be to the 'man on the street.' Our scientists can discover some of the most remarkable breakthroughs in the world, but if they cannot tell the Congress, or the Milwaukee factory worker, or the Mississippi farmer what they are and how they can be put to use, then they are wasting our time and money."⁷

While no small degree of responsibility for this communication lies directly with scientists, a very substantial part of this responsibility rests upon our shoulders as agricultural college communicators. We must press scientists for the information we need to explain, in simple English, what our scientists' objectives are, what they hope to find out, and what the potential benefits of their research could be, or what the actual benefits were, whatever the case may be.

Often this requires research on our part beyond the particular project that we're writing about. We may have to go to an agricultural economist not associated with the project and ask: "Hey, Joe over in animal science is trying to get an extra pound of milk out of dairy cows. If he succeeds, what would be the impact?"

And then we'd darned well convert all of that scientific math into stuff consumers can relate to. Let me give a related example. We're doing a story about milk. And, of course, the scientist talks about a cow giving 44,000 pounds of milk. That doesn't mean beans to a city fellow. Probably doesn't mean beans to you or me. But divide it by 8.6 to get 5,116 gallons and tell the reader that that amount of milk will provide all of the milk consumed by 167 "average" Americans in a year and 44,000 pounds of milk takes on meaning.

So, plain simple English isn't necessarily enough. A pound is certainly plain and simple English, but use it to define milk and it suddenly becomes an obscure Chinese dialect.

To whatever degree we will take the pains to speak in terms that the layman understands, and relate the stories to the consumer's interests, I can all but guarantee that editors will accept our stories and give them good exposure . . . and that their subscribers will read them.

⁷ Congressional Record, June 16, ppS10673-75