

Mass Media Gatekeepers for Colleges of Agriculture

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TO REACH THE PUBLIC, most news and information from colleges of agriculture must pass through an intermediary. This man in the middle is called a "mass media gatekeeper." He literally has the power to open or close the gate to any material he gets from colleges of agriculture.

The gatekeeper may be a newspaper or magazine editor, a broadcaster or program director; even county extension agents are gatekeepers. They and the others have the choice of either opening the gate or closing it to any college releases, tapes, films, or photographs, even publications. All must pass his scrutiny. Otherwise, the readers, listeners, and viewers which he holds in escrow will not be allowed access to messages from the colleges.

Focus of Study

A group of mass media gatekeepers recognized to be effective channels for creating awareness and interest in practices, products, and ideas was chosen for this study. Along with other information sources they have been successful in getting adoption, purchase, or acceptance. The audiences they serve are the same as those colleges want and need to reach.

Who these audiences are, what they are really like, what they want and need, and what agricultural college editors need to know to effectively reach them are subjects of the papers to follow.

It wasn't possible to research all gatekeeper groups or all mem-

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bers within any gatekeeper group on a national scale, so we decided to survey active and voting members of four national gatekeeper associations:

- American Agricultural Editors Association (mostly farm magazine editors)
- National Association of Farm Broadcasters (mostly large commercial radio and TV station farm directors)
- Newspaper Farm Editors of America (mostly daily newspaper farm page editors, a few farm newspaper editors)
- The Cooperative Editorial Association (editors of coop magazines and periodicals)

Most states were represented by members of the four associations, and about 50 per cent of those surveyed completed and returned the questionnaire.

Members of these associations are important disseminators of news and information to farm and home audiences, as well as to the general public, but there are other important gatekeepers—such as weekly newspaper editors and all the other editors and broadcasters not surveyed. These groups can best be studied on an individual state basis, possibly using the same questionnaire and survey technique employed in this study.

Objectives of Study

1. To determine generally what information services the gatekeepers were getting from colleges of agriculture;
2. How they evaluated the services received; and
3. What recommendations they had for improving services or starting new ones.

In a sense this was like having a National AAACE Communications Contest with our “everyday” information services—releases, tapes, films, and photos—being judged by members of the four associations. Could it be that their opinions of our “run-of-the-mill stuff” are more important, certainly more revealing, than winning blue ribbons with our carefully selected entries? You be the judge.

Findings

Colleges of Agriculture provide information to gatekeepers via college editors, researchers and extension specialists direct, and

county extension agents. Practically all the gatekeepers reporting received at least some material from all three sources. A substantial amount of material is apparently submitted to newspapers, magazines, and broadcast stations directly by researchers, specialists, and agents. However, it could be that gatekeepers get material from college editors, but because of story attribution credit the story as coming directly from one of these sources, and not from the editor. Magazines get relatively fewer contributions from agents, but all newspapers received material from them.

Broadcasters and newspaper editors are more likely to get material from colleges of agriculture than are either farm or coop magazine editors.

Releases, Stories, Articles, Photographs

Practically all of the magazine and newspaper editors responding receive news releases from colleges of agriculture. However, only 62 per cent of the broadcasters receive releases. Farm magazine editors get about 30 releases per week; newspaper editors, 11; broadcasters, 8; and coop editors, 5. Newspaper editors and broadcasters use a greater percentage of the releases and evaluate them higher than do the farm magazine editors.

Half of the gatekeepers said they could use "some more" or "much more" material from colleges of agriculture than they now receive. The broadcasters suggest a story length of not more than one page. The magazine and newspaper editors made no such request. Only about 10 per cent of the releases come with photographs.

Most of the photographs, 96-100 per cent, are black and white. The newspaper and coop publication editors were fairly well pleased with the photographs received. The farm magazine editors were less complimentary. All could use much more photographic material. Newspaper editors and broadcasters use a higher percentage of the photographs received than do farm magazine and coop editors.

Representative comments regarding photographs. Receive too few. Technical quality good, but too many "people shots." Don't like so many mug shots. Would use more if quality were better. Need photos that tie in with specific articles. Photo quality often is better than writing quality. Show story in pictures, keep them

simple. Have people doing things. Action. Provide pictures we cannot get ourselves.

Probably the most disliked photograph was that of posed administrators and organization officers.

Comments on releases and other services from colleges of agriculture were generally favorable—"good" to "fair." Farm magazine editors were most critical. Here are some representative comments.

Farm magazine editors say. Magazine content should rate higher than newspaper and radio. Farmers are not too interested in type of releases received. They do, however, provide a running report of information flowing from the university. More concern for farmer who reads and pays his taxes and less on promoting institutions. Too much is daily-paper oriented. **Like most:** Farmer experience stories. Research results. Exclusive articles with photos. New ideas for profitable production. **Like least:** Publicity puff for the institution and its administrative officers. Dry research without a practical application. Newspaper-type items. Re-hash of old ideas. Must go through so much material to find usable items.

Newspaper farm editors say. Material received is poorly written. College editors send everything so we pick and choose what we need. We read all releases for background. Like localized features with photos. Generally good, a few excellent, some pretty trashy. The college editors have to keep in mind the relationship of their information to current farm news.

Coop publications editors say. Must have material earlier in order to use it and still be timely. Usually require extensive revision.

Farm broadcasters say. Stories are written for newspapers, not radio-TV. Much is only "filler" for mail box. Need visuals. **Like most:** Be short and to the point. Provide helpful ideas farmers can use. **Like least:** Long technical releases. Old material "warmed over."

Telephone Reports

Is the telephone used to any extent to get information from colleges to gatekeepers? Not much! The gatekeepers averaged getting only one to three reports per week from all college

sources. They initiate most, only about half of the gatekeepers reported getting any information via telephone. Are we missing a bet here?

Comments. One telephone call is worth five stories mailed in. Usually solicit half of my reports. Most telephone tips are timely and newsy. Instant availability of technical aid. Standing order—call me collect. Spot news. Spray guide. Up-to-the-minute features. I must call them; they never call me. Usually better than releases. Would like to see more voluntary reports.

Other Findings

Magazine and newspaper editors rework most of the material they receive from college editors, while broadcasters and coop publication editors are more likely to use material just as they receive it from college editors.

Slightly more than half of the newspaper and farm magazine editors and broadcasters promote college for-sale items and fee services. The coop publication editors are not quite as willing to do so. Is the fee amount included? 73 per cent of the farm magazine editors said "yes"; broadcasters, 60 per cent yes; coop publication editors, 50 per cent yes; and only 36 per cent of the newspaper farm editors use the fee amounts in stories.

When asked what subject matter they wanted college editors to emphasize, "research findings" was the overwhelming first choice by all gatekeepers. "Timely tips" were in second place with each group except the newspaper editors. "How-to-do-it" items came in third, but newspaper editors prefer events coverage.

Do gatekeepers have enough contact with college editors? 30-40 per cent said "no." This should be our cue to develop closer relationships.

If invited to the college or university to report a special story, 90 per cent said they would come provided time and travel money were available and the story warranted it. About the same number said they would attend a "College of Agriculture Press Day." Evaluation of press days ranged from great to awful. Some states are doing a good job; others are not.

Probably the most useful part of this study came in response to Question 13: "What more than anything else could improve information services from colleges of agriculture?"

Newspaper farm editors say. Information service should be a news service, not a public relations vehicle. I would suggest college editors stress "the public's right to know" with researchers and specialists. Check with editors on when deadlines are. Some of the writers should study the AP or UPI style books. Sell ideas, not institution. Ask what good the story will do a reader; if it does him no good, he's better off without it.

Get some people doing the writing who are writers; they can get the information they need from someone else; few research people or specialists can write for the public. Know reporters and editors, understand their problems, deadlines, and space limitations. Triple the output. Narrow in on a specific problem.

Speed . . . Too often information is available on Wednesday, finally gets mimeographed and mailed Friday, we get it on Monday for first use in Tuesday's paper; week old! Or Saturday event gets written the following Monday, mailed Tuesday, etc. If a college editor ran across an old skeleton once in a while to rattle, it might be helpful. More contact between college editors and farm editors. Timely photos. Research features.

Coop publication editors say. Recognize the fact that material often comes too late to use. Regularly contact me to find out what I'm interested in publishing. Need more farmer stories and less how-to stuff. Put information in layman's language about new research being conducted. Let information staffs make more field trips to contact editors and become better acquainted; editors would welcome such visits and work with them in story development and use more college material. Something regular and concise. Categorize the materials.

Farm broadcasters say. Make sure the reports are concise, current, and to the point. Farm success stories. Better equipment or better use of equipment to approach professional level of reporting. Train local county agents and district agents in communications; a newsletter just to let us know what's going on at the college. Quit trying to sell the university. Forget personalities and try harder to get understandable ideas across.

Stories presenting both sides of an issue; farmer given information so they can make own decisions. Get out in field some; get "manure on your boots." More leads on stories we could do ourselves. You're bending to provide more services to city people at expense of country folks. Some editors need "speech therapy;"

others need to sound like they've been on the farm once in a while. Need a good inquisitive reporter who was **not** extension trained.

Farm magazine editors say. Break down some of the scientific reticence of researchers; give us a break over the pure science journals. Why should we wait a year or two for a report while it's awaiting publication in one of the dull, limited circulation scientific publications or the college ag publication, particularly if work was done with public funds.

Every news packet should be arranged so they can be reviewed in seconds. Put big titles on releases so we know what it's about right away. Categorize-color code. More pictures. With one million circulation and potential great impact we're more important than a county weekly. Many times I think only published material is available, but I am sure some significant research is conducted but never reported. I would like to see more qualified photographers on the agricultural college editorial staffs.

Extension has tended toward urban affairs, forgetting agriculture in large part. Select best media for different stories and offer exclusive use. News releases sent to everyone get little attention. Make release more than boring statements of facts or "plugs" for extension. Send different pictures with any feature article being sent to more than one news disseminator.

Don't "talk down" to readers. I appreciate and need releases, but offer criticism to make your product more useful. Use this guide: "If I write a release, will it really be useful to my user, or am I just putting words on a page to meet a weekly output." Appreciate surveys such as this as they lead to improvement and constructive change.

We'll get in touch and pull story together if you'll help point the way. Don't waste your time trying to "fit" our needs with ready-to-go stories; they never quite fit. Universities badly need to pull together material that crosses the lines of several disciplines in order to make more significant contributions to welfare of people. Ag editors probably must wage continual battle to get and keep the right kind of staff and the right to do what is needed.

Some place on or in the release, indicate correct name, address, and phone number of person responsible for the information.

I would suggest more college editors get out and talk with farmers to find out first hand what the final recipient of informa-

tion thinks he wants. Theories expounded during the daily coffee break often don't hold water when subjected to the true test, that of audience need and acceptance.

AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATORS SURVEYED—RETURNED

State	American Agricultural Editors Association		National Association of Farm Broadcasters		Newspaper Farm Editors of America		Cooperative Editorial Association	
	Sent*	Returned	Sent*	Returned	Sent*	Returned	Sent*	Returned
Alabama.....	5	2	2	1	2			
Alaska.....								
Arizona.....								
Arkansas.....	2	1	2				1	1
California.....	5		10		1	1	2	1
Colorado.....	1	2	4	3	2	1	2	
Connecticut.....			1	3	1			
Delaware.....		1						
D.C. (Washington).....		2	1		8		10	
Florida.....	1	1	1	1				
Georgia.....	4	1	1		1		3	
Hawaii.....								
Idaho.....			3	1	1			
Illinois.....	23	17	8	2	10	5	10	2
Indiana.....	2	1	6	4	2	1	3	1
Iowa.....	20	8	16	3	10	4	8	4
Kansas.....	8	4	8	5			5	2
Kentucky.....			4	1	3	2	1	
Louisiana.....			5	3			1	1
Maine.....								
Maryland.....	2	1					2	1
Massachusetts.....			1	1				
Michigan.....	5	2	4	4	1		9	
Minnesota.....	14	9	6	2	2		7	3
Mississippi.....	1		1				2	1
Missouri.....	12	3	9	1	2	1	18	3
Montana.....			2	2	3	1	1	
Nebraska.....	3	2	10	2	2	1	3	1
Nevada.....	1							
New Hampshire.....								
New Jersey.....	2	1					1	
New Mexico.....								
New York.....	4	2	3	2	2		9	1
North Carolina.....			6	1	2	2	1	1
North Dakota.....			3	1			2	2
Ohio.....	7	5	4	1	6	2	10	5
Oklahoma.....	4	2	5	2	2	2	1	
Oregon.....			1		1			
Pennsylvania.....	11	1	1	1	3	2	2	1
Rhode Island.....								
South Carolina.....					2			
South Dakota.....	2	1	5	3			3	1
Tennessee.....	4	2	4	4	2	1		
Texas.....	4		19	10	11	1	1	

Continued

AGRICULTURAL COMMUNICATORS SURVEYED—RETURNED (Continued)

State	American Agricultural Editors Association		National Association of Farm Broadcasters		Newspaper Farm Editors of America		Cooperative Editorial Association	
	Sent*	Re-turned	Sent*	Re-turned	Sent*	Re-turned	Sent*	Re-turned
Utah.....	1		1	1				
Vermont.....								
Virginia.....	3	3	4		1		5	1
Washington.....	1	1	1				2	2
West Virginia.....			2	1				
Wisconsin.....	10	5	10	3	11	5	14	4
Wyoming.....								
Canada.....	1	1	3				6	
New Zealand.....					1			
Colombia.....							1	
Not identified.....		1		1		1		2
Total.....	163	82	172	69	95	32	146	41

* Listed according to address of base operation. Many gatekeepers responding serve audiences in several states. Surveys were sent to all active members listed in the 1970 Directory of Communications in Agriculture, Published by Agricultural Relations Council, 18 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Questions for Further Thought . . . and Action

1. More than half of the gatekeepers said they could use "some more" or "much more" material from colleges of agriculture than they now get. Is all the news and information generated in and by college of agriculture staffs being released? If not, why? What is needed?

2. Gatekeepers complained repeatedly about the college editor's concern with promoting college staff members, administrators, and the institution and his apparent lack of concern for or knowledge of what people really want and need. Is this a fair criticism? Are college editors too institution-oriented and not enough audience-oriented? Publicity-promotion: for whose benefit is it done? What priority should it receive?

3. Research findings should be emphasized, the gatekeepers say. Research was far and away their No. 1 topic preference. Are college information departments doing all they can to meet this request? Is there a need for more research editors? Should experiment station administrators make a stronger commitment to getting research findings into current media? Should the Hatch Act phrase regarding "printing and disseminating" research findings be interpreted to mean more than just experiment station publications and print media? How about allocating experiment station funds for radio, TV, and film reports?

4. Many gatekeepers seem to feel that college editors don't know or care much about their audiences. There's a serious need for college editors to be more in tune with audience needs as perceived by gatekeepers. Should statewide studies be made of each gatekeeper group to determine audience needs as they see them? Would their evaluation of and suggestions for improving college of agriculture information services be helpful?

5. In general, shouldn't there be a stronger emphasis on communications research within colleges of agriculture, preferably with agricultural communicators doing the research?

6. Farm magazines continue to be a popular information source for farmers, and the editors contend they "should rate higher than newspapers and radio." Some television farm directors feel the same way. Should these gatekeepers receive preferential treatment? Is it appropriate for colleges of agriculture to honor requests for exclusive information services?

7. Similarly, each medium has its own unique copy requirements. For example, articles written for newspapers are not liked by magazine editors or broadcasters, and vice versa. With present resources—personnel, etc.—how can communication departments best provide specialized services to each media group?

8. Gatekeepers complained about the time-consuming process of sorting through reams of releases each week. Stories, they say, need to be categorized and coded according to subject matter, and each article should have a full, descriptive title. How can college editors best meet this need?

9. The telephone is a highly satisfactory means of getting information to gatekeepers. A high percentage of the reports received are used, and the gatekeepers would like to see this method used more extensively. What can we do about this?

10. Should officers and/or representatives of the major gatekeeper associations be invited to speak and make their case at regional and national AAACE meetings?

11. What are the key factors in conducting a successful "Press Day" for gatekeepers? Some states seem to do a good job, others don't.