

Administrator and Communicator Cooperation, Essential for Success

By Don M. Springer

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On behalf of almost 700 members of our professional organization, the Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE), I want to say thank you for this opportunity to share some thoughts and ideas with you.

Recently, I had a privilege which I would like to share, because it helps set the stage. I was a member of a regional panel to screen applicants for the first "journalist in space". It was exciting to be involved in that kind of effort, even at a distance. A couple of things came across in every individual's application: The applicant was a dedicated communicator; and the individual was enthusiastic about life and living—about experiencing as much as they could experience, and, then, translating that experience to others.

This is a lot of what those I represent do as communicators. We enjoy what we do! And we try to do the best we can to translate and transmit experience and information to others. It's not easy, nor do we seek ease in what we do.

Let me suggest, both to administrators of experiment stations and extension services, that we need to plan together to find areas where we can cooperate in communicating. For instance, if you go to a builder and say, "Build me a house", you'll expect some questions: "How big should it be?" "Where are you going to locate?" "What resources are available?"

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It is the same with communicators. We have to know something of your intent and your priorities. And we must be involved in that planning process to be as good as we can be in the communications process.

Three Areas of Cooperation

I see opportunities for cooperation in communicating in three arenas: the national arena; the regional or multi-state arena; and that which involves agencies or divisions within the individual states.

- At a national level I don't know how anybody can be anything but excited. The first journalist in space is a case in point. The amount of information such experiences and resulting technology can deliver for journalism is awesome. The speed and the distances at which information can be transmitted are awesome, too. The kinds of calculations that can be done in a matter of seconds used to take scientists years. Problem solving, model building, answering the questions of "what if...".

As communicators, those in my profession—and you—will need to be aware of this "what if" and the "media mix". We need to "package" our information. If we're to gain attention in the competitive information market, we have to be aware of the packaging and the mix as we put them together to deliver, through communication, the subject matter information to our "clientele". Another factor—we must also think of the need for fast turnaround. People are impatient. If they need information, they demand it now, not later. We're going to have to pay attention to that, maybe more than ever before.

And, we are using new tools. For instance—interactive video discs provide the capability of having entire encyclopedic volumes at our electronic fingertips for identification of insects, for use in anatomy or physiology—or whatever—and for problem solving.

Satellite, video and audio teleconferencing use is growing. We must cooperate with those ventures.

Computer data networks, electronic mail, electronic publications, decision aids—these kinds of things, we all hear and know about. They are areas from which we can receive great benefit. But, again, the word is cooperation.

- In terms of the regional arena, it's going to be similar to that at the national level, except that the focus will be more concentrated; that is, there will be more "focus". The content may change. For example, Texas could be considered to be about five different states when you look at the crops and livestock produced and the various soil regions. Those farmers along the coastal regions who raise rice aren't necessarily interested in practices surrounding dryland farming of grain sorghum, and *vice versa*. So, we

need to be aware of content. To share what we can share. Within your communications staff, you've seen some of that work in publications. But, there's more. We need to see what we can do in sharing video formats, in interactive video computer-driven discs, in computer-assisted decision aids, and other areas. We will soon get into much more data exchange and program sharing. But it will take planning, and it will take resources.

- When we turn to the individual states, we need to recognize that there is a difference in terms of agencies and divisions—where they're coming from, their missions, their priorities, their goals. There's a difference, you must know, in terms of audiences, even though, at times, they may be made up of some of the same people. You're going to reach them at different times for different reasons, and therefore, the "audience" has changed.

Communicator's Role—to Help

That's a communicator's role. If we know your goal, we can help. And—that's cooperation. How we cooperate, and on what, may be determined as much by the administrative or program structure that exists in a state as by any other single factor. It will probably be the basis for resource allocation and utilization.

At the last ESCOP-ECOP workshop, held in Atlanta, we observed the various types of communications units organized at land grant institutions. There was the single unit, university-wide, that tried to meet all of the demands of a great university. There was the single unit, college of agriculture-wide, that tried to meet all the demands of that type of an institution. There are those of us that make up units serving joint "agencies", if you will, serving two administrators, and funded from two separate sources with two sets of priorities.

Then, there are those institutions that have separate units for experiment station and for extension service. They cooperate only through the interaction of staff, and try to seek the economies of joint use of facilities. How you will go about securing cooperation depends on which kind of an organizational structure you find.

But, any organization can and does work, depending on *people*. The key always is *people*.

What are the implications of what we're looking at? We have some real challenges as we look at communications in terms of research. For instance, have we as communicators discussed with administrators communication plans for dealing with the objections of animal rights activists to research or recommended rearing practices? What would we do if either through vandalism or terrorism, regardless of what label you put on it, our labs were to be invaded, our test plots destroyed? What would we do to counter publicity drives against agricultural research and current production practices? Are these planning possibilities?

Genetic engineering has the potential to be a key to some wondrous advancements. But have your scientists been asked how they feel about the life manipulation aspect of living cells? Do they have an answer?

These things need to be considered and actions determined before they occur. We need to be thinking in terms of, not only the bright side of this era but what may also come with it, and we need to prepare. We best can do this by sharing and cooperating in various training and communications efforts.

As we turn toward more basic research, what about the return on investment? That becomes less apparent to the practitioner of agriculture as you turn more and more to basic research. It becomes increasingly difficult to communicate the benefits of this research. And, extension is not too different as we look through some of these same kinds of considerations.

The decisions on programs and delivery methods, and the priorities and dedication of resources, are going to be made by administrators, not by communicators. So, I would hope that we would have your ear—that of the administrator—and the opportunity for some input as we plan ahead and follow through.

Communicators Are Cooperators

Communicators are, by their very nature, cooperators. We take your purposes and priorities, your messages and materials—massage these, using the skills, knowledge, techniques and technology available to communicate with your clientele. In short, work with others.

Communicators have been called “wordsmiths”. I won’t quibble with that. But words are labels to which we place meanings. They are the wheels which transport ideas from one mind to another.

It’s a communicator’s job to make sure that your message, your vehicle, has a matched set of wheels and to be sure that set is appropriate to what you want to deliver. We can do that.

I offer that as an illustration to show that we must work together, not only to meet the challenges, but to make sure that our efforts are matched. The efforts of administrator and communicator must supplement and complement each other if we are to transport ideas and information quickly, freely and accurately, for the benefit of our clientele.

We are the pioneers of this era of new experience and technology, just as were the pioneers of the era of the Morrill, Hatch and Smith/Lever Acts.

We can make a difference, too. The challenge and opportunity are ours.
