

Communication Strategy: Does the Two-Step Still Work?

By F. Dale Parent and Stephen B. Lovejoy

Much of our work in cooperative extension deals with the transfer of information or technology to clientele. Therefore, it is extremely important that we use the most effective and efficient means possible in carrying out this task. Often, both consciously and unconsciously, we have depended upon what is known as the "two-step" flow of communication. This strategy involves working with a small number of local leaders, and using them to get information out to others in the community. This assumes that those we work with are opinion leaders in the community and that others will follow their example and begin using the new ideas, technology, production practices, etc. that we are trying to promote. This strategy has indeed worked extremely well throughout the history of the Cooperative Extension Service.

Rural America and Change

But how well does the two-step strategy currently work? Rural America has changed dramatically over the years. Many observers suggest that rural area leadership has become more fragmented.¹ Today, rather than being overall opinion leaders, rural leaders tend to have expertise in only specific areas of knowledge. For example, leaders in educational issues may not be the leaders in land use issues. Leaders in production technologies may not be the leaders in conservation technologies. Secondly, rural residents have greater access to urban-based medias (e.g. TV, radio and printed media, including farm press). Therefore, they may be less dependent on local leader advice.

In these changes there is reason to suspect that the two-step communication strategy may not work as well as in the past. In fact, some researchers have suggested that the two-step strategy is no longer a viable method for transmitting information and transferring technology.² These researchers feel that information is not "trickling down" from leaders to others in the community as intended. In

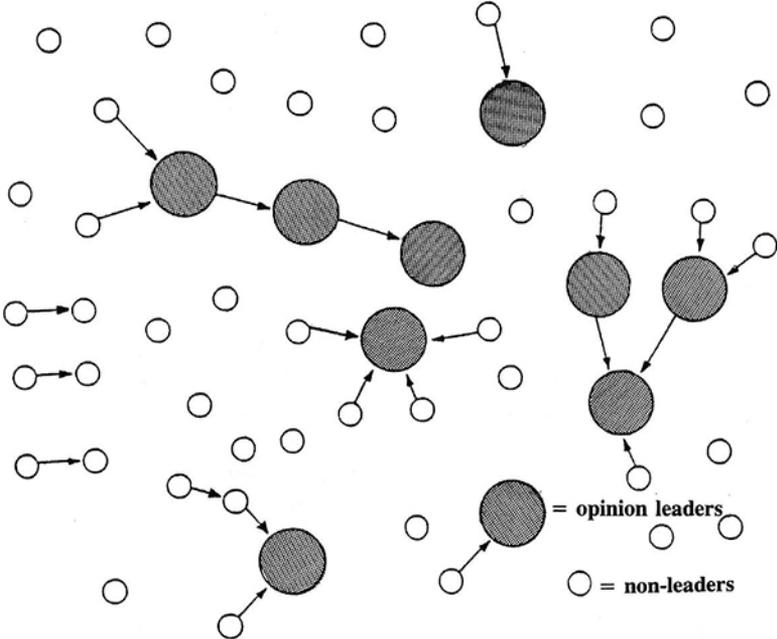
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this paper, this problem is looked at more closely by focusing on a government-sponsored project that used the two-step communication strategy to introduce conservation practices to a group of northern Indiana farmers. Through discussions with all farmers in the study area it was determined if, and from whom, each farmer sought advice about the use of the conservation practices. Further, we were able to determine to what extent farmers were using recommended practices.

Social Structure of the Study Area

Figure 1 shows the informal social structure of the study area. The larger circles represent the ten people who were identified as opinion leaders at the time the project started. The smaller circles represent the non-leaders. The opinion leaders were targeted to receive more information and contact from project personnel than the rest of the farmers. In fact, these leaders were contacted by project personnel nearly twice as often.

FIGURE 1.
The informal social structure of the study area.



Advice Seeking

The arrows in Figure 1 indicate where one farmer had gone to another farmer for advice. As can be seen, some non-leaders did act as expected by seeking advice from opinion leaders. However, the number of non-leaders seeking advice was small. Instead, much of the communication that occurred was among the leaders themselves rather than between leaders and non-leaders. Only 14 of the 29 non-leaders sought advice directly from one of the opinion leaders.

Impact of Strategy on Adoption of Practices

What do the study developments imply? First, it is clear that the "trickle-down" of information from the 10 opinion leaders to non-leaders was only moderately successful. The information that was supposed to reach all reached only a portion of the farmers. However, what is really important to note is the impact which this communication strategy had on the diffusion-adoption process. More specifically, who actually began to use the recommended practices? After all, the primary purpose was the adoption of conservation practices, i.e. a transfer of information and technology.

We found that by the end of the 8-year project, the opinion leaders were using nearly 90 percent of the practices recommended for their farming operation. However, non-leaders were using less than 55 percent of the practices. Therefore, it would seem that the two-step communication strategy employed by the project was less than successful.

Conclusion

The current findings, which are supported in other studies,³ point to the fact that the diffusion strategy most commonly used by extension personnel may be benefiting certain segments of the population (opinion leaders) at the expense of others (non-opinion leaders). This strategy has long been recognized as the most efficient and equitable means to diffuse information. However, extension personnel involved in this type of activity must seriously consider the consequences of such a strategy. We must realize that our clientele have changed and the social setting in which we operate has changed. A more equitable approach, which doesn't single out a few individuals to receive a disproportionate amount of agency resources, may be more appropriate.

¹ Ayres, Janet. A Comparative Analysis of Residents' and Leaders' Attitudes Toward Community Change. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University.

² Brown, Lawrence A. *Innovation Diffusion: A New Perspective*. New York: Methuen, 1981.

³ Brown, *Innovation Diffusion: A New Perspective*; Brown, Marilyn A., Gaybrielle E. Maxson, and Lawrence A. Brown, "Diffusion Agency Strategies and Innovation Diffusion: A Case Study of the Eastern Ohio Development Center," *Regional Science Perspective* 6:1-26, 1977; Parent, F. Dale and Stephen B. Lovejoy, "The Use of Conservation Technologies in Agriculture: an Examination of the Market and Infrastructure Approach," Staff Paper No. 84-10, Department of Agricultural Economics, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.
