

What Kinds of Research Information Do Communications Practitioners Need?

by John Pates

Listen to a communicator attending any conference related to their work and one could conclude that the mission of the average communications office has become:

“Do more, do it better, do it with LESS!! Not only on less money . . . but less time!” Now, if that isn’t the perfect recipe for frustration, it would be hard to find one. Unfortunately, it seems to be a feeling shared by many.

Given that oversimplified scenario: What research information do communication practitioners really need?

I felt it would be good to gather a few opinions from some whom I consider to be working “in the trenches” of the information business. So I asked . . . And what did I get back??

I think I received about a dozen letters. Responses ranged from two lines to four pages. And suggestions were usually totally different from each other.

After looking at those letters, most questions posed by practitioners fall into three or four categories.

Your Audience

The first and most prevalent questions could be called “audience type” questions:

“What’s the most efficient way to determine audience needs on a continuing basis: surveys, advisory groups, focus groups?”

“Is our information distribution system outdated?”

“Where do print materials fit in the “mix” and is their use declining?”

“Is being able to access information more important than clarity or elements of writing? Isn’t anybody interested in quality?”

“How can we promote meeting attendance?”

“How much will people pay for information and how do we market “for sale only” materials?”

“Are we reaching the desired audience?”

“How do you sell “pie in the sky” stuff to legislators?”

The author is agricultural editor at South Dakota State University, Brookings, South Dakota, and a 33-year member of ACE. Prepared from remarks presented at the 1987 ACE North Central Region Conference.

Gatekeeper Concerns

The second largest group of questions dealt with "gatekeepers" of the information process for both print and electronic media. For example: "Who carries our stories and why?"

"What about Public Service spots? FCC has changed rules, can we still use them effectively?"

"Our large papers are devoting less space to agriculture. Why? Seems we have fewer readers unless there is an ag crisis?"

Now, practioners who work directly with an audience have one set of problems, but those who operate through the commercial media have one additional problem. . . that is getting by the "guard" or the gatekeeper for that particular media outlet. We tend to assume that the gatekeeper always has a finger on the pulse of the audience, when, in fact, he or she suffers from the same problems that we do. We need to know how that gatekeeper actually tracks the audience. You have heard it said (and by and large it is true) that one of our most serious limitations with mass media—especially when it comes to providing scientific, technical and policy information—is the arbitrary time and space constraints that are imposed on us by every commercial news channel.

For example, we are told: "A news story longer than two pages won't get used. A publication of eight pages or more is too long. Exhibits that can't scream a message at you in 15-20 seconds is no good. Radio spots longer than 15-20 seconds are dead. A 15-minute video tape is maximum length."

Over the years, I have adhered to those statements, too. And I could not count the number of times that media members or an audience has made a liar out of me.

How many of you who work with newspapers have told your people that print media won't take or use a picture of someone getting an award? Then some local agent takes that kind of a picture and it gets front page position.

Last summer our university relations office put out a little story on a geography professor who wrote a book. Usually these items are for local use and get buried on page six. The *Brookings* (S.D.) *Register* had a short news day and took that story and placed it on page one. Now you try to explain to the next guy who writes a book why it isn't worth a page one story in the local paper!

Most of us have had experiences like that. So what people say (including gatekeepers) is not necessarily what they always do. Example: Scott Fedale, radio-tv coordinator for Idaho (and ACE member) tells that when he first got on the job he met with news directors to find out how receptive they were to taking stories he prepared. He was told: "Sorry we don't use canned stories."

They want to do their own. Sure, but how often can they send a TV crew out 300 miles to a university campus?

Scott had to make a decision. He decided that he needed to find a way to give stations what *they* wanted (editorial control) while getting them to do what *he* wanted (air stories about agricultural research and extension activities at the University of Idaho).

So, he gave them a written intro plus three times more footage than they would need or use. In between opening and close he put an on-camera statement by the talent used in the story. He provided a printed opening and close, then supplied a complete list of timed cover footage, to aid stations in the editing process.

The results were better than he had dared hope. He did some evaluation and eventually asked stations to dub their version back on the video tape before sending it back. What did he find? Many were using exactly what he had sent out.

Scott "researched" his Idaho television gatekeepers. And he earned their trust. To me this demonstrates that if we do our audience homework we can probably get almost any message out to the public. The key is knowing our audiences and gatekeepers well enough to know where the payoff is. (Remember, county staffs are also information gatekeepers.)

Administrative Questions

A few respondents had administrative type questions. Here is just one example:

"How useful is our information service in helping Experiment Station and Extension accomplish their missions?"

Don't forget your administrator audience has a need, too—to keep the institution or organization out of political hot water if possible!

Our administrators in Extension and research may be suffering from the same problem affecting politicians. Our audiences have become so fragmented, so single-issue oriented, that it is becoming more and more difficult to put together any kind of a meaningful support base. And we are suffering mightily for it.

The other area that seems to bother most communications practitioners is expanding technology. First, it would appear to threaten our jobs because everybody can now use it. Second, what is the overall effect on the audiences we are dealing with and the quality of the message? In a way this is also an audience-type question, of course.

In this day of specialization and the need for instant information we need to be aware that we are dealing with much higher volumes of information and with audiences that are more and more specific in terms of information needs.

What practitioners seem to be saying is that they need more and more information about the specific audience they are working with at any given moment.

A Love Affair With The Audience

It is becoming more important than ever that a good communicator develops a "love affair" with the audience! And when you have a true love affair you want to know everything about that person. Who they are, where they have been, what experiences they have had, what do they read, what do they watch, and why?

Time is always a concern. Perhaps a formalized survey is not possible, but if we could do four to five per year and share what we find, it could be very helpful.

Based on the responses to my letter, and the questions, it is obvious that the No. 1 problem for the information office practitioner is that there is no No. 1 problem! There are hundreds, and most can only be answered by the audience we are trying to reach at a given moment.

That makes the life of the communications practitioner more and more complicated. . .but also more challenging.

Technology Threatens?

Some worry about technology replacing the communicator. Remember when television first came on the scene? Many prognosticators said we might as well forget about printed materials because everybody will be watching television.

What happened?

People heard and saw things of which they had never dreamed. Curiosities were aroused, and libraries tripled their business. General interest publications have fallen by the wayside, but they have been replaced by dozens of other publications that address special interest audiences with more in-depth material.

Then along comes the computer and we hear that this technology will make the printed word obsolete. What I see coming from the computer is, by and large, printed material! The predictors of a "paperless" society are losing their credibility.

For some reason we also keep listening to those who say everyone is going to be able to access information on the computer. Our researchers tell us you have to take that with a grain of salt. Recent studies in Iowa and New York tell us that computer technology is purchased by fewer than one percent of the farmers per year and it seems to be leveling off. The present rate of adoption is about 10 percent.

What about video technology? Many administrators have become carried away with the idea that this is the only way we can communicate with tomorrow's audience.

Much of the video and audio technology is extremely important today because this is the way we get audience attention. But when it

comes to *helping* people use and apply educational information, electronic broadcast material is practically useless, unless it is accompanied by something written or that has interactive capability.

ACE Also Affected

Even ACE is being impacted by the “specific audience syndrome”.

I am disturbed by the fragmentation that has taken place within our own ranks. I hear many speak as though the particular media in which they work is the only important one.

We must think of the audience. They do not deal with only one type of media. Each technology has its purpose and plays a unique role. So a practitioner needs to learn more about how each technology contributes to the message, or messages, which the audience receives. Then plan message treatment accordingly.

Over the years I have had administrators who have tried to split our group to be housed in more than one building, using the rationale that print and radio/tv people really don't work together, anyway. In fact, I have had staff members attending a weekly staff meeting tell me they are wasting their time when we share with each other the projects we are working on.

That is mushy thinking in my book. If we aren't working together, we ought to be. And when you analyze messages and audiences these days it is becoming more and more important that we do work together.

One questioner asked: “how do we get the greatest bang for the buck?” My answer would be by coordinating our communications efforts. That's hard enough to do with a small staff, it must be nearly impossible in a larger one. But I think it is a worthy goal!
