A Model for Extension Publication Planning and Scheduling Systems

Judy F. Winn

Abstract

A research project using naturalistic inquiry was undertaken to learn which systems of planning, prioritizing and scheduling extension publications are in use throughout the country. Data from those states determined to have such systems were used to create a model. That model became the basis for a new planning and scheduling system adopted in Texas in l995. The system has achieved its main goals: helping the publications staff manage their workload; and giving county agents a voice in determining which publications are printed.

Introduction

The Department of Agricultural Communications at Texas A&M University needed a system of planning, prioritizing and scheduling extension publications. We operated on a first-come, first-served basis, never knowing what our workload would be from day to day. Authors often had such unrealistic expectations about production times that we were unable to complete publications when requested and were criticized for taking too long. The total number of projects we were expected to manage was not related to the size of the communications staff available to do the work. Furthermore, the publications that specialists chose to produce often did not reflect the greatest needs of extension clients. We thought that if county extension agents, who do not author publications, had a voice in the publishing process, their knowledge of the public's needs could help extension be more responsive.

Judy F. Winn is associate professor and extension communications specialist with the Texas Agricultural Extension Service located at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. She has been a member of ACE since 1974. This work was presented at the 1995 meeting of the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists, Agricultural Communications Section, in New Orleans. She also discussed the project at the 1997 Western ACE meeting in Las Cruces.

To address these problems, we wanted a system that would do two things: (a) bring order to the publishing effort and help the publication staff manage their workload; and (b) give county agents a voice in determining which publications are to be printed.

Methodology

I set out to learn what kinds of systems other states use and how they work, using Lincoln's and Guba's methodology for naturalistic inquiry. An open-letter survey was sent to the person in charge of extension publications, or the Agricultural Communications Department Head, in 48 states (I was unable to find contacts in two states). The survey asked only two main questions: "Do you have a system for planning and/or scheduling the extension publications you publish, and if so how does it work?" and, "How would you change your system to make it better?"

I also asked two peripheral questions about the size of the staff and the number of publications produced per year. These were not used in data analysis, but were for information only.

I received 17 responses—a 35% return. Of these 17 responses, I followed up with phone calls to seven respondents and an E-mail dialogue with one in order to clarify points or fill in gaps in the information.

My next step was to analyze the content of the answers received by reducing them to their smallest units of meaning (a method described by Lincoln and Guba). Units of meaning were categorized and cross-referenced, which allowed each unit of meaning to be separated from its context while maintaining a path to the complete response so that conclusions could be verified. I found that the content of the survey responses fell into several categories related to planning/scheduling systems. These categories (posed as questions) were:

1. Is there a planning/scheduling system?

2. Who authors publications?

3. Who funds or approves expenditures for publications?

4. Who determines the number of copies of a publication to be printed?

5. What problems do you have?

I then analyzed the publishing systems described by states that claimed to have them. It became clear that not all of them involved the kind of integrated planning and scheduling that might allow us to meet our objectives in Texas. Two criteria emerged as critical to a true planning and scheduling system:

- Authors must be required to plan ahead and submit proposals for publications all at one time (or else it would be impossible to create a comprehensive production schedule); and

- A group other than the individual editors must set publishing priorities (or else the burden would remain on editors to juggle competing demands for time).

Some states met one of these criteria but only six met both.

Characteristics of Existing Systems

The systems in these six states were broken down into the following series of events, posed as questions:

1. What is the cycle for proposing publications?

2. Who receives proposals and what do they do?

3. What does Agricultural Communications receive and do?

4. What other events occur?

Table 1 summarizes the answers (See pages 10-12).

Because it was important to us that county agents be involved in the publishing process, I next determined whether agents in the six states have a say in determining which publications get printed, and in what quantities (Table 2, on page 13).

In all six systems, county agents have some involvement in publishing decisions, and in some systems they have quite a lot . The systems in these states, then, satisfy both criteria we had set for a publication planning and scheduling system in Texas.

The question then was: How effective are these systems?

I found that two factors affect how well these systems actually allow publications staffs to manage their workload: (a) whether or not they are enforced, and how; and (b) whether or not all publications must go through the planning/scheduling process (Table 3, on pages 14-15).

Table 1.
Outline of the six, true, planning and scheduling systems

State	What is the proposal cycle?	Who receives proposals and what does that entity do?	What does Ag. Comm. receive and do?	What other events occur?
A	Twice a yr.	**Separate review committees for each program area** (committees include agents, specialists, administrators and publications staff) • Reject, guarantee publication if submitted, or accept provisionally if there's money • Prioritize approved publications	3 prioritized lists (1 from each program area) • Processes publications according to priority as they come in— without any advanced scheduling	
B	Once a yr.	**Separate review committees for each program area** (committees include agents, specialists, administrators and publications staff) • Approve or reject • Do not prioritize 2 unprioritized lists (1 from each program area)	• Sets priorities according to requested delivery dates, when publications arrive • Reminds authors if publications aren't submitted when promised, but processes them whenever they come in	

State	What is the proposal cycle?	Who receives proposals and what does that entity do?	What does Ag. Comm. receive and do?	What other events occur?
C	Once a yr.	**Program units** • Prioritize lists	Many prioritized lists (1 from each program unit) • Dean decides how many publications on each list will be printed and gives final lists to publications staff	
D	Once a yr.	**Program units**	• Prioritize lists Many prioritized lists • Publication coordinator puts each publication into the year's production schedule according to its planned submission date, requested completion date and estimated specifications	Publications Advisory Committee (made up of administrators and publications staff) • Hears staff's opinion on how much work can be done • If necessary, deletes some publications or puts them on a 2nd priority list

Table 1. *(Continued)*

State	What is the proposal cycle?	Who receives proposals and what does that entity do?	What does Ag. Comm. receive and do?	What other events occur?
E	Monthly	**Publications Review or Advisory Committee** (includes administrators and publications staff) • Prioritizes each program area's list • Determines whether free or for-sale • Determines quantity • Sets reorder number • Sets publication policy	3 prioritized lists • Processes publications on each program area's monthly list, according to priority, as they come in • Relies on each state program leader's willingness to realistically set priorities and readjust them as necessary	
F	Twice a year	**Publications Review or Advisory Committee** (includes agents, administrators and publications staff) • Prioritizes publications	1 prioritized list • Processes publications as they come in, from the prioritized list; editors know dates publications are needed, but there's no other scheduling	

Table 2.
Discovering the role of agents in the six systems

State	Determining what to print	Determining how many to print	Funding decisions made by. . .
A	Agents serve on the publication review committees in each program area.	Authors must poll the counties to find out the number of copies needed. They must justify the need for the publication and the number of copies they request. HOWEVER, program units decide how many copies they can actually afford to print.	State program leaders and program units
B	Agents serve on the publication review committees in each program area.	End-users (agents and public) have indirect input–the number of reprints and revisions printed is based on the number actually used over the previous 3 years. Counties aren't polled.	Administrators and program units
C	Publishing is planned according to expressed county needs.	Before submitting a new publication the specialist does an e-mail survey of counties to find out the number of copies needed. Specialists are then required to print the number counties need. For reprints and revisions, Ag. Communications polls counties to find out how many copies they'll need in the coming year.	Dean can use departmental funds or an Ag. Communications revolving account
D	Agents submit a form to let specialists know when new, revised or reprinted publications are needed.	Ag. Communications polls counties by sending them the year's publication production schedule and asking how many copies of each they will need.	Program units
E	No information provided.	Counties are sometimes polled for the number of copies needed, especially with expensive publications. Not everything is polled.	Program leaders
F	Agents serve on the agency's publication review committee.	No information provided.	Director sets one annual publishing budget–publication review committee administers funds.

Table 3.

Factors that affect workload management and system effectiveness

State	Enforcement	Inclusiveness
A	The author knows the priority of his/her publication, but there is no actual scheduling. "There's a separate review committee for the three program areas. Ag. Communications is recommending that either one review committee be formed OR that another review layer be added to combine the three groups' priorities so we get one complete, prioritized list."	"Miscellaneous publications (programs, newsletters, conference materials, etc.) keep coming regardless of the review process. We have more than we can do every year." Ag. Communications is going to begin screening miscellaneous jobs as they come in, and accept or reject them based on certain criteria.
B	The author knows the priority of his/her publication and when it is to be submitted. There is no enforcement. "It would help if authors were held more tightly to the schedule they set for themselves. Currently, if they miss the deadline the job is moved back. This hinders the publication staff's ability to schedule realistically."	[No mention of publications not subject to the review process.]
C	The author knows the priority of his/her publication and must get a release to do a low priority publication before a high priority one, or to do an unplanned publication.	[No mention of publications not subject to the review process.]
D	Author must submit his/her publication according to the schedule. If not, the publication is dropped. The program unit can substitute another publication for one dropped, or substitute the dropped publication (when it is ready) for one of the group's publications later in the schedule. "Sometimes manuscripts are longer or more complicated than authors said they would be. We can't give all the authors the schedules they want. Unless the	All jobs must go through the review process. To give some flexibility and allow for unplanned emergency needs, a new "fast track" has been implemented. Unplanned publications that meet certain strict guidelines (very simple and brief, emergency need, author agrees not to make changes once in production) will be accepted.

Table 3. (Continued)

State	Enforcement	Inclusiveness
	Publication Committee can realistically set a reasonable workload (by deleting jobs from the schedule or making them second priority), Ag. Communications is likely to accept more than we can comfortably do. Planning and scheduling are great but you can only go so far. It doesn't always work. You can't always enforce it."	
E	The author knows the priority of his/her publication. Publications are "scheduled" monthly after the review process.	Miscellaneous jobs go directly to Ag. Communications. "Editors still have to juggle. Due to emergency projects, last-minute needs and lack of planning, publication schedules are frequently altered."
F	The author knows the priority of his/her publication. There is no scheduling except for the prioritized lists.	Miscellaneous jobs go directly to Ag. Communications. "No matter how we plan, emergency requests come in to take priority over scheduled work. We have too many jobs and too little time."

Even though the lack of enforcement and the exclusion of miscellaneous publications from the planning/scheduling process undermine the effectiveness of some of these systems, each of them has at least some successful components. The successful components were put together into a model, publication planning and scheduling system. To determine which components to include, I turned to the respondents' comments about what works and what does not, and how they would change their systems to make them better.

The Model System

Based on data collected for this study, this, then, is the model for a system that, theoretically, should be effective and successful:

1. A county agent can suggest a topic for a new publication by sending the appropriate specialist a brief description of what the content should be, who the audience is, how it might be used in programming, and the approximate number needed

in that county per year. This is done by means of a simple form, with a copy to the publications staff.

2. Annually, the publications staff sends counties a list of existing publications and asks how many copies of each will be needed in the coming year. The staff compiles the totals and sends them to the program units (specialists) so that they can plan their annual publishing according to county needs.

3. Program units prepare lists of proposed publications for the coming year. If a publication is to be revised or reprinted, the list will include the number of copies to be printed (from the county surveys). If a publication is new, the list will include information about the content, the audience, the estimated number needed, the estimated number of printed pages, the artwork, special needs (e.g., four-color), the source of funds (e.g., budget or grant), and the desired (or required) delivery date. Each program unit prioritizes its list, which includes all numbered and miscellaneous publications.

4. Each program unit forwards its list to a publications review committee, made up of state program leaders, initiative team leaders and county agents, and chaired by a publications staff member.

5. The committee chair surveys counties regarding the number of copies they would need of proposed new publications.

6. When the committee meets, it checks to see that needed revisions and reprints (from the annual county poll) are on the lists (or new ones to take their places), and that agents' requests for specific new publications have been addressed. Prior to the meeting, the chair has prepared a rough estimate of the cost of each publication. Using those estimates and the county surveys of quantities needed, the committee puts publications on an approved list, in priority order, until funding limits are reached. (This method should work whether funding is from one central source or from program units'/ areas' individual budgets.) Publications are moved to the approved list as equitably as possible from all program unit lists. The chair tells the committee whether some publications need to be eliminated from the final list in order to maintain a reasonable workload. (The publications staff is responsible for setting some benchmark for this determination; it could be based on total number of publications produced in a year, total number of printed pages published, or some other

measure.) If so, the committee moves some publications to a "second priority" list, with the understanding that they will be accepted, in the order listed, if vacancies occur in the schedule.

7. The chair then figures the amount of production time each publication should require, based on its specifications. Counting back from the desired delivery date, the submission date is determined. The cumulative submission and delivery dates become a comprehensive production schedule for the year. The chair sends the schedule, with required submission dates, to program units and authors whose publications are scheduled.

8. Authors have five days from the scheduled submission dates to get manuscripts and artwork in. If a publication is late, the author can: (a) with the approval of the program unit, substitute it for another of the unit's publications on the schedule but not yet submitted; (b) place it at the end of the "second priority" list; or (c) get administrative approval to resubmit it as an unscheduled priority publication.

9. If an opening occurs in the schedule, the editor begins work on a publication from the "second priority" list. (Authors of these publications will have been notified to have them ready for submission at any time.)

10. If an emergency arises, authors may, with the approval of their program units and state program leaders, submit unscheduled priority publications. These must fit strict criteria—very brief, little or no artwork, needed to fill emergency requests from counties.

11. At mid-year, the review committee accepts proposals for other publications to fill needs that were unforeseen at the beginning of the year. Authors and their program units must substantiate the need. Assuming that funding is available, these publications may be added to the schedule, if necessary by substituting them for others previously scheduled. This mid-year review should lower the number of jobs submitted as unscheduled priority publications and keep that category from getting out of hand.

The advantages of such a system to county agents and publications staff are obvious. But there are also advantages to authors and their program units. First, with county input about the number of

copies needed, there should be neither unused, wasted publications nor angry agents unable to get the number they need. Second, it would be known early in the year approximately how much money is needed for the publications scheduled. Whoever controls those dollars, either the program units or the administrator of a central fund, should be happy to have that estimate ahead of time. In this model, the volume of publications produced is determined by available staff time rather than the amount of money available, thus giving publications staff some control over their workload. A final advantage is that if authors adhere to the schedule, they will be assured of having their publications completed when needed.

The Texas System

Of course, no single system could be called ideal for every state. The realities of politics, personalities and funding at each university cannot be ignored. To be workable, the model presented above must be modified somewhat to fit varying needs. This is what I did in developing a planning and scheduling system for extension publications that was adopted in Texas in 1995.

Our system works on an annual cycle that parallels the plan-of-work process. It begins in the summer, when we send a list of all existing publications to each county. Agents are asked how many copies of each title they will need to order in the coming calendar year. (At the same time, they are asked what new publications they would like to see developed.) The numbers needed, as well as the current warehouse inventory of each title, are entered into a database that calculates whether or not existing supplies are sufficient to meet anticipated needs. These reports are sent to program leaders and specialists in early fall. This supply and demand information helps them plan their publishing for the coming year. Specialists are also sent proposal forms to complete for each publication they would like scheduled (including reprints, revisions and new titles). Specialists send their proposals to their program leaders. Program leaders put the proposals from their groups in priority order and forward them to Agricultural Communications.

In December, an Educational Materials Review Committee meets to review all the proposals received. The Committee is made up of extension agents, specialists and administrators, and chaired by the publications coordinator. Prior to this meeting, the Agricultural Communications staff has determined the number of publications that can be scheduled for the coming year, based on staff size. Our production benchmark has been 300 publications per year since the system began. If the number of proposals received exceeds this

benchmark, the Review Committee decides which proposals should be on a second priority list.

When the Review Committee has finished its work, the Agricultural Communications staff establishes the production schedule for the year. The production schedule begins February 1 and ends the following January 31. Each publication on the first list is given a submission date (e.g., February 1, March 1, etc.) based on the author's desired completion date and the estimated production time. Authors have a three-or four-day grace period. If a publication is not submitted on time, its place in the production schedule is filled with a project from the second priority list. Late publications are not turned away, but are worked into the schedule as time permits, without promised delivery dates. If an emergency arises (such as the 1996 drought) and educational materials are needed unexpectedly, they are added to the schedule as "unplanned priority publications," with the approval of an administrator.

In the first year of the new system, 1995-96, we were quite lenient about missed submission dates and fairly flexible in rescheduling publications at authors' requests. Everyone was learning and adjusting to the new system, and we were anxious to make it as easy as possible. Now that we have had a year of experience, the publishing staff is enforcing the submission dates more strictly. Administrators support us in this effort because we have demonstrated that managing our workload in this way allows us to meet scheduled delivery dates, and because they recognize that authors have equal responsibility in seeing that materials are completed on time. Each year, we have been able to complete all submitted publications on the schedule, as well as all on the second priority list. We are using this system to plan and schedule not only publications (which we produce simultaneously in print and electronic form), but also graphics and multimedia projects.

The benefits we hoped for have indeed been realized. County extension agents have a mechanism for influencing the educational materials we publish, and the Review Committee is putting considerable importance on responding to agents' needs. The publishing staff knows what the workload will be for the year and can set each publication's submission date according to the time that will be required to complete it. This helps us both to meet customers' delivery expectations and to keep our workload flowing more smoothly. Perhaps most gratifying is the fact that communicators have assumed management responsibility in a critical area that affects all of extension. We no longer simply react to requests; instead, we facilitate

better communication among all groups and assist in working toward common goals.

I hope that the model system presented here, and our experience in Texas, will be useful to other states interested in establishing planning and scheduling systems, and to states wishing to evaluate existing systems.

Reference

Lincoln, Yvonna S. and Egon G. Guba. 1985. Naturalistic Inquiry. Sage Publications: Newbury Park, London and New Delhi.