

# Decision Data Service: A New Resource For Communications Planning

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While communicators benefit from communication research to guide their planning, external and internal constraints often prevent them from carrying out the research. As a result, the Office of Agricultural Communications and Education (OACE) at the University of Illinois established a new Decision Data Service. Together, the communicator and decision data specialist discuss research objectives and review options. Data are collected, analyzed, and reported by the decision data specialist to the communicator who decides how to use the information. More research for communications planning has resulted in increased cooperation from College of Agriculture staff, greater understanding of audiences, improved resource utilization, more questions about communication effects, and increased publication sales.

## The Situation

Agricultural college communicators have broadened their responsibilities greatly since the late 1800s when experiment stations began to report their findings through annual reports and bulletins (True, 1937).

The first agricultural college editors were viewed as scribes and secretaries who could save the time of scientists by helping respond to inquiries (Kearl, 1983). Those early editors answered letters, edited

manuscripts, and otherwise helped produce printed materials. Since then, the work of agricultural college communicators has expanded steadily as photography, radio, television, graphic design, film/video, telecommunications, computers and other technologies emerged as tools for use by agricultural colleges.

Throughout this process, production of communications materials has been the core activity of professional communicators. This niche

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has been commonly described as the "producer" or "craftsman" role (Bost, 1973; Kern, 1978).

**More calls for communications planning.** Kearl (1983) cautioned against forgetting how the best editors in an earlier generation addressed broad questions as well as detailed editorial tasks. However, pressures are growing for professional communicators to work across the full spectrum of efforts, from analysis and planning through production and distribution of information.

In 1973, an Extension director urged communicators:

So please don't fret if you think you are too much on the old, production road. We must continue to travel this road. We may need to pave it so we may go faster, produce more, with better quality, but we cannot lay it aside! The new road, or the planner or consultant road, is one that makes the information specialist a member of the overall decision-making team in programming or managing Extension information. That is, the information specialist who has what it takes and is willing to devote the energy and effort to earn his place on the team is very much needed in this new role (Bost, 1973).

During the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, considerable discussion centered on the planner/consultant role of communicators (Childers, 1976; Cutler, 1977; Kern, 1978; Nelson, 1979; Metcalf, 1981; Swanson, 1981; Anderson, 1982; Miller, 1983; Evans, 1985; Browning, 1987; Pates, 1987). Observers noted that attractive, well-produced materials do not guarantee successful communications.

They emphasized the need for more communications analysis to guide and improve decisions about

audiences, messages, delivery methods, timing, pacing, and other vital elements.

This need continues to grow. Today's agricultural college communicators face increasingly tight budgets, highly segmented audiences, more issue-oriented educational programming, and a shift from public-funded services to user-paid services requiring communicators to allocate resources more efficiently. They face dual objectives: helping carry out educational missions while recovering more costs from users.

**Problems in carrying it out.** Agricultural college communicators and others have found it easier to identify the need than to address it. Many barriers confront communications support units as they try to establish strong capabilities in analysis and planning:

1. External constraints. Observers have identified external constraints such as (a) heavy workloads which trap communications units into production, and little else (Mason, 1983); (b) lack of new financial resources to employ communications analysts and planners; and (c) risk of alienating or threatening faculty and administrator clients who may not want to involve communicators early in the planning process (Evans, 1976).

2. Internal constraints. Constraints within the communications units also are apparent. Examples include: (a) negative attitudes among some communicators about the role of analysis and planning (Swanson, 1981); (b) lack of specialized skills for communications analysis and planning (Ad Hoc, 1976); (c) tendencies for communicators who are familiar with specific production methods to recommend those methods rather than to explore a full range of options (Woods, 1982); (d) frustrations that arise from the time-

consuming, complex process of working with clients and associates in planning teams (Nelson, 1979); and (e) tendencies not to redirect staff resources from production to planning functions.

### Alternative Approaches

**Three approaches tried.** Historically, the agricultural communications staff at the University of Illinois has used three main approaches in efforts to provide communications analysis and planning, along with production services.

1. Alliances with communications researchers on campus. This approach involves arranging with communications faculty members or graduate students to carry out specific research projects of mutual interest. We use it when opportunities permit because it can work well. But it has not yet proven to be a way in which to build a continuing program of communications analysis and planning. It tends sometimes to be slow, unreliable, and not tailored to project needs because it often depends upon outside agendas and constraints.

2. Designated communications planners. This approach involves identifying specific staff members who consult broadly with clients. It began here in the 1950s, under the leadership of Hadley Read, as perhaps the first of its kind (Kern, 1978). Assistant Extension editors were assigned responsibilities close to those now associated with the concept of consulting communicator. Called departmental editors, they had dual roles. They helped plan communications programs and produce materials in support of those programs.

In 1986, we implemented a more centralized version of this approach: designated communications planners who had limited production re-

sponsibilities. All communications jobs entered our Communications Services unit through one of three staff members who consulted with clients before jobs moved into production. This approach was abandoned after one year of pilot testing. It proved unpopular among clients, who preferred to go directly to editors, photographers, or other communicators in the unit. It also proved unpopular among communications staff members, who felt that the consulting function should not be centralized in this way.

3. Everyone a consulting communicator. We now use a system under which designated members of our staff carry major consulting responsibilities, but all staff members serve as consulting communicators. A client can introduce a communications job through any section of our Communications Services unit and expect to get counsel on communications strategies.

The success of this approach depends on the extent to which all staff members are trained and skilled in communications analysis and planning. Some feel comfortable and operate effectively in that complex, time-consuming role; others do not.

**Needed: resource for communications analysis.** Experience is suggesting that we should encourage all communications staff members to provide communications analysis and planning for their clients, at different levels. Experience also is suggesting that we cannot realistically expect all staff members to be skilled in research activities such as drawing probability samples, drafting questionnaires, conducting focus group and other kinds of interviews, doing message pretests, and using statistical research software. These are specialized communications research skills. And, we believe, they

are skills needed in our communications units. Our units need new kinds of information-gathering capabilities to support communications decisions. These capabilities need several features:

1. They must provide a wide variety of quantitative and qualitative information.

2. They must operate "up front" in the communications planning process to help guide the decisions of communications planners who work with clients—and to side-step the stigma and threat of summative evaluation.

3. They must offer rapid turnaround; a year's wait for completion of a thesis project will not do.

4. They must be moderately priced.

5. They must be fully responsive to the needs of communications staff members, not merely available if-and-as a topic fits into a researcher's agenda.

### **A New Resource: Decision Data Service**

In August 1988, we proposed and established a new kind of Extension communicator: a decision data specialist. Leaders of the Communications Services unit converted a media production position into a new information-gathering service for the total communications staff.

The Decision Data Service is staffed by a person who has background and experience in market research and business administration. Our own communications staff members are the direct clients of this service. They identify information needs while they consult with their clients, generally the Extension subject-matter specialists.

The Decision Data Service offers (but is not limited to) secondary research, surveys, internal financial

information, pilot tests, and copy pretests. It provides any information-gathering service that can help lead to better communications decisions; that is, decisions which lead to greater efficiency, increased usage, and/or increased client satisfaction.

**How it works.** Together, the communicator and decision data specialist discuss objectives, options, and costs involved. If primary data are needed, the decision data specialist develops data-gathering options and reviews them with the communicator. The data are gathered, a report written, and recommendations made. Complete reports are given to the communicator/client. In addition, the Decision Data Service prepares a one-page summary which is produced and distributed to interested College of Agriculture personnel.

The decision data specialist discusses findings with the communicator/client, answers questions, and offers recommendations related to the data. However, the communicator/client decides how to use the information in a particular communications situation and holds the decision-making responsibility.

**Kinds of data gathered.** To date, projects of the Decision Data Service have ranged broadly across the Communications Services unit. Following are some examples of projects completed since early 1989:

- County adviser usage of a media packet from the communications services unit. (Mail survey)
- Survey of computer hardware and software in county Extension offices. (Mail survey)
- Reactions and suggestions from Extension field staff about a new tabloid newspaper, *Home, Yard and Garden News*. (Telephone interviews)
- Readership study of a Sea Grant

- newsletter, *Helm*. (Mail survey)
- Improving sales and reducing costs of annual Extension circulars. (Personal interviews)
  - Information sources used by home economics, youth, agriculture and horticulture advisers. (Mail survey)
  - Sales analysis of 1990 Extension circulars. (Analysis of primary data)
  - Distributing Extension video programming about health education through local libraries. (Pilot study)
  - Effects of a promotion campaign on the sale of annual Extension circulars. (Pilot study)

## Conclusions

### Some benefits seen to date.

We see five kinds of benefits from this early experience with the Decision Data Service:

1. Increased cooperation. Advantages for the Communications Service unit include increased cooperation with Extension subject-matter specialists, field staff, and administrators. Increasingly, these colleagues are looking to communicators for information about all elements of the Extension marketing mix: information about product and price, as well as promotion and distribution of educational programs.

When communicators discuss specific, targeted audiences and channels with Extension subject-matter specialists, the specialists focus more carefully on who will use the materials they produce. When the specialists find communicators interested in more than the production of educational materials the specialists often provide mailing lists, contacts, and helpful suggestions for distributing the materials.

2. Greater understanding of audiences. Surveys have helped our

communicators achieve a better understanding of audiences. For example, a survey among home economics advisers showed that they were interested in traditionally agriculture-related subjects, such as the impact of pesticides. Insights from audiences help cut through stereotypes and misconceptions.

3. Improved use of resources. The Communications Services unit uses resources more efficiently, as a result of the Decision Data Service. For example, better sales projections for publications help control inventory, reduce waste, and permit authors to revise materials more often. Promotion efforts are more targeted, as a result of decision data. Direct mail promotions have yielded response rates as high as 10 percent.

4. More questions about communications effectiveness. The Decision Data Service is encouraging communicators to ask questions about what they are doing and how they can improve their efforts. In the past, communicators were forced to try to answer such questions through their own efforts. Now they need not be skilled researchers; from the Service, they can get answers through the specialized research skills of others on the staff.

5. Increased sales volume. The volume of publication sales is increasing. For example, of 13 annual publications carrying pesticide recommendations, nine showed an increase in sales for 1990 over 1989, reversing a five-year declining trend of annual circular sales. Much of the increase is attributed to promotion efforts guided by information from the Decision Data Service.

A popular annual, *Illinois Summary of Farm Business Records*, had usually sold as single copies prior to the 1989 edition. In Fall 1989, we promoted several related publica-

tions along with this annual. As a result, income-per-order increased by about 40 percent.

**Challenges.** We have observed a number of challenges in establishing the Decision Data Service.

1. Tradition. The results of a Decision Data Service sometimes put strain on the traditional, comfortable methods of delivering Extension programs. Specialists and communicators often have preconceived ideas about the appropriate communications methods to use in given programs. Such ideas come from past experience, preferences, and other sources. Sometimes these notions clash with the communications planning concept of looking afresh at each situation — gathering information, then building a communications program to fit.

2. Division of labor. Experience with the printing runs of publications illustrates how the Decision Data Service sometimes changes a prevailing division of labor. Prior to 1989 the size of a print run was determined mainly by the author's estimate, as confined by the printing funds available. Now, print runs are determined from estimates generated by the Decision Data Service, using author estimates along with other sources. Audiences such as "all farmers" or "all consumers" are no longer acceptable.

Divisions of labor may also shift within a communications group. For example, editors and designers make major decisions in editing, designing, and producing publications. The Decision Data Service prompts them to keep the market in mind. Data from the market analysis for a new publication may suggest a production treatment and schedule different from what the production staff had in mind. Perhaps the audience is

limited in size or perhaps the optimum selling price is low, requiring low-cost production. Conversely, perhaps the intended audience is expected to respond to a more upscale image that requires higher-cost production than the editors and designers had in mind.

3. Balancing efforts. Sometimes the results of decision data reduce efforts or costs on one front, but increase the efforts or costs on another. An experience in publishing illustrates this point. Reduced inventory made possible by better decision data helps control costs of printing and storage. However, more time is spent monitoring inventory closely because stockouts occur more quickly. Maintaining inventory cost control and sufficient inventory is a balancing act.

4. Maintaining the decision data role. An effective Decision Data Service operates at the cutting edge of communications effort, so we find a continuing need to distinguish between "decision data" and "decision making." This service gathers information and makes recommendations; it does not act on those recommendations. We consider the distinction important if a Decision Data Service is to maintain a sharp focus on information-gathering and avoid confusion about who is making communications decisions within the organization.

**In summary.** Our experience suggests that a Decision Data Service holds excellent promise for communications units. It can increase the likelihood that funds and human efforts will be spent in an efficient manner to serve the right audiences with appropriate messages through suitable methods in a timely manner.

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