

## Commentary

# Is It The Sweet Siren Of Technology Or Just An Ill Wind?

Dave King

It is the author's opinion that while technology can dominate our vision of the future, creativity and accountability will have a greater effect than any new technology. Specifically, the creative use of training, media relations, and teleconferencing, while maintaining accountability to the public, will help guide effective agricultural communications in the next 10 years.

On a recent National Public Radio news report, a woman named Diana Burgoin from Montreal discussed her art. What she does is wrap herself completely in wires connected to a series of small radio speakers and a nine volt battery.

As she touches parts of her body and other people's bodies, she and they become electrical conductors from the battery to the speakers. In this way, she creates a variety of sounds that can loosely be construed as music.

As she says, her art depicts western society's current state of being completely surrounded by technology.

Art, once again, imitates life. (*Morning Edition*, NPR, 3/12/90)

When we look to the future of agricultural communications—or

communications in general—technology seems to dominate the image.

- We see modems and other telecommunication equipment that allow news writers and media relations specialists to deliver copy directly into computer terminals at UPI or *USA Today* just as easily as to your hometown daily.
- We see greater interaction between text software and graphics software, helping editors and artists work more closely together.
- We see the integration of computers and video to create personal desktop video.
- We will see better network interaction and interchangeable software between IBM and Apple, making desktop publishing more accessible to the masses and more efficient for the professionals.

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- We can meet with or train people from all over the state, the region, or the world during interactive video teleconferences delivered via satellite on national distribution systems, like that proposed as Ag\*Sat.
- We will see improvements in color shift and screen accuracy in graphic programs helping artists and editors function more efficiently.
- We will take photographs using digital technology and alter a noonday scene to look like dusk, while we eliminate the unwanted image of a person from the middle of the frame.

Even though I enjoy speculating about the future of technology as much as anyone, I don't think that's truly where the future of communications lies.

### Creativity

There are two major points I'd like to discuss today that I feel transcend the relatively short life of most technology. They are creativity and accountability.

I'm sure you all know people who can "talk numbers." Video producers—some call us *vidiots*—can be the worst.

Here's a typical "numbers person" conversation. "Well, you can combine the 300CLE or the 200 CLE with an F70 CCD or the AG 7450 to enhance your SVHS system. Ours has Y/C signal separation, 400 lines of resolution, and a signal to noise ratio more than 47dB. And, of course, we use the VITC/LTC generator/reader that docks directly to the back of the unit."

It's easiest for me to pick on video producers, but conversations like this happen in publishing, graphics, and newswriting. Virtually everything we do is becoming

tied to technology. And there are those among us who jump immediately into the jargon and are never heard to speak coherently again. Although these conversations have merit at times, just as scientific jargon is a more precise language than the generalities more understandable to the public, they are also an indication of the pervasiveness of technology in communication. Also, they can be an impediment to creativity.

More important than knowing and speaking numbers-eze, those who know what technology can do will be the people who take us into the future most effectively.

So, here's a safe prediction of the future: **Technology will change, but human beings will continue to create.**

Technology and hardware are not the real future of communications. Human creativity is.

- Humans will make things work.
- Humans will make contact with others.
- Humans will coordinate efforts.
- Humans will increase (or in some cases decrease) communication efficiency.
- Humans will identify human needs and challenges and then find technological solutions.

Human creativity is the ultimate software. The human mind is the ultimate hardware.

One important impact on communications in the next 10 years, will be the constant identification and evaluation of trends in audience perceptions and interests.

Communicators should look at these trends as guides for how to provide Extension and research information to our audiences at the time they need it most.

In order to be perceived as responsive, we often will be making

decisions on distribution and media selection before most people will even know they need information.

Some say the responsibility of the communicator is to wait for the researchers and subject matter specialists to decide what they want to tell their clientele, then step in, apply some technology, and open lines of communication.

For a department of agricultural communications to cope in the next decade, it must be more than a network of computers and technically competent people to run them. It must have a network of human beings with contacts across campus and across the country. People in the department must identify trends, analyze them, and be prepared to provide support and consultation about who will want what information, when. And then they must be able to provide it.

There is no hardware that will substitute for a network of people. People assessing ideas. People providing input that comes from their particular individual area of expertise. And people using technology combined with their own creativity.

Without question, technology will play a huge part in the next 10 or so years of agricultural communications, but the departments that accomplish the most will do so with a delicate balance of human intuition and technical understanding.

### **Accountability**

Another critical concept for agricultural communications is and will continue to be accountability.

Now that you've read the word, accountability, I assume you have defined it in your mind. I also assume few readers defined it exactly the same. Accountability means many things to many people.

- It could mean satisfying the dean's

desire to reach a particular audience.

- It could mean reaching enough people that the program cost is justified.
- It could mean that you are personally satisfied you did the best job you could do within the parameters of the project.
- It could mean just one call, from one person indicating he or she got the message—especially if that call was from someone like, say, the governor.

Many long-timers in Extension and agricultural research will argue that accountability has been so important in the past that it couldn't possibly be any more important in the future.

Well, I think communications departments face accountability in a different fashion now.

We've always been accountable to the clientele we work with. They could be specialists needing training, deans needing speeches, researchers needing help communicating with the public, 4-H agents needing publications...and more publications...and more publications...and more publications.

I think you get the picture.

### **Credibility**

But, our product is not publications or videos or news releases or exhibits. Our product is information. And information is a perishable commodity. A factor that communications departments have an effect on, and has the most direct impact on long-term usefulness of our information is credibility. And credibility is most enhanced by being accountable.

For colleges and schools of agriculture to survive in the fiscal turbulence of the next 10 to 20 years, our information must continue to be

perceived as credible, unbiased, and above reproach. Much of that perception will come from the message, but much of it also will come from the messenger and the package. And we will be responsible for those.

We can be accountable by trying to satisfy all the narrowly focused groups we work with as clients. And in doing so, we'll occasionally be put in the awkward position of working with people who have apparently competing desires and motives.

One way to prevent that is to begin the entire process by saying our ultimate goal is to satisfy the public's right to know, and to judge the basic worthiness of our efforts against that goal first.

Although satisfying the public's right to know is a concept that comes primarily from efforts to build and maintain credibility in news and information operations, it is a useful baseline for all communications efforts—publications, video, exhibits, posters, teaching, and all other activities we do.

We are different. We are different from Dow, DuPont, and Ciba-Geigy. We are different from the Farm Bureau, The National Wheat Growers Association, and The National Cattleman's Association. We do many of the same things, and many times our needs, goals, and outcomes are exactly the same. But we are different because we have an ultimate responsibility to those who pay our salaries...the taxpaying public.

Operating on the premise that satisfying the public's right to know, or the public's right to have access to information—whether they use it or not—is one way to maintain and foster credibility in our product. Basically, to maintain credibility in our information.

So, as we look at the future of agricultural communications at

public institutions, I think fostering creativity and maintaining a healthy respect for the public's right to know and have access to our product are two of the most vitally important factors in our potential for success. Technology will come and go, but knowing what to do with it and *why* will never become obsolete.

With those two major philosophical points stated, here are some thoughts on two or three specific areas I feel will have a significant impact on communications effectiveness in the next 10 years.

### Training

It seems like many agricultural communications units have lofty ambitions about training, but difficulty in execution. One of the main complaints of departments on the west coast is that people—agents, specialists, and researchers alike—like the idea of training but when it comes time to show up for a session, they are too busy.

This has led many of us to alternative training tools such as communications newsletters with tips that can be read and absorbed when you have more time. Oregon and Vermont do this, as do many other states. Although this works to keep advice available to our clientele, it really does little for in-depth training in areas like desktop publishing and video production.

The advent of desktop publishing and the expected arrival of its younger cousin, desktop video, have brought with them a revolution in communication.

The democratization of the media means we are now coping with people with the capability of producing relatively sophisticated looking publications in far-flung areas of our states and regions. These publications, and soon the video presenta-

tions produced in the same fashion, can carry the image of the institution. But sometimes they lack the more typical checks and assessments of content and style that we have applied in the past.

The process brings into question whether we should be applying the checks as we have. The answer is probably. But how?

I feel the dissemination of production capability will continue to greatly assist the delivery of information to those who need it.

Many times the agents and researchers that are producing these publications and video programs know much better what the people in their region need, and are in the best position to supply it.

Our assignment then becomes how to assist them in the process. And training then becomes an obvious option.

Returning to the problem of field staff and specialists not showing up for training sessions, we must shoulder the blame for that ourselves. Rule number one is know your audience. If few people show up for a training session, then we're selling what they're not buying. And we haven't judged our audience very well.

But identifying communication problems that are "everyday and real" for our audience will ensure they show up and gain from the training experience.

Enough people now are just barely coping with desktop publishing that well-designed training sessions will be well attended and might head off future problems of poorly executed field publications.

The real key is that the whole process, if it works, will offer another mode of distributing the information.

This is happening now in publishing and is beginning to happen in

electronic media. Camcorders and the interconnection of computers will soon allow field staff the opportunity to create moderately sophisticated video presentations. Many of the field staff in Oregon and other western states have camcorders now. And it's no problem getting people to show up for camcorder and video production training sessions.

Looking to the future, we need to realize these publications and videos are not replacing what we do now. They are in addition to what we do now. They are—because of the creativity and initiative of the authors—an additional avenue for satisfying the public's right to the information. And in many cases, it's an avenue more likely to be effective because they are a direct response to locally perceived needs.

### **Media Relations**

Media relations is another area that includes a training component that will significantly affect our future work.

I'm always amused when I find that, in some places, media relations is the latest hot topic. It's a new concept. Actually it's quite fundamental.

But it comes and goes as an integral part of most operations for two reasons: One, it's difficult to do well, and two, it requires a consistent and on-going effort but returns a very erratic response.

One of the reasons it's difficult to do well is that it takes a certain personality.

I remember about 16 or 17 years ago when I was freelancing, working the night shift on a local radio station, and selling radio time during the day, I walked into a shoe store about 10 in the morning on a Wednesday. The man inside looked up from his newspaper—the place

was empty—took one look at me and said, "So, what're you sellin'?"

I was devastated. How could he tell? Was it that obvious? And it was especially hard to take from a shoe salesman, of all people.

I have since come to have a better appreciation for people who sell shoes and I've also come to realize media relations takes someone who actually enjoys or, at least, can survive that kind of reaction.

But, as technology invades news writing, video news release production and other aspects of our communication efforts, and as it becomes clearer that our efforts to position the image of the college or school of agriculture in the public's mind depends on regional and national media exposure, media relations again becomes an important factor.

Media relations training allows those scientists, specialists, and agents with the needed information to better interact directly with the media. Agents and specialists have an easier time with this than researchers. Agents and specialists come to their jobs with the expectation they will be directly involved in media relations. Researchers, however, come to their chosen field with the expectation that they are better served communicating with a narrow band of colleagues and others with interest in their specialty.

But, as research dollars become more scarce and accountability is increasingly important, many researchers—some grudgingly—have come to realize they have a responsibility to enhance the public's overall perception of science. Otherwise public support of scientific research may weaken.

Unfortunately, there are times this interaction with the media occurs with minor blemishes to the specific details of someone's work.

These cases cause me deep concern. A person's life work is seldom accurately reduced to a four word headline.

Although we will have little direct effect on the way the media work, we can have a very direct effect on our scientific colleagues' understanding of how the media work. And in training scientific staff in media relations, we are able to help people cope with an admittedly imperfect model of information distribution.

Secondly, if we are to have any long term effect on media accuracy and perception of research and Extension, the communications staff must consistently maintain a program of direct media relations.

Video technology's skyrocketing cost and constant change make it very difficult for us to regularly provide video information technically acceptable for use by local and regional television station news departments.

But at the same time some of this technology—live satellite feeds and microwave connections—helps us entice news crews out of their metropolitan hideouts to do stories at our far-flung land grant institutions.

What this takes is a direct decision to do more tip sheets, phone calls, and media visits in addition to our production work.

The same is true in print. The time has gone that we can simply write news releases and check the clips the next week to see how they did. We need to know who wants what, in what form and by what time.

We need to make regular but effective visits to major national media outlets to provide story ideas, discover trends, and offer suggestions for stories that they might be able to do if they were to visit our campus.

## Teleconferencing

The third and final specific area of importance for the future is teleconferencing, also known as interactive video teleconferencing via satellite.

I feel the jury is still out on teleconferencing. Not because of its potential, but because of its execution.

Video teleconferences offer us a chance to come as close to what communication theorists call the "Hypodermic Effect" as any communications distribution mode currently available.

The "Hypodermic Effect" is the ultimate goal of a communicator. It's the ability to inject your message directly into the brain of individuals in your audience. Because of interference or static, few methods of communication ever come close to achieving this effect.

But teleconferencing has some potential. You can structure your message and make it interactive, two major advantages of interpersonal communication. You can also use the visual stimulation of television and graphic design. Add to this the fact that your audience has taken the effort to come to a specific site to attend to your message, and you should have a very effective tool.

But, in reality, the typical teleconference of today is far from achieving the "Hypodermic Effect." In some cases it is far from the most effective mode of communication for the message.

But some say, "Isn't it neat? 22,000-plus miles in the sky, beaming down its footprint on the earth, bathing us all in illuminating information." Unfortunately, "neat" doesn't accomplish anything without an understanding of the medium and a heavy dose of creativity.

Teleconferences are not just

meetings on television—or they should not be. They are interactive opportunities for communications between distant sites with the use of video to enhance understanding and exposition. They should be planned and executed from start to finish with that concept in mind. Otherwise why not just set up a camcorder in the corner of the room and send the tape around to whoever wants to see it later?

## Conclusion

There are a thousand other ideas that will effect the future of agricultural communications, but the philosophic guidelines that serve creativity and accountability should stand out as we plan the path of our departments.

And specifically, if we remember we can accomplish more if more people know how to work with us *as well as* how to work on their own, we will be set for whatever the year 2000 and beyond will bring to agricultural communications.