

Some "Musts" for Doing our Job Better¹

M. Rupert Cutler

When your president, Gordon Graham of the University of Arizona, came by my office in April and asked me to kick off your 61st annual meeting, I happily accepted.

Happily, because it provided me an opportunity to talk to you about two things that are of vital interest to me, and to you.

First, I've always been interested in journalism — writing and photography. I even made a living for a time editing a weekly newspaper — the Winslow Mail in Arizona — as well as editing Virginia Wildlife and National Wildlife magazines. So, I know first-hand some of your problems and frustrations in dealing with the many gatekeepers you must pass to reach large and diversified audiences.

Second is our common interest in doing a better job of communicating to the people of this nation the incredibly vast amount of information that the land grant university system and the U.S. Department of Agriculture has to offer them.

I understand your program will emphasize new technologies in communications and explore the subject of "how to reach new audiences with more information." Your program is just the opening I need. I agree with your theme but I would like to edit it somewhat. I would change the words "how to" to read, "we must," and insert the word "effective" before "information." So that when my editing — something you have all learned to live with, I am sure — is finished, the theme would read, "We *must* reach new audiences with more effective information."

¹ Remarks of Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research, and Education, before the American Association of Agriculture College Editors, Logan, Utah, July 12, 1977.

But, as you know, my editing alone will not magically accomplish the task laid out in that theme. That is up to you. It's up to you to do it by combining the new techniques you learn here with the old techniques that have worked well for you all along.

Both the land grant university system and USDA have an enviable record for producing and distributing useful information to the rural public. Now, to a growing extent, you are getting that information to the urban public.

But I would be less than direct with you if I did not say, with emphasis, that major changes are under way at USDA to improve our service to *all* the people of this nation — rural and urban.

There will be more attention to environmental quality, to conservation of energy, to helping small farmers, to rural development; and to the nutritive value of our food. The USDA is today known as "the people's department", as it was in Lincoln's time. We aim to make it known as "all the people's department."

Everybody with information to communicate — land grant and other universities, state and federal agencies, industry and public relations firms, the mass media — must reach new audiences of minorities, low-income citizens and others we have not reached before.

It has been said many ways, but any way you say it it is true: That an idea, no matter how good, is worthless unless it is communicated to someone.

Just as we are making changes at USDA in getting ideas and information to people, so must you change in the Experiment Stations and state Extension Services to reach the new audiences that demand our attention — people who need our help to improve the quality of their lives. It's your job to work out the details, but let me offer some suggestions I hope you will explore and consider:

I urge you to work with USDA to do the following:

*Emphasize our similar goals, such as improving the environment and helping rural communities achieve economic stability.

*Devise programs for our similar missions, such as helping small farmers and low-income citizens.

*Try to reach all segments of the public, regardless of race or income.

*Having reached them, find out what the people want from USDA and the land grant system.

*Increase the flow of USDA-land grant information to the media — including visual information — on nutritional, environmental, energy and other high-priority issues.

*Increase the accessibility of our information, including where to find our phone numbers, our offices, and our "experts" when people need our information.

How do we get this cooperation?

The only way I know to get our land grant and USDA information staffs together on similar high-priority issues is by close and constant liaison with

each other. But I do have some suggestions and observations for you who are members of these two groups that go beyond mere coordination.

I wonder, first of all, if we realize what an effective communications force we have assembled to disseminate information? It's impressive — in numbers and in talent. But we have to organize this force to reach these new and enlarged audiences I have talked about.

Let me begin with the Extension Service and the Experiment Station staff. Because I have mentioned enlarged audiences, please don't return to your campus and increase your staff. Conversely, don't think I subscribe to the belief you can continually do more and more with less and less. Rather, I would suggest that all of us need to evaluate our priorities and to use our resources more effectively.

For example, most land grant universities are about as far from high-density population areas as a devious mind could have planned them. Shall we start with Logan compared with Salt Lake City? Or Pullman versus Seattle? Columbia versus Kansas City or St. Louis? Ithaca versus New York City? Most states fall into this pattern.

You can't move the university campuses. But you can move some communicators.

Why not, then, place an Extension information specialist in each of the largest cities in your state? That specialist would then be in closer contact with the media that cover your state. There is no substitute, in the communications business, for that kind of closeness. The specialist comes to know news people, has their phone numbers, and makes regular calls, at least weekly.

There are excellent examples that show this works. In Arizona Bob Halverson in Phoenix works full time with the media. I met and spoke with Bob just last week in Phoenix. He's on three TV channels "live" five days each week, and is heard on three radio stations six days a week. The studios have given him door keys to all of the major stations so he can let himself in and start his day at 5:25 a.m. At KTAR in Phoenix, Bob appears during the break in the middle of the "Today" show. That kind of close relationship with the media allows Bob Halverson to do his job of reaching people — almost all of them in Arizona, in this instance. He couldn't do it if he lived in Tucson.

I realize that Extension information staffs, including local county staffs, are doing the best they can to serve the media in their states' larger cities. But I also believe few here would argue with the idea that a top information specialist with local contacts in Los Angeles, Houston, Miami, Denver, Philadelphia, Chicago, Oklahoma City or Albuquerque could tell your story better in those larger cities. And that, after all, is what we are all looking for.

There are, of course, ways to reach more people other than moving someone to a large city, and some of you in Extension and Research are using them. Some are an interesting combination of a new emphasis and an old technique.

In Dane county, Wisconsin, the Extension Service used direct mail and newspapers to distribute a list of 322 home and garden subjects on which the public could get a recorded, informational message. Call these telephone numbers, the announcement said, and learn how to spray for insects, prune bushes. The dial service operates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. During an eight-month period the service received 28,000 calls. Now, that's reaching people who have a question that you can answer.

In Georgia, the Extension Service is increasing its visibility by using more short TV "spots" on local television. Their program of a brand new 60-second spot each day in five major TV market areas is reaching approximately 80 percent of the people in the state.

In Louisiana, the Extension Service is telling people how to deal with termites and wood decay in similar TV spots, using "raw material" for the spots provided by the USDA's Forest Service.

Just as we can be more effective in getting out our message, we can make the message itself more effective by using techniques like cooperative publishing among the states and USDA. Cooperative publishing can help cut duplication of effort and reduce costs, thereby helping us supply the quantities of publications we need to serve both the old and new audiences. It can save staff time and make top talent available to the states that they may not normally have.

It is already being done in the Pacific Northwest, the Northeast, and North Central regions. Many states are sharing costs of USDA publication reprints — called "riding the order" — with a real savings from increased press runs. Just recently states ordered a total of 266,750 copies of seven consumer publications USDA was reprinting. The states saved \$77,000 from what it would have cost them through the Government Printing Office. But, just as importantly, they had 266,750 copies of food publications to distribute to their public.

Cooperative publishing with the states could develop into a two-way street. USDA soon will distribute its first publication printed in a state — rather than by GPO. It's called "Small Poultry Flocks." It has a USDA cover but gives credit to its South Carolina authors, who originally produced it. The reason: USDA didn't have a publication that told this particular story as well as the state did.

We can get the message out in fewer words. Fact sheets can and should replace some longer, costlier publications. Many of you already use fact sheets successfully. USDA is starting a series of them for part-time farmers and gardeners in order to reach this large audience more economically.

These are some of the ways we can increase information to the public. These are by no means all of the ways. We need even more. You, I, and everybody connected with communications should be thinking of innovative techniques that will help us do our job better.

Let us move on to another area that needs some thinking.

There are USDA information people scattered across this nation. They serve a wide variety of agencies, from Soil Conservation to Food and Nutrition. But are they staffed properly and in the right pattern to serve Americans today? I doubt it.

Let me give you something to consider. What if we reevaluated the USDA field information offices?

If you look on pages 63-65 of your land grant information staffs directory, you find listed several branch information offices of agencies. But not all of them. Missing are some of the major USDA agency information offices that should be involved in answering questions on the wide range of subjects covered by USDA.

By and large the public doesn't know these agency information offices exist. Those few who do tend to think of them as general USDA information offices rather than as information offices that serve specific agencies. And probably few people, including the media, understand why the offices are structured in this separate way.

All of which raises a very logical question: Should these agencies remain staffed and located to serve program people and agencies — as most are — or to serve the mass media and reach more people for the USDA as a whole?

This raises another question. What if regional agency information offices were set up and staffed to serve as truly general USDA information offices?

If that were to happen, I believe we would have more daily contact with the major media and that the media would begin to look to that regional office as a source of *all* USDA information, knowing live people instead of an abstract office in Washington.

If we should establish regional USDA information offices, should Extension be represented? It would seem to me this would help tie our communications together.

And how about the four regional offices of the Agricultural Research Service?

ARS has regional offices at Berkeley, New Orleans, Beltsville, Maryland, and Peoria, Illinois. If information units there are to maintain close liaison with all the rest of you and the media, then it would be my opinion that ARS information should be represented in the package.

If we could tie together all the strings of the communications package, what do we do with the information we produce each day? Do we change our formula our techniques, our distribution methods? I believe we do. I think it would help us find a way to focus more precisely on what the public wants from us, answer their priorities better, and support USDA missions with a more coordinated information program. To do it we also need two other things: Continuing research into how to communicate effectively and a regular training program to teach people how to use this research information to the fullest.

All of us tend to get "source-oriented." We communicate only what we think is important, in ways we like to communicate, via channels we are comfortable with. What I'm asking for now is more orientation to the "receiver" of the information. What do all those segments of the public we're hoping to reach think is important? How would they like to have information communicated to them? What channels would they like to see used?

As I said, it may take research to help us get answers to these questions. But we must find ways that will get the research done.

The information that we deal with has implications that go far beyond the audiences served by the farm press, as important as they are to us. That means we have to develop new sources in the metropolitan media to reach those new audiences.

Would it be fair to say that you have been reacting to regular pressures to meet daily deadlines for schedules that have been established as "untouchable," instead of finding new ways to reach more people?

Would it be fair to say that, for the most part, you have little solid proof of the effect your information has on the user, "feedback," in other words?

Do you offer all assistance possible to your research and Extension specialist faculty members who have new data but can't seem to find the time to write for public consumption the fruits of their labors in the lab and in the field?

I'm not down-grading the important role the professional plays in establishing, in his own mind — from his own experience and good judgment — what information is most likely to be effective. I'm just asking if in a changing world, and with a changing audience to reach, that judgment is supported by adequate communication research.

There is much concern now about whether enough educational material on nutrition is being distributed by USDA and its agencies, and how this information is being used by the media.

Surely you have a feel for what the media wants. But your information the media may deliver to the public depends greatly on what you offer that media to choose from. You should be the main source of reliable information on nutrition research. If you fail to meet this obligation, the public will be short-changed. We are concerned about this as administrators in USDA. And we think you can do that job better — we think you can bring a new level of professionalism and effectiveness to your work — if we take advantage of what we can learn from information research.

I was very interested to learn of your efforts to renew and update the activities of the old National Project in Agricultural Communication. These efforts come at a time when we recognize clearly the need for, and our responsibility for, that better communications job we have discussed. Along with you, I have high hopes that this "NPAC II" proposal will find funding and become a reality. And that it will once more produce in the

communications field the excitement and growth in your profession that the original NPAC did.

As one involved in communications myself, I'm convinced that new information, well-communicated, can substitute for some government program expenditures — thus bringing a cost-effectiveness to information that most managers don't appreciate, or even understand. By that I mean that some of what we are trying to do with government program money can be done better and more economically with better information delivered more effectively. And certainly the effectiveness of government programs is greatly determined by the effectiveness of the information program — which again is all too seldom understood or appreciated by program managers.

I have thrown a lot of questions at you today. I have done it in the spirit of the old saying that "it is better to know some of the questions than all of the answers." So, continuing in that spirit, I offer you three final, challenging ones:

First, who is doing the innovative thinking on communications policy at your institution today — your administrators or you and your staff?

Second, could you be more effective if you wiped out some of your present positions and added some new ones, in such areas as research report editing, public involvement, and mass media contact?

And, finally, "What am I going to do in my job as a result of this meeting that I have not been doing?"

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Broadband Communications Systems for Rural America

Gretchen Kolsrud

The Office of Technology Assessment, better known as OTA, is quite new and quite small. Most simply stated, OTA is a kind of think tank for Congressional committees — for subjects in some way related to technology and its use.

¹ Talk by Dr. Gretchen Kolsrud, Assistant to the Director, New Emerging Technology and Telecommunications, Office of Technology Assessment, U. S. Congress, at the AAACE annual meeting, Logan, Utah, July 11-14, 1977.