

Kansas Editor Lauds Role of Press

Communicating Agricultural Research Results to the Public.*

Gary L. Vacin

WHEN YOUR DIRECTOR asked me to participate in your annual Experiment Station Conference this year, and told me the theme would be "Communicating Research Results," I was delighted. Being an agricultural communicator, naturally I'm biased. But I seriously believe that never before has it been so important to communicate the results of agricultural research to our various audiences.

A major responsibility of the office I represent, the Office of Extension Information, is to interpret the programs of the Cooperative Extension Service and research generated by the Agricultural Experiment Station to the people of Kansas.

Where does research end and Extension begin? I don't worry too much about that question. That's because we are a Land Grant institution. We have agricultural scientists to generate research and agricultural communicators to help carry the results of that research to the people.

What good are scientists if the results of their research are left to gather dust on the shelf? Of what value are communicators if they have nothing to communicate?

Research, communicator. We're both on the same team. We need you and you need us. One cannot succeed without the other.

My topic is communicating agricultural research results to the public. Our next speaker, Thayne Cozart, will discuss using trade magazines and the farm press to communicate research results. Another speaker, Paul DeWeese, will cover radio and TV. So I'm going to limit my comments this morning to newspapers. I believe newspapers are an ideal medium for telling the public about agricultural research.

Here's why. Newspapers are widely and quickly circulated across the state. Kansas is served by 242 weekly papers with a total circulation of 387,000 and 50 daily papers with a total circulation of about 667,000. Every county in the state has at least one newspaper. Some counties have eight or nine.

*Presented to the Annual Kansas Agricultural Experiment Station Conference, Kansas State University, Jan. 5, 1977.

Let me throw out a few figures to show how newspapers can be effective in communicating agricultural research. A story about KSU agricultural research carried in a typical county seat weekly — the Oberlin Herald, for example — may reach 3,000 readers. If it hits one of the major daily papers in the state — the Salina Journal — it may reach 30,000 readers. If it is used in the two major metropolitan dailies that serve Kansas — the Wichita Eagle and the Topeka Daily Capital — it may reach 300,000 readers. And if it is picked up by the wire services — Associated Press or United Press International — it may be picked up by most daily papers in Kansas, across the midwest and the entire nation. Thus, it may reach 3 million or even 30 million readers. So you can see why we like to use newspapers to communicate research and Extension accomplishments to the people of Kansas and the nation.

Although I recognize that the electronic media are superior for communicating fast breaking news, I'm biased toward the printed word. Let me tell you about the printed word. You can hold it, you can see it, you can read and reread it if you don't understand it. You can file it away for future reference. You can keep it for posterity. You can show it to your boss.

I don't mean to downgrade the spoken word, for without it, interpersonal communication would be impossible, and so would the conference we're having today. The spoken word complements the printed word. But when it comes to communicating the results of agricultural research to the public, it's hard to beat the printed word.

One thing you as agricultural scientists and we as agricultural communicators have going for us today is that agriculture is big news. I think the date July 8, 1972, should be a national holiday for agricultural scientists and communicators. On that day, a massive grain sale to the Soviet Union was announced. Since that day, our job of communicating agricultural news and research has been a little easier. That sale signalled the opening of the export market, which in turn signalled higher prices for farm products, which in turn signalled higher food costs for consumers. As a result, agriculture made headlines. So did farmers; so did agricultural scientists.

The Wall Street Journal recently put it this way: "The USA, long preoccupied with rapid urbanization, now is rediscovering its economic heritage is still its biggest industry — agriculture. News of food prices, grain exports, and supply and demand is in the headlines regularly, underscoring for citizens and national leaders alike the tremendous influence that agriculture has on the economic, social and political well-being of America and the world."

We got the attention of the American public. Now it's up to us as agricultural scientists and agricultural communicators to take advantage of that fact.

A word of warning: The job of communicating news about agriculture is not a bed of roses. We have some things going for us, but we also have problem areas.

One of these problems is, that even though agriculture is in the news these days, we will must compete for space in the newspaper. The editor has a limited amount of space in each issue. That space is made available by advertising the paper sells to its advertisers. And, make no mistake about it, it's the advertising dollar that keeps most newspapers in business — not money generated by subscriptions.

We at K-State write articles about extension and research accomplishments and many other KSU activities for use in the space the editor has available. But so do the publicity people at other colleges and universities in the state.

So do ag communicators at the Land Grant institutions at Oklahoma, Nebraska, Missouri, Colorado, and every other land grant institution in the nation.

So do the farm organizations like Farm Bureau, NFO, Farmers Union.

So do the agri-business firms that send press releases about their products and programs — Far-Mar-Co, John Deere, DeKalb, and others.

So do the multitude of nonfarm companies, some of which have huge PR budgets.

So do politicians, preachers, and others — the list goes on and on.

What I'm saying is that we're all competing for a resource — the news or editorial space in the newspaper. Space is a limited resource, and the editor wants to get maximum use from that limited resource. He will do that by selecting stories he considers most newsworthy.

That means we're competing with news of sex and violence, the energy crisis, the situation in the Mideast, the activities of Governor Bennett and the state legislature, Jimmy Carter and Billy, the political candidates, and a host of other news sources and publicity seekers.

To compete, we must convince editors that our extension and research programs are newsworthy. That means our news stories must be interesting. I think much of our research is newsworthy and interesting. So do editors. These slides show news accounts of K-State agricultural research that were carried on the front page of the major metropolitan papers in Kansas.

1. KSU Scientists Develop Cheaper Feed for Cattle — the development of Starea by Earle Bartley, Charles Deyoe and Harry Pfof. Wichita Eagle.

2. He says he's got a better zip code. The he is Leonard Schruben and the better zip code is a computerized mail delivery routing system that could save \$500,000 in Kansas and \$40 million in the U.S. Topeka Daily Capital.

3. Pre-dressed Meats to be Choice — and Cheaper — resulting from a KSU study done by a team of researchers. Wichita Eagle.

4. Railroads Hasten Branch Closings — research on rail line abandonment by Orlo Sorenson. Topeka Daily Capital.

5. Kansas Experiments Improve Crops — Floyd Smith predicts breakthroughs in crop production as a result of KSU research. Wichita Eagle.

6. Fuel Not the Only Shortage — A shortage of boxcars and storage space may also plague farmers, according to research by Orlo Sorenson and Roy Frederick. Hutchinson News.

7. Beef Prediction Gloomy — So says John McCoy in a speech to the Kansas Bankers Association based on his research in livestock marketing. Kansas City Star.

The point is that agricultural research is big news. At least the editors think so, and they're the gatekeepers who decide which stories are printed in their newspapers, and which ones go into the round file.

Of course, not every story we do on agricultural research can hit the front page. But our goal should be to hit the paper as often as we can, if not on the front page, then on the consumer page, the editorial page, in the county agent's column, or somewhere else in the paper where people will read about Kansas State University research.

The story we at K-State need to tell is that agriculture is the No. 1 industry in Kansas; that funds for research and development of agriculture and agribusiness are more important than in most other states because Kansas depends more on agriculture and agribusiness than most states do. States need economic activity to support schools, roads, city streets, welfare programs. To get funds for these projects and services, states must have economic activities to raise money.

To fare best, states must have economic activities in areas where they have a natural competitive advantage. At present, Kansas has a competitive advantage in agriculture. It appears that Kansas should have most success in increasing economic activity to pay for her schools, highways, and other projects and services Kansans need by investing in agricultural research.

This is the story we at Kansas State University need to tell. We need to show how dollars invested in agricultural research are paying big dividends to Kansas taxpayers. In short, we need to be accountable to the legislature and to taxpayers who support our programs and pay our salaries with their tax dollars.

I feel strongly that we must demonstrate that public support yields broad public benefits. Let me say that again, because it may be the most important thing I'll say this morning. Public support of Kansas State University yields broad public benefits.

The State of Kansas has been generous in its support of agricultural research at K-State, particularly the last few years. Our Agricultural Experiment Station budget is about \$13 million this year. Our ultimate goal is to serve the people of Kansas who pay that bill. They are the ultimate beneficiaries of our research and Extension programs. They are the real source of most of our budgets. Therefore, we must be accountable to the taxpayers.

One way to be accountable to taxpayers is to communicate with them.

Terence Day, agricultural research writer at Washington State University, put it this way:¹

“The mechanism for accounting to the real source of most of our budgets, the public, is often overlooked and usually under exercised. That mechanism is communicating with the public. I’m not talking now about conveying to the public information that will be useful to citizens in the sense of educating them in how to use research or extension programs.

“I’m talking about educating the public in the knowledge that it does, however indirectly, receive something for the money it invests in agricultural research . . . that agricultural research benefits them, enriches their lives, and their pocketbooks, and is worthy of their support.

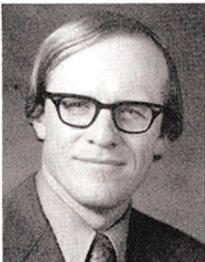
“I suspect that some would argue whether this is accountability or public relations. I prefer to call it accountability. But I also maintain that accountability to consumers is not only good public relations, it is the best public relations.”

Your responsibility as agricultural scientists no longer ends with a technical report to your colleagues in a professional journal. In this day of accountability, your obligation includes interpreting or having your research interpreted to the public.

Our responsibility as agricultural communicators is to press you for the information we need to help you relate your research to the people of the state and the Kansas public policy makers. People in the state must know what has happened as a result of the dollars they invested in research.

We ought to tell everybody about the accomplishments of our Agricultural Experiment Station. We need to tell them in plain, simple English they can understand. You as agricultural scientists and we as agricultural communicators — we all share that responsibility.

¹AAACE Quarterly, July-September, 1976, p.21.



GARY L. VACIN was named extension Editor at Kansas State University December 1, 1976. He had been assistant Extension Editor since 1966, and also holds an associate professorship in economics. Gary is a native of Thomas county, Kansas. He has B.S. (1960) and M.S. (1964) degrees in journalism from Kansas State, and a Ph.D. in rural sociology from Iowa State. He was assistant Extension Editor at Iowa State two years before joining the faculty at his alma mater in 1966. Dr. Vacin is well known for popular writing in agricultural economics, as one might guess from his article here. He is also a member of a number of professional and honorary organizations, including AAACE.