

# Videocassettes as a Training Tool

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Depending upon who you talk to, video can be the savior of all training headaches or it can be an expensive and awkward substitute for slide presentations and live bodies. Somewhere in between these two attitudes is the truth; and sometime soon, we need to decide on the role video should have in training.

My assignment was to find out what the future is for videocassette training for Georgia extension agents. Of course, videocassettes have much wider ranging possibilities than just training, but my study centered on using them as a tool in agent training.

Right now some Georgia agents are developing their own programs on video; others know where the playback machine is on the storage shelf but are afraid to touch it; and some don't know what video is. Before those of us in a communication department can go full force into videocassette training, back out of the field completely, or settle somewhere in between, we need to know who has access to machines and who would use them if they had them; we need to know attitudes of agents, district directors and specialists who would be involved; and we need to know the advantages and disadvantages of the system. That's what my study intended to find out.

The report is presented in three parts: background information, including a definition, research and other states' experiences; a narrative of the survey results; and conclusions. Write to me if you would like copies of the survey instruments and detailed results.

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## **Some Background and a Definition**

Here is a homemade definition of videocassettes and how they work.

They are pre-recorded programs on two-inch by four-inch containers. When the cassettes are played, they show the program on a playback machine that looks like a television set. This is not the caramate system.

If you can believe the manufacturers, take note that well-produced video training modules teach more subject matter in less time than conventional classroom instruction. Well-designed videotaped technical presentations yield measurably better results than conventional classroom instruction in one-quarter to one-sixth the time.

A 1978 report forecast tremendous savings for training by using video. The report argued that video releases instructors from administration and presentation so that they can concentrate on development and improvement of training. If so, that translates into cost-efficiency, better time management and better use of resources.

Further, the report suggests, video presentations can reduce new job blues because they can face a new employee's second thoughts and explain or orient without forcing the employee to show any misgivings to employers or trainers. Video can convey information required by law; clarify, dramatize and reinforce aspects of the organization; and present benefits, facts and figures in less time and more clearly than other methods. With tapes available to answer questions on processes and methods, video can reduce time off the job tracking down answers.

Video can help managers become communicators and communicators become managers. In extension's case, it also can help specialists become communicators. Video allows employees to receive tangible, timely data; it can communicate specific recommendations, policies and procedures to all or selected employees; and it can eliminate redundant training and briefing tasks. Video can help trainers cut time and hold the interest of the audience.

Video's success depends on media practitioners with several years experience as producer/directors, knowledge of communications principles, experience in developing learning strategies and evidence of success.

With a basic one-way videocassette network, origination equipment would be set up in a central location with remote

offices housing only playback units. The amount of origination equipment is formidable, but extension communication already has or can arrange to use much of the equipment. For field equipment, the playback unit comes with some options — rent or buy, color or black and white, reel-to-reel or videocassette, portable or assigned use, wide gauge or narrow gauge, professional or home machines.

Application dictates the selection of the most appropriate video equipment.

### **What Video Reality Shows**

Now that you know how the manufacturers see it, take a look at how it works in the field, particularly in the extension field.

Three *ACE Quarterly* articles analyzed how video works in training farmers and agents using videocassettes. Don Springer reported work done in Kansas for pesticide training and pork production.

On the pesticide training, he compared five methods, including Telenet (a telephone hook-up similar to a conference call), presentations by a county agent and by a specialist, self-study and videocassettes. He measured knowledge of the information before the training, which ranged from 71 to 76 percent. After the presentations, Telenet and the specialist's presentations went up 13 percent when measuring knowledge gained, the county agent's group gained 16 percent, and the self-study group gained 17 percent. The videocassette group climbed by 25 percent, up to 96 percent.

In cost per person, Telenet cost \$8.12, the specialist meeting cost \$7.16, the agent's session cost \$2.38, self-study cost \$2.14 and videocassettes cost \$1.99.

For the pork production training, videocassettes were combined with a telephone hook-up in 11 locations. Hand-outs were used, the agent conducted the meeting and all participants received transcripts of the questions and answers. A total of 97 percent indicated they would continue to use videocassettes following this experience.

In South Dakota, John Pates ran a test in four groups of counties to find out whether videocassettes or slide-tape presentations were better for teaching. A total of 90 percent chose videocassettes.

In Nebraska, Jim Randall ran a survey to find out how agents and specialists view the medium. All the county offices in Nebraska have playback units.

Randall found that county agents request 250 video-cassettes every month, but few specialists want to develop material. A total of 87 percent of the extension workers felt videotapes were an effective means for helping others learn, but 38 percent of the specialists had not used videotapes at all.

The majority felt the effectiveness of the videotape as a teaching tool was dependent upon the content of the videotape program itself, the specialist's ability to apply the information to the learner, and the discussion that accompanies the videotape presentation.

The majority of the specialists felt that the use of videotape programs would increase the ability of the extension service to reach people. Seventy percent felt videotapes could save travel time and money because a program could be made to send to several counties instead of making personal visits.

Videotape equipment and its weight and bulk were problems for specialists. They felt these problems discouraged use and so those who saw this as a problem produced fewer videotapes.

Specialists who had developed videotape programs did not think the process was too time-consuming. Half of the respondents had no experience in developing videotape programs and 65 percent said they would like to develop a program. In addition, 72 percent of the specialists wanted a workshop on the techniques.

### **Still More State Experiences**

Several extension communication departments in other states have gone heavily into videotape production, so I talked to people in four states to find out how it is working for them.

In North Carolina, Reese Edwards is in charge of videotape work, so he outlined the operation. North Carolina has been in the videotape business since 1972, and has videotape units in each one of its 101 counties.

He says, "Now those units are suffering from old age. They are reel-to-reel and we were considering going to cassettes (VHF half-inch format), but we lost that idea along

with 23 positions. Now we're looking at upgrading the systems."

Edwards says the greatest success has been in agent training. The biggest drawback is acceptance and participation by specialists. "We have a hard time getting some of them to do the programs, but the tapes are requested like crazy by the counties."

Agents in North Carolina say one advantage to video is that the same message is given to all audiences. Edwards says his state has just completed two statewide training projects built around videotape presentations. The trainers went along with the videotape to field questions. Edwards says the only time they use the tape in place of the specialist is when a quick change comes. The videotape is the first contact and county agents don't seem to mind.

He says, "Let me emphasize that videotape is not a replacement for the specialists. In fact, the opposite has happened here. If they want to get out to the counties, they will. We have a saying here — 'extension specialists will always publish and always travel.' The agents are not fearful of losing the specialists."

Edwards adds that videotapes are particularly useful to show expendable or large items and close-ups. For instance, a tape on showing and fitting a steer eliminates the need to arrange to have a steer at several locations. Close-ups allow all to see equally.

In Alabama Lloyd Yerby of Auburn University sees different problems and different uses. Alabama does not have playback units in county offices so specialists or other trainers take all the equipment with them and Yerby shoots everything on campus.

He says, "As good a use as any is to help the agents be better able to see themselves live. Many don't have access to TV so our videocassette training can help."

Specialists can go out with the cassettes but Yerby doesn't think that's the best use; he prefers to send the tape in place of the specialist.

As for equipment, Yerby says, "We have big tape recorders out in many of the counties gathering dust right now. You can't just give equipment and not teach how to use it. Agents are lukewarm on getting used to the video equipment. They are taking a 'show me' attitude. We're willing to have agents take the videocassettes to the clientele, but they are uneasy about handling the equipment or fielding questions after they show the tape."

Yerby plans to use the videocassette in conjunction with a teleconference in several locations. For the first one, the Bell System is picking up the tab.

In Idaho Scott Fedale devotes about half of his time to video work, the rest to radio/TV coverage. He has been working with video for about five years. He says the response has been good to video use, although obviously some catch on more quickly than others.

Idaho had 12 player units stationed around the state, but after a survey in which 80 percent of those who didn't use any video said they would if they could get near a machine, the powers that be bought eight more machines.

Fedale says video has the ability to bring complex problems or out-of-season visuals to the viewer. Since he does not have a studio, he shoots almost all of his programs on location. He expects a specialist to come with a reason for using video and a plan of action. He trains specialists on the steps involved in videotaping and what the communication department will need before taping. He says, "Every time I do a video taping with a specialist, it's on-the-job training."

Last year, Fedale produced 15-20 programs. His department offers a videotape catalog and a newsletter to agents. Each lists the programs available.

He has done some district training on how to handle and operate the gear.

A new outlet for videotapes has come from specialists going to professional meetings who want to get away from the traditional slide set. They want video presentations.

He adds, "One thing that is terribly important to the success of video work is strong backing from the administration. You've got to have it."

John Wells of Mississippi produces videotapes in the studio and distributes them to each county upon request. Each county has a playback unit and some use them more than others.

Wells produced 10 programs last year on an "as needed" basis. His training for specialists using video comes on the job. He says, "On-camera appearances vary and some just aren't very good on TV. 3M has a series of tapes on how to perform on TV that are very good. I use them a lot to help the specialists."

As for the counties, he feels there is need for more training on how to use the equipment. He says most agents like to use slide sets because the equipment is more portable.

The Mississippi offices have Betamax systems with 13-inch monitors; however, they are not set up in the offices so that people can use them on the spot. They are packed and ready for transportation.

### **Results of a Georgia Survey**

To find out where Georgia extension stands on videocassette training for agents, I prepared three survey instruments. I conducted telephone interviews with all five district directors and a random sample of specialists and county agents. Twelve specialists were interviewed and five counties from each district were called.

The questions were aimed at finding out attitude, knowledge and experience with videocassettes. For the district directors, I wanted to find out if they would support videocassette training for their agents, what they saw as advantages and disadvantages, and whether they would favor offering training by placing a videocassette machine in their offices.

For the specialists, I wanted to learn if they had ever used video, what they thought are advantages and disadvantages, if they thought video is as effective as their live presentations, and if they would sign up for training on how to prepare video presentations.

The county agents were asked if they had access to a playback machine in their county, if they had ever used videocassettes in training or with clientele, if they could originate programs, how they could see video used in training, and what they thought were its advantages and disadvantages.

In all three groups, responses ranged from ignorance to experience, negative to positive, rejection to acceptance.

#### **District Directors**

The district directors all agreed that no more than a third of their counties could have access to videocassette playback units. Two estimated that figure would be very low, if any.

For advantages, they listed savings in travel costs, the ability to gear training around county schedules, self-teaching and streamlining training to individual needs. One said the use is only limited to the imagination, another said it

could be a valuable tool only if it is used as a supplement to other training methods.

For disadvantages, one said travel money for training was not significant enough to justify the loss of two-way communication. Others said production and equipment are expensive, agents lose follow-through and need training for equipment and presentations. Some said agents would miss the togetherness and sharing time of district training, the training with video in county offices would also require self-discipline, and it might be put off.

Asked if their agents would have a positive or negative response to training using videocassettes, one would not venture a guess, two said the response would be positive, and two said it would depend on the quality of the work and the proportion of training done through video.

Four would be in favor of offering video training in the district offices, one would not. He could see no advantage of video presentations unless the specialist was present.

In commenting about agent training using videocassettes, the district directors showed a wide range of acceptance. Two were positive, one was positive but cautious, one was negative, and one was unsure of how it could work.

## **Specialists**

Of the specialists called, all conduct training for agents. A fourth of them had used videocassettes in their training.

Among the advantages specialists listed were reduced travel and expenses and more widespread training possibilities. Agents could train on their own schedule and new agents would not have to wait for scheduled training.

They looked at the medium from a teacher's viewpoint and noted that advanced preparation would be easier than a live lecture, it moves fast, it offers good possibilities for props such as music and sets, it has replay ability, and it allows the trainer a chance to edit and refine the presentation. It allows a break from a lecture and it offers the chance to present the lecture in a series, using the tapes as a reference library.

For disadvantages, the specialists were concerned about losing personal contact, losing two-way communications for answering questions, and limiting sizes of audience in case equipment were not available.

Some said equipment is delicate and hard to move. One said if the tape is not high quality, efficiency and effective-

ness are lost. The individuality would go out of a presentation.

Asked if they felt videocassettes were as effective as their live presentations, a third said they were. A quarter of them said they had had some training in presenting material using video and all but one said they would sign up for training.

## **County Agents**

The county agents surveyed offered various levels of experience with video. A surprising 60 percent said they had access to a videocassette playback unit in their county, primarily in a school system or library. Forty percent of those with access said they could borrow the machine and physically move it to another location. The others said they could use the machine at a fixed location.

One unexpected answer to the question about access was that two major metropolitan counties claimed no access to machines while some of the agents in the least-populated counties knew where a machine was and said they had used it.

Four percent had used video for agent training, while 16 percent said they had used video with clientele. Thirty-two percent said they could originate programs in their counties.

Asked how they thought videocassettes could be used in training, they suggested, (1.) using them with new agents, volunteer leaders and office staff in particular; (2.) as a tool for updating material, since it can show out-of-season visuals; (3.) combining it with live presentations and other methods of teaching; (4.) using it on a district level; and, (5.) using it to teach correspondence courses.

They could see it used with a telephone hook-up, taping themselves and 4-H'ers to learn more about making presentations, taping lectures or programs or events to show those who could not attend in person.

Some of the advantages they listed included saving travel time and money, training on their own schedule, bringing in expertise to their counties that they couldn't afford, and showing difficult concepts more clearly. Because of replay possibilities they thought it could help agents and 4-H'ers see how they appear to an audience. They said video training could spread the specialist's time around in other ways in the counties, it would standardize the presentation so

everyone would learn the same thing, and it could be used on television appearances.

For disadvantages, agents said audiences couldn't ask questions, the material could get out of date, equipment might not be available, it is bulky and expensive, and someone must be responsible for the equipment which also means insurance could be necessary. In some cases, it could be difficult to get machines and audiences together and the small screen dictates a small viewing audience.

One agent said he did not want to lose specialists, another said contact with the specialist was especially important for new people in the organization.

## CONCLUSIONS

It seems obvious that the research is very high on video training, the experience in other states using it is mostly positive and the equipment is designed to offer a tremendous service in training.

However, the reactions from people in my state are mixed. The district directors represent just about every possible position, from very positive to very negative. The specialists and agents also have strong opponents and proponents.

Therefore, my conclusions are based on coming to some kind of consensus within the organization. The advantages and disadvantages comprise long lists on both sides. Before training using videocassettes can be applied with complete confidence in my state, some of the major disadvantages, particularly equipment shortages and fears, must be corrected.

The people involved, starting with the district directors and administrators, must be convinced this is a proper course to follow, and then the agents and specialists must be convinced of its merits. Some states introduced the equipment and ignored the follow-up training for both equipment operation and presentation. I don't believe a state should do that if attitudes are mixed.

Certain districts, including the director and the agents called, seemed more receptive to videocassettes than others. One possibility could be selective application, introducing it into districts that are willing to give it a try.

So I conclude that the first step is deciding if the method has enough merits to make it work, then tackling the equipment problem and convincing those involved to give it a

limited attempt. If all these steps point toward action, I recommend considering a pilot project and preceding it with training for both agents and specialists.

The uneasiness about going to videocassettes for training is natural and the disadvantages are real and must be reckoned with. But the obvious potential cannot be denied.

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