

Using a Community Relations Plan for Inservice Training

Bud Grimes

Positive visibility is an area of continuing concern for the Extension Service in Tennessee. Creating an accurate and positive public image has become everyone's job, and with a large and diverse clientele, this task is a challenging one. A pressing need for visibility lies at the county level, so the need for effective agent training in communication takes on added significance for the agricultural communication staff.

Past inservice training efforts consisted of one or two staff members meeting with a group of agents to provide training in a single area. This method was fine for helping agents improve certain skills. However, these training sessions failed to show the relationship of various media to each other in a general effort to improve visibility.

Recognizing the need for change, the staff determined to take a fresh approach to training. Enter the idea of selling agents on establishing an organized community relations plan. Such a plan could not only accomplish some important objectives for county staffs, but for the communication office as well.

At the county level, a community relations plan would help agents develop more visibility through better use of available communication channels such as newspapers and radio. At the same time, this approach would expose agents to communication channels they might not otherwise consider. Sessions on exhibit production and the use of cable T-V could stimulate new ideas.

Grimes is with the University of Tennessee. This article is from a paper he presented Feb. 8, 1983, at the Southern Association of Agricultural Scientists in Atlanta.

As for the communication staff itself, encouraging an organized community relations plan could help the staff identify agent communication needs. A knowledge of the tools available to individual counties would prove valuable in efforts to provide more effective training in the future. A resulting benefit from this would be improved credibility for the Office of Communications. Establishing staff members as reliable authorities in their particular areas would improve agent acceptance of future ideas.

Ideas for presenting the community relations plan concept were contributed by each office member. It was determined from the outset to offer two days of training, leading off the first day with some basic information on community relations and the importance of public opinion. A film was planned for the first session that examined factors contributing to public opinion. This film included comments from several public relations professionals who represented major U.S. companies. The reason for this was to plant the idea that positive visibility does not occur by accident but is an ongoing effort to keep the public informed of an organization's activities.

After the film showing, agents received a review of available communication channels. This led to an opportunity for each agent to consider the channels most appropriate in developing a community relations plan for his/her county. A form would then be provided allowing the person to identify the specific audience to be reached, the intended message, the channel or channels of communication to be used, the treatment of the message, and a time frame for release of the message. After this, each agent could attend the training sessions that would help best use the channels chosen for carrying out their individual plan.

The specific areas of training covered a range of potential channels for the agents. Sessions on writing, photography, radio, cable television and basic graphics were scheduled. Participants could choose the sessions that best fit their needs. These varied in length but an attempt was made in each session to allow time for questions. Communication staff members were also given the option of inviting guest speakers to present the information. This was an important innovation, because agents would be given the opportunity to hear ideas from communication professionals outside the Institute of Agriculture.

At the end of the second day of training, an important time for the agents was set aside. In addition to a question and answer session, each participant was asked to respond to some specific questions regarding the sessions. The questions were:

1. What commitment to action will you make to increase extension's visibility in your county?

2. How can we improve the program content and format used to present this workshop?

3. What kinds of training would you like the Office of Communications to provide in the future?

The answers to these questions would provide some valuable insight into how well the training had been received and indicate whether or not ideas had been planted through this new approach to inservice training.

After the training was completed and comments evaluated, it appeared that many of the agents planned to implement some aspect of a community relations plan. Intended actions were apparently aimed at specific communication needs in each particular situation. Building better relations with local news media was a primary goal of many participants. These agents wanted to begin increasing visibility by first selling their programs to the media on a personal basis.

Additional areas for commitment to improved visibility covered all of the major subjects taught at the inservice training sessions. Communication avenues of particular concern included the need to improve writing skills and shorten radio programs. Intentions to enhance photography skills and learn more about cable television were expressed. Working more with exhibits and displays also attracted the interest of some agents.

One aspect of the training that drew a range of comments was the inclusion of guest speakers on certain portions of the program. Reactions were mixed, but trended toward favorable. The opportunity to hear ideas and viewpoints from outside the University mostly was well received. Problems surfaced when speakers were not as informed about the role and function of extension as they might have been. However, most agreed that experts outside the organization could make important contributions to a training program.

An informal followup of the training found that many agents had turned commitments into actions. One example is a home agent in middle Tennessee who now makes more use of radio time to announce meetings and special programs. An east

Tennessee 4-H agent is helping to organize a slide/tape presentation about the county 4-H program for use at civic clubs, PTA programs and other community gatherings. On another positive note, an extension leader in west Tennessee felt that the training had confirmed the importance for good communication. This supported his intentions for continuing to increase extension's visibility through the channels covered in the community relations plan.

Some meaningful conclusions can be drawn from this training experience. First, the idea of tying a community relations plan to inservice training seemed to put the purpose of communication into a new perspective for the agents. In past training, agents were primarily taught how to improve certain skills. Through the community relations plan, improved communication skills could be seen as a vehicle for better visibility.

The format of the training presented a unique opportunity for interaction with the agents. A beneficial result was that communication staff members better identified with the problems of extension visibility on the county level. Several agents indicated a need for more one-on-one training so that communication staff members could answer more questions about individual situations. Agents also showed a desire to be better informed about communication trends and ideas that would contribute to an evolving community relations plan.

The most important implication of this training was the need for the communication office to become more involved in an overall visibility effort. The professional communication staff must learn more about county programs. Staying current on new ideas is a necessity for staying in touch with agent needs. Beginning and advanced training should be included in future sessions so that these needs are met. The training and implementation of ideas by the agents must then be evaluated on a continuing basis.

A community relations plan appears to offer an effective means for both teaching communication skills and improving extension's image at the county level. With agents learning the skills necessary for designing their own plan of action, visibility can be increased in an effective manner that meets the needs of each county situation.