

To My Colleagues In the Land-Grant Universities...

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“What do onsite review teams learn about our information and communication operations?” I am often asked that by ag information staff members. After 16 reviews, I think I begin to see some generalities that could be stated.

What follows is my own analysis. But it is based on the 16 reviews of state agricultural information offices that CSRS (the Cooperative State Research Service, USDA) conducted when I was with the organization. And on interactions with the 40 or so communication professionals who have served with me on those onsite teams over the past 7 years — people I admire, trust, and have learned a great deal from.

1. I'm constantly amazed at the productive capacity and outstanding abilities of ag information and communication staffs around the country. You turn out a lot of material — and do it well.

2. Many of you indicate that the constantly expanding volume of production work is also a trap. Many of you are working at the edge of not being able to handle the load, but you still do a professional job and put the utmost of your abilities into the job. Some staffs cope more successfully than others.

In some states, there is a system — sometimes resting with the director, sometimes with departments and/or project

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leaders, sometimes with program leaders — that helps control the volume of flow and help with making decisions about what is to be produced and what is not. There the feeling of desperation over the size of the production load is not so strong as it is in staffs where there is no advance planning system.

3. Part of what motivates you in your production responsibilities is a real dedication to serving your institutions and their clients. One of your key abilities and responsibilities is to represent the audience in the planning and production of materials for them. And there is a great dedication to objectivity, and to being non-political.

Yet in these times of need for our institutions, using that objectivity argument as a crutch not to engage in the needed public relations work for agricultural research, extension, and resident instruction is also an abrogation of our responsibilities.

4. Few of you are fully involved with your administrators at any time during the year to do overall strategy planning for the public relations and information needs of the various units you serve. Few really move assertively to help or study or work with units in their part of the university to plan ahead, anticipate needs, have an early input into planning so that the communication components aren't simply afterthoughts, add-ons.

One administrator said to his information chief, "Oh, we don't have any problems. I can have you come into the office any time I want to and talk about our communication needs!"

But did he really share what his problems were, so the information chief and his or her staff could look for ways to help, make adjustments in their own work to accommodate working on those problems, etc.? Did the information chief have a chance to say what he or she and the staff felt were that administrator's unit's problems as they saw them?

I doubt it.

5. I can't remember many information staffs — except those units where experiment station and extension information staffs are separate — where I felt that the staff was doing much thinking about, working for, or helping the research units in a broad information and public relations way.

Information staffs are extension-oriented. And rightfully so. Appointments and money largely come from there. Extension

specialists and field staff are communication-oriented — they are pushy, their success depends on communicating. And so they are constantly at your doorstep, demanding, proposing, presenting.

Not so with the station staff, by and large. They aren't aware of what is needed often, they do not see or think of the opportunities there are. They tend to do things themselves rather than turning to a professional communication staff for help and advice — often because there is no such staff to turn to, from their point of view.

Stations, research, and science communication are the great area for information support development as far as I can see.

6. And then there is your own research. I'm really delighted with all the evaluation research that is going on around the country. I'm sorry that administrators and others aren't really aware of the volume or of its value.

Most of the evaluation you do is taken out of your hide — done with little or no added resources. But you are doing evaluation on problems and questions that really matter to you. And learning in the process about how to do the evaluation job better the next time. That is most encouraging to me.

At the same time, I find very few staffs where keeping up with what is being found out in research, or keeping up with changes in research methods and theory, has any priority. Mostly it is an individual matter. And yet I believe that unless we do research on our own jobs and problems, we'll never have anything but state-of-the-art guides for doing better.

Why not have seminars on research? What aren't social science researchers from departments in the university invited in to tell about their research, to learn something about ag communication in case they can do some research of importance to ag communication?

Why don't we build those lists of questions and problems we have, so that when a scientist is available we can try the list out on him or her to see if we can't get help? And use the list to guide our own evaluation and research priorities, instead of having individual theses and projects that don't build into anything?

Why, even with evaluation research, don't we have a plan, a program, a sequence of things we want to find out, explore, check on — to guide us?

7. Professional development. Most staffs, most individuals, have no plan. Little spelled-out idea of where they would like to go, what it takes to get there, and then a method for seeking ways of getting there. Part of the problem is, as with doing more research or engaging in teaching — “with my production load, how do I find time?”

And yet without professional development, we stagnate, get behind our profession, lose sight of the bigger picture, don't get our heads cleared out so we can grow and change. A university campus is a great resource for a professional-development-minded staff. But seldom does it get used. We're as bad as the undergraduates in not using the university for our own purposes, as well as serving it.

8. Very few ag communicators get to teach. More are involved in inservice training of others. Even in this area, we are not making the contributions we could.

Why not a communication curriculum in inservice training? Set out sequences of courses, annual emphases in terms of training, continuing orientation to media and methods and to the information staff?

In many institutions, the faculty have very little idea of what the communication staff does, who to go to for help, or what help the staff offers. We have to look to our own public relations more consistently than we have in the past.

9. Academic teaching is a thrust that many of you feel you must follow to gain academic credibility and status — and many feel guilty because you don't teach or deprived because you don't have that credibility and status. If you are part of a teaching institution, that is what is going to be valued. So your communication staffs must wrestle with the problem of how or whether you can teach.

Most agricultural communications or journalism programs receive little or no support from the ag communication staff. Yet that is where our replacements are being trained. Most ag communication curricula give students a strong base in agriculture and in journalism. But few pull the two together in any way to give the young people an idea of what ag communication is, what you do on the job, how you think, what the job opportunities are, etc.

There is no support in most universities for the ag communication students from faculty or staff. Those students who make it through the curriculum survive it on their own and despite the system. Internships do help in some states. I've

hoped that the teaching section in ACE would gain support and be an important, integral part of the organization in the long run. Right now, the movement needs some tender loving care to survive and keep going, despite the great enthusiasm there has been for the section among those involved.

We have a useful, productive, needed profession. But no one is going to nurture it and us in it unless we do. Some of us look on our responsibility as being to do the production job we were hired for. And that is right.

But there is a broader responsibility that at least some need to take on. That is the same responsibility that top-flight professionals in the rest of the university have. A dean, director, department chairperson all expect an agronomist, for example, to do research to advance the knowledge of his profession, to help diffuse that knowledge and information and skill through academic teaching and through extension-type work, to help train others who will enter the profession through academic programs, to help train and upgrade other professionals in the subjectmatter field, and to keep up to date in that subjectmatter field and important related areas.

Should we expect less of ourselves as agricultural communicators working in and with the land-grant universities? Should others expect less of us?

I think not. Yet I know the long and difficult effort needed to get us there — if we can ever make it. But I'm convinced that that is the direction we must take. And the goal we have to keep ever before us, no matter what the trials and tribulations and successes along the way.

