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Journal of Applied Communications

The Journal of Applied Communications

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Professional Development

Research

Journal of Applied Communications

Photo-elicitation as a Method of Assessing Village Needs for Extension Planning

Lulu Rodriguez and Denise Bjelland

Abstract

Photo-elicitation is a method of gathering data from respondents who are asked to take photographs or critically examine and reflect on images taken by others to offer a more "native" view of often cross-cultural or inter-group experiences. This method was applied to determine what the residents of a village in China's Hangzhou province saw as their community's development priorities by asking them to take photographs of local scenes, characters and objects to depict their needs. Through their snapshots, they indicated the need to diversify their community's economic base (currently limited to snake production and processing), the need for better transportation and for more markets for their products. On the other hand, the faculty and students of a university mandated to develop an extension force to serve the village's agricultural needs indicated in a focus group that their rural clients were likely to clamor for more markets, lenient govern-ment policies, and educational opportunities. Examples of studies that have used this approach and the strengths and limitations of the photo-elicitation technique to assess village needs for extension planning are discussed.

Introduction

Agricultural communicators on international assignment often face a daunting problem: the lan-guage barrier. Often asked to undertake rapid rural appraisals to gather benchmark data for project development, they encounter language and other cultural difficulties that threaten the validity and reliability of their formative evaluation data. Some well-endowed projects can solicit the assistance of competent translators and interpreters on a sustained basis; others, however, are not so fortunate. Almost always, these quick appraisals, done through surveys and interviews, do not provide the necessary context to identified problems and offer too little about what people make of their own circumstances.

One of the ways by which communication planners and practitioners, ethnographers, anthropol-ogists and other social scientists have dealt with language and other cultural "immersion" problems is to tap the rich data and multiple meanings offered by photographs and other visual devices. Drawn or taken by researchers, planners or local citizens who are usually the target beneficiaries of develop-ment efforts, these images have been used to elicit reactions and information concerning community life (i.e., Schwartz, 1989; Caldarola, 1985, Sampson-Cordle, 2001), immigrant concerns (i.e., Sustik, 1999; Gold, 2004), the use of rural and urban space (i.e., Quesnell, 1987), the concerns of refugee populations (i.e., Mathews et al., 2006), and organizational change (i.e., Buchanan, 1998), among others, that might otherwise have never become apparent. The technique has demonstrated several advantages, but in general, it uses images as "bridges between worlds that are culturally distinct" (Harper, 2002, p. 21).

Researchers from different social science fields have given this method of gathering data different

names—"visual ethnography" (Schwartz, 1989), "photo essays" (Sampson-Cordle, 2001), the "photographic research method" (Caldarola, 1985), "photo interviewing" (Tucker and Dempsey, 1991), "auto-photography" (Sustik, 1999) and "photofeedback," among others. This technique, however, is now more popularly known as "photo-elicitation," following the term first coined by photographer and researcher John Collier in 1957 (Harper, 2002).

Photo-elicitation "is based on the simple idea of inserting a photograph into a research interview" (Harper, 2001, p. 13). While most elicitation studies use photographs, the technique can be employed using paintings, cartoons, graffiti, public displays or any type of image. The approaches to elicitation studies also vary. In some cases, development planners and researchers examine available visual data or create their own images that they analyze to gain insights into their target communities. In other cases, subjects are asked to critically examine and reflect on the images taken by others to offer a more "native" and grounded view of development concerns and priorities. In rare cases, community participants photograph their own world with inexpensive automatic cameras to share and elaborate on their experiences.

There are apparent advantages to this latter approach because the personal orientation of the group under study guides the selection of the subject matter. Using photographs taken by participants as elicitation tools in an interview allows the researcher to enter the perceived world of local citizens. What emerges is a local visual documentary that permits a more direct presentation of the insiders' narratives about themselves and their concerns. In other words, this method of collecting data enhances the possibility that the resultant discourse is grounded in the participants' immediate world.

Photo-elicitation also enables a greater understanding of the informants' environment emerging from their selection of, and commentary about, the images. Using photographs as the basis of interviews further enhances the reflections made about the context in which people's lived experiences are revealed. Such a technique can thus be expected to empower respondents.

Photo-Elicitation in Agriculture and the Social Sciences

Although photo-elicitation is a contemporary qualitative approach based on image and narrative, there is a history that shows the evolving use of photographs as data by anthropologists and sociologists. Social scientists have used cameras as research tools almost since anthropology and sociology had been declared legitimate areas of study in the United States (Harper, 1988). Collier (1967), for example, found that photographs can provide a more efficient analysis of social settings, such as dwellings, "poverty pockets" and workplaces than can be obtained by using only oral or written descriptions. He observes that the photographs allowed researchers to move from a concrete idea to one that is more socially abstract in their discussion with respondents.

Harper (1987) describes the process he used in his own study as follows:

"In the photo-elicitation interview, the informant and the interviewer discuss the photographs the researcher has made of the setting, giving the interview a concrete point of reference. The researcher gains a phenomenological sense as the informant explains what the objects in the photograph mean, where they have come from, or developed from, and what elements may be missing . . . The individual being interviewed comes to a level of understanding, as would anyone confronted by a photographic study of his or her social world, that probably did not exist prior to the interview" (p. 25).

Other studies have also capitalized on this approach. For example, Bunster (1978) used Collier's (1967) work as a basic source in stimulating open-ended interviewing of working mothers in Lima, Peru. In this case, she used booklets of photographs compiled prior to the interviews to serve as discussion springboards. Curry (1986) applied the method to study the sociology of American sports, and Suchar and Rotenberg (1994) used photo-elicitation to examine the shared meanings about housing held by three different categories of residents in an urban Chicago neighborhood. Quesnell (1987) employed this approach to determine people's perceptions of development initiatives in Vermont while Clark-Ibanez (2004) used it to engage the children of south central Los Angeles in a series of conversations about their social world. Others (i.e., Mathews et al., 2006) took advantage of the approach to elicit the stories of young asylum seekers through photography, drawings, paintings and sand play. Beillin (2005) was able to recreate physical and social changes in a Midwest agricultural landscape by drawing on the residents' accounts of critical events in the community elicited by allowing them to examine old photographs. Crosscombe (2003) did the same to tease out stories about farming from dairy farmers.

Can this method be applied for more efficient problem identification especially in an international assignment? We set out to test this approach to identify, clarify and prioritize the pressing needs and concerns of a village in southeastern China.

Photo-elicitation in Community Problem Identification: A Test Case

Located in the coastal city of Hangzhou 180 km southeast of Shanghai, Zhejiang University was recently given a new mandate—to develop a rural extension system different from the state-run mechanism people have traditionally known. Since 1999, national policy makers have been gradually transferring the function and fiscal responsibility for extension to universities to stimulate the creation of free market enterprises in the countryside (Garnau et al., 1996). Accustomed to its usual dual function of teaching and research, ZU was suddenly thrust into the business of communicating with its rural constituents, and charged with developing a vibrant extension force.

Originally, policy makers had thought that the university's extension workers could simply relay the villagers' problems and concerns to officials who can respond to their needs. They quickly learned, however, that extension should serve as the conduit between scientists and the villages, and while agent advice based on sound research is important, the clients' ideas are just as valid in finding science-based answers to meet people's needs. ZU immediately recognized that it needed to augments its rural ties and its level of interaction with rural clients. Citizen input was needed to answer the following questions:

    (1) What do villagers see as their most pressing development needs?
    (2) What does the university, as the potential extension delivery entity, think the villagers see as their most pressing needs or development priorities?

Theoretical Framework

To determine whether the villagers and those charged with extending research results to them share the same views regarding the areas demanding the expertise of university scientists, the photo-elicitation technique was applied. For this test case, McLeod and Chaffee (1973) provided a theoretical framework useful in approaching and measuring the extent to which these two groups co-oriented with each other with respect to extension priorities.

The key assumption underlying the co-orientation approach is that a group's behavior is not based simply upon its members' private cognitive construction of the world; it is also a function of the

group's perception of the orientations held by other groups in the environment. A further assumption is that under certain conditions of interaction, the actual cognitions and perceptions of others will also affect people's behavior (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973). As such, the theory suggests that communication can bring about congruency, agreement, understanding and accuracy of perceptions about an object or issue between, for example, university extension agents and their clients if both parties ask the right questions and are sensitive to each other's goals.

The co-orientation model integrates three basic kinds of variables. Figure 1 illustrates how these three measures relate to the current test case. The first is congruency or the degree of similarity between a group's cognitions and its perception of the other group's understanding of a specific object or issue. The second, agreement, refers to the extent to which the two groups' orientation with respect to an object or issue is similar. These two variables are highly dependent on personal values, the products of numerous experiences, and are thus unlikely to be changed by communication actions alone. Therefore, neither congruency nor agreement makes for a satisfactory criterion for measuring the influence of communication acts. The third variable, accuracy, is "the extent to which one group's estimate of the other group's cognitions matches what the other group really does think" (McLeod & Chaffee, 1973, p. 47). Accuracy, therefore, seems an ideal criterion to measure because it is achievable theoretically through communication. Thus, this study set out to determine how two groups—the villagers and the university people—accurately perceived the development needs of a village.
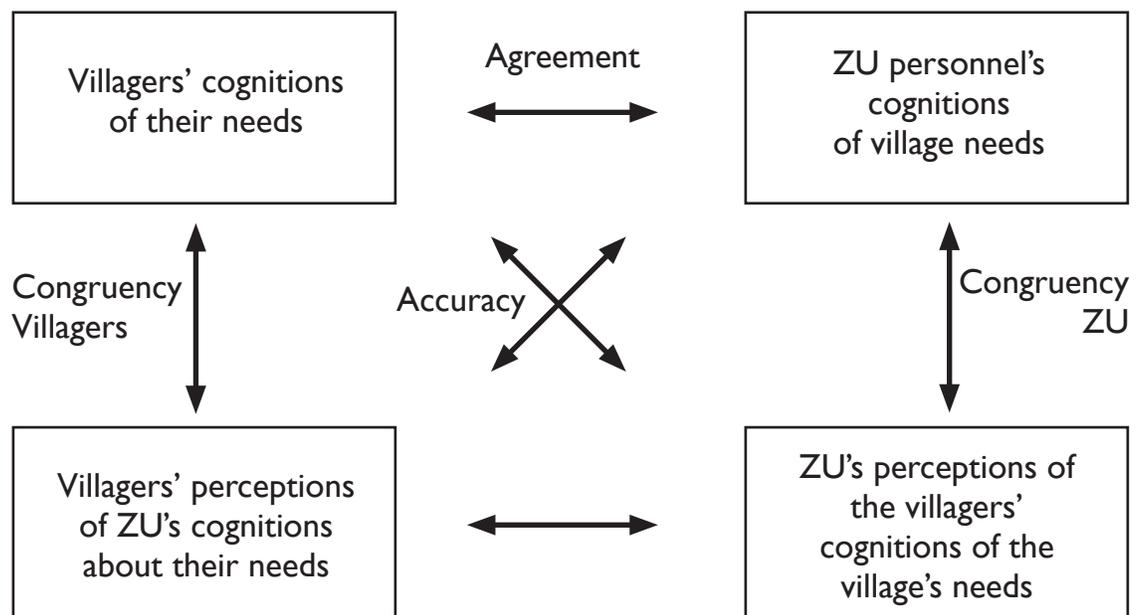
Figure 1. The co-orientation measurement model as applied to extension planning in China (Note. Adapted from Chaffee and McLeod, 1973.)

According to the co-orientation theory, groups who have a positive opinion of each other will, with increased contact, gradually come to agree more on topics of mutual relevance. Another expectation from the theory is that two groups are likely to hold different perceptions because they have differing roles, purposes, prior experiences, and communication potentials. Thus, one can expect that the perceived development priorities of a villager are not going to be the same as those of an extension agent who, more often than not, is a village "outsider." The broader objective of this study,

therefore, was to examine the extent to which university extension agents and their rural clients accurately identified village needs. Ascertaining the village's development needs from the point of view of its residents was done through photo-elicitation.

The first phase in an appraisal of needs involves finding out what people thought were the main problems and concerns to which extension should direct its efforts. While gathering the opinions of university constituents may not be a daunting task, how to get the perspective of villagers is a demanding undertaking, especially to non-natives and non-Chinese speakers.

The availability of inexpensive Polaroid™ (instant photography system) cameras fueled the idea that the villagers' commentaries could be elicited through the use of photographs they took themselves. The village participants in this needs exploration exercise were asked to take pictures of what they perceived as their most pressing development priorities. These photographs were then used as the focus of discussion, encouraging them to become the "teacher" by explaining to the researchers the images they took and what they meant. Essentially, these photographs served as the basis of further discussion about their concerns.

Harper (1988) points out that this approach was not intended to obtain images that are visually arresting, such as those seen in a documentary. In fact, he explains, the desire for visually arresting photographs stems from the "culture of the photographer" rather than the "culture of the photographed." The idea, rather, is to photograph objects and situations through the eyes of the villager. The method requires a "culturally neutral" eye—a difficult but exciting challenge for the interviewer—with the goal of obtaining information from the succeeding in-depth interviews with local "photographers."

By recording data, events and activities in a way that would convey a "feel" for the lives of the communities being studied, photo-elicitation was employed in this study as a means of shortening the gulf between the group under study and researchers whose own cultures and professional training can result in a different mental construct related to what was worthy of film. This follows the works of Preloran (1975) who used his films as an opening for dialogues with people he was studying in an effort to "give voice to those who had none" (p. 103). Film, then, became a part of the method for eliciting a conversation with a group of people about their day-to-day lives.

The Test Case

The study was conducted in a village located in DeQing prefecture (county) in Zhejiang province, located approximately 300 kilometers southwest of Shanghai. The village, categorized administratively as a "town and village enterprise," was a suitable study locale because nearly its entire population was involved in a common enterprise—snake production, processing and marketing. As such, it will be referred to here as Snake Village.

According to Huang (1998), gaining access to a village and ensuring the voluntary participation of villagers depended on following established protocols. This meant that the approval and support of officials and opinion leaders must be solicited first. To do so, the nature, purpose and process involved in the project must be thoroughly explained to the community authorities.

Because of their established presence in DaQing county, the government seat of Snake Village, ZU officials were instrumental in setting up meetings with the village officials, a difficult task considering that Chinese government officers are usually reticent to allow their constituents to be evaluated, particularly by researchers from free-market democracies whose government leaders are quick to point out China's human rights infractions.

Eight villagers were selected by the village heads to participate in this study. The research project

was explained to this purposive sample by the interpreter who also demonstrated how to load film and take pictures using Polaroid One-Step™ cameras. Each participant was given a roll of film with 20 exposures and was asked to return in two days with ten photographs representing what he or she considered to be the village's development priorities. The other ten exposures, they were told, were free for their own use. The participants were also promised 40 yuan (about US $5.00) if they would discuss their photographs with the researchers.

Upon their return, the participating villagers were asked in private interviews to explain what each photograph represented using open-ended interview protocols. After this, the photographed concerns were placed into specific categories of needs.

Structured interviews with native informants allowed the researchers to understand ways by which they conceptualized and categorized elements in their own terms. The inquiry matrix included such questions as: "Tell me about this picture you've taken." "How would you describe that?" "What is happening in this photograph?" "What particular need does this picture represent?" The probes were structured and controlled for the initial information being sought, but information also emerged that allowed the researchers to gain additional insights about concerns the villagers perceived as most pressing.

Commenting on the photographs they took themselves allowed the participants an opportunity to further position comments within their own experiences and contexts. If the interviewee was able to regain or get in touch with perceptions held about village priorities, then the photo-elicitation process can be considered to have accomplished its task. In the qualitative research paradigm, data so grounded in the participants' personal contexts and experiences are considered more valid (Lindlof, 1995).

It should be noted that the community leaders were quite skeptical of the villagers' ability to participate in this exercise. They doubted whether villagers had the educational background or experience to understand its purpose. They also thought the villagers would be more intrigued with the camera and would place less emphasis on identifying their most pressing concerns.

Results and Discussion

The Locale: A Brief Economic History

The researchers first interviewed community leaders, including the village's Party secretary who offered a narrative that pointed to the remarkable success the village had scored over the past few years.

Snake Village, according to its Party chief, was once mired in extreme poverty. When the government encouraged free market trade and the establishment of village enterprises, the village decided to focus on value-added snake products. Rather than continuing its 15-year practice of first-level snake processing (raising and selling snakes), the leaders determined that refined snake processing would be more profitable. Ninety percent of Snake Village farmers were engaged in harvesting and processing four to five varieties of non-poisonous snakes for food, medicine, and cosmetics. The largest markets for live snakes were Hangzhou and Shanghai restaurants; snake venom and organs were processed into medicine and wine. Product prices were mostly dictated by Hangzhou and Shanghai because the snake producers have yet to expand to foreign markets. After engaging in value-added snake production for only four years, the Snake Village enterprise became one of the most profitable in the county.

The Party secretary was understandably skeptical about the study, demonstrably at a loss as to
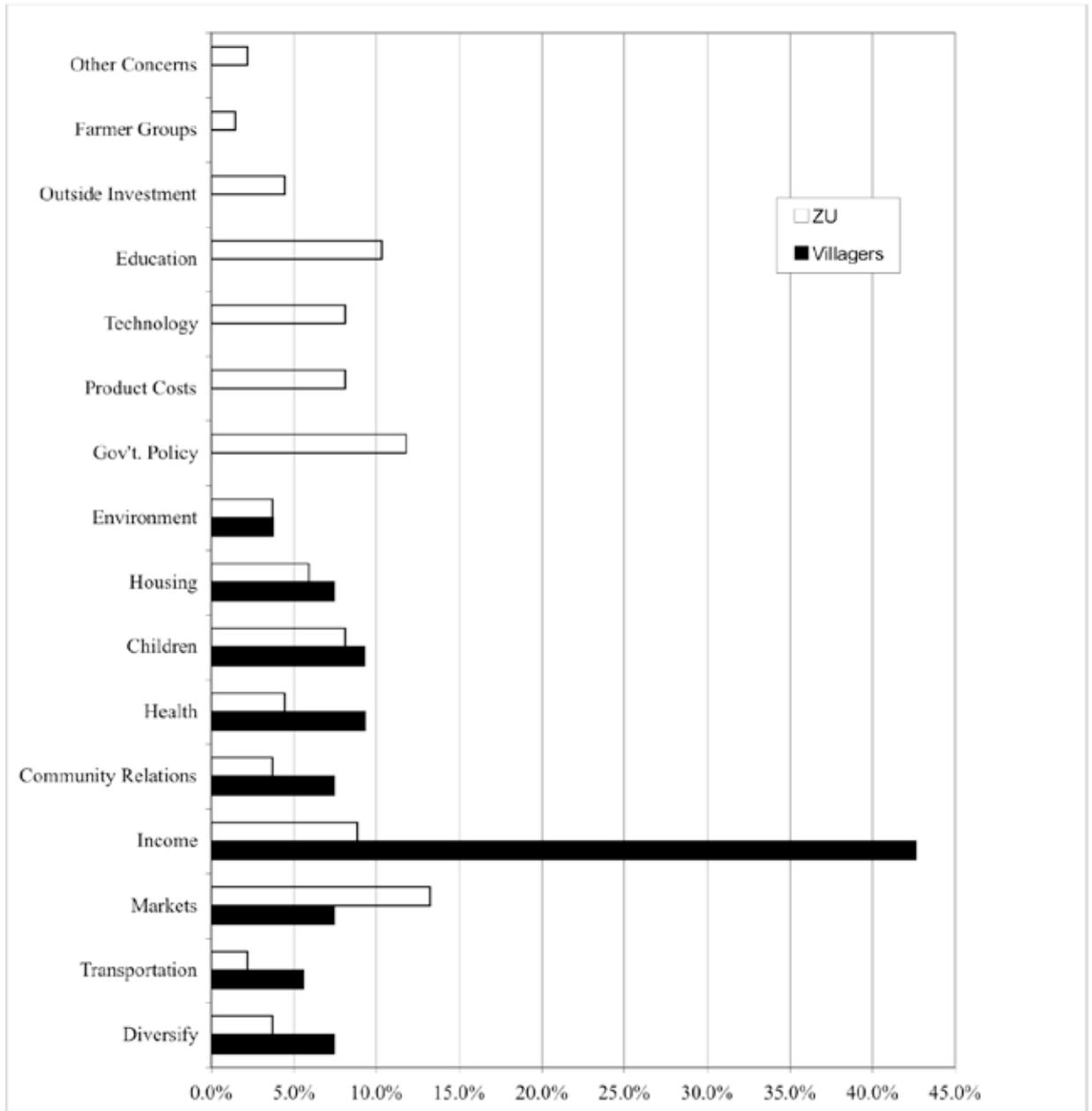
Figure 2. The perceived needs of snake village: A comparison of the villagers' and ZU faculty and students' responses

why the team would go to such lengths to understand village needs. He was sure his constituents would not understand, let alone have the skills to photograph, their concerns. Having been reassured that the study was not meant to assess the performance of government officials, he gave the team permission to proceed.

What the Villagers Actually Cared About

Eight people—seven men and a woman, 25 to 50 years old—took pictures and participated in interviews the following day. Assured that their photographs and responses would not be shared with other villagers, the eight were asked individually, with the aid of an interpreter, to explain what their photographs meant. Their development concerns fell under eleven broad categories (Figure 2).

The need to diversify their economic base topped the list of villagers' development priorities. A photographic depiction of this primary concern is shown in Figure 3. This development concern was followed by better transportation (Figure 4), more markets (Figure 5), and the desire to increase personal incomes (Figure 6), in that order. Better community relations, more adequate health care, and a concern for their children's future (Figure 7) were categories that occupied the middle part of their development priority list. Improved housing (Figure 8), environmental protection (Figure 9) and care for the elderly (Figure 10) completed their needs inventory.

Figure 3. A lone fisherman at work represents a villager's perceived need for the community to diversify its economic activities.

Figure 4. Snakes and snake products can be marketed more efficiently with better means of transportation. This cargo raft represents a villager's perceived need for improved transportation systems.

Figure 5. Two vendors in the background have arrived to purchase snakes, a representation of "more markets" as a major concern.

Figure 6. A shrimp harvester earns more than a snake farmer, according to a villager for whom this photograph means the need for higher incomes.

Figure 7. Pre-school children at a day-care center illustrate child care as an important concern.

Figure 8. A new apartment complex outside the village represents the desire for better housing.

Figure 9. Environmental protection as a priority area comes up in this picture of pipes for the new village water system.

Figure 10. This village grand lady turns 100 years old in a couple of months. She symbolizes to a villager the need for better elderly care.

The disparity between the number of photographs depicting each of the above categories and the priority assigned to each may be noteworthy. While a majority (42%) of the photographs fit into the "increased income" category, the villagers deemed the category as only fourth in importance, following diversification, transportation, and improved markets. Several factors may have contributed to this priority list. First, it is possible that some nuances in responses may have been lost in translation. The villagers also may have found it difficult to find objects in their immediate environment that depicted some of their concerns. Also, three of the four photographs that fell under "planning for diversification" were taken by a participant who helped oversee the village government. Used to government-directed initiatives, the villagers may well have looked up to him for leadership in determining how to prioritize their categories of need.

Comparing Villagers' Priorities and What ZU Officials Perceived Villagers Cared About

The research team then moved to the ZU campus to determine what university constituents thought were the most important issues confronting Snake Village. Eight graduate students in programs related to rural development (i.e., agricultural economics, finance, and rural sociology and rural development) and six professors with expertise in horticulture, agronomy and agricultural economics agreed to participate in a focus group that discussed what they thought were the main development concerns of Snake Village residents. Their responses were then compared to those of their village counterparts to determine if both groups agreed on development priority areas. Because of unequal sample sizes, the percentages of total group responses falling under each identified need category were compared (Figure 2). It was expected that incongruent responses could serve to clarify the development priorities of the emerging extension program.

The results showed that while most of the villagers' photographs (42.6%) indicated a desire for increased income, their university counterparts assumed that the villagers would clamor for more markets (13.2%), more lenient government policies (11.8%), and for better education (10.3%). In fact, only 8.8% of the ZU officials' responses accurately pinpointed the farmers' expressed need for improved incomes. The university constituents' three most cited needs, however, indicated strategies to boost local incomes.

The two groups' responses were most closely aligned in the categories of "health," the "future of children" and "environmental protection." A significant number of ZU officials' answers, mostly falling under the categories of "government policies," "production costs," "technology," and "education," were not even identified as development concerns by the villagers.

Figure 2 illustrates that the villagers' top category, "diversification," was mentioned only five times by the ZU participants. Evidently, the officials had ignored the second and last categories in the village residents' list, "transportation" and "care of elderly parents," respectively.

Clearly, the university constituents produced development priorities different from those identified by the villagers themselves. Specifically, the university focus group participants' list included items they consider necessary for a village to become and remain economically stable. Indeed, the university prioritization scheme clearly identified the areas for which the villagers might need technical assistance: government policies, production costs, technology cost/benefit, environmental issues, investments, credit, and the creation of viable farmers' organizations, among others.

In their studies of dyadic co-orientation, McLeod and Chaffee (1973) point out that two individuals or groups should be expected to hold different perceptions of the same object or issue given their different roles, purposes, experiences, and communication potentials. As such, the nascent extension efforts in China must first understand the importance of maintaining continuous dialogue with rural clients to ease the countryside's transition to a free market economy. Given limited resources, it will be important for the university to pay attention to program planning and delivery based on what their rural constituents truly care about.

Conclusion

The use of photo-elicitation as a research tool in this study proved productive and rewarding. The researchers won the confidence of villagers by entrusting them with a camera and assuming they would return in two days with the cameras and photographs in hand. The villagers were particularly fascinated with the cameras' instant film processing capability. Their incentives for participating included enough film to keep ten photographs for their personal use, along with a cash payment. By allowing villagers to identify and explain their concerns in their own terms, the researchers were able to

encourage dialogue in a way that would not have been possible through survey interview techniques. In fact, it can be said that the method gave researchers access to the village because the cooperation of county and village leaders stemmed in large part from their curiosity about how photographs can be used to obtain in-depth information.

The photographs, rather than direct questions, became the focus of discussion and made sense to the interviewers only through the villagers' explanations and elaborations. More important, the villagers' animated responses indicated they reveled in the opportunity to verbalize their thinking about the economic and social welfare of their community, a task traditionally left to Party leaders. The villagers volunteered that the method allowed for their first organized experience in strategic development planning. The study, in effect, set the stage for continuing dialogue between the villagers and ZU extension agents that may, in turn, lead to the shared governance of extension activities.

The photo-elicitation method did not allow the researchers to see the world the way the actors did necessarily, but rather permitted the sensitive translation of the social situation being studied. Even the villagers who took the photographs cannot be said to have captured reality on film, but have instead constructed a set of images consistent with their view of what ails their community and the what areas are ripe for improvement. Nevertheless, by using their own photographs to ask about their environment, the method uncovered and expanded on the meanings they hold for the villagers who took them. The use of photographs also elicited more grounded verbal commentary than one might get in a traditional question-and-answer type of survey.

Not all village participants were good photographers, but all revealed more about themselves and their environment through the photographs. This study showed that intensive interviewing using photographs as starting points has the potential to be applied to a number of other data gathering situations for planning.

While most of the villagers' photographs indicated a desire for increased income, their university counterparts assumed the villagers would be looking for more markets, lenient government policies, and education. In fact, only a small percentage of the ZU responses overlapped with the farmers' expressed desire for improved incomes. The two groups' responses were most closely aligned in the categories of "health," the "future of children" and "environmental protection." The villagers' top need category, "diversification," was mentioned only five times by ZU participants. Neither "transportation" nor "care of elderly parents" appeared in the university participants' answers. To the university constituents, "government policies," "production costs," "technology," and "education" stood out as the most important village concern although these issues were not identified by the villagers themselves.

Qualitative research allows for deeper descriptive narratives, but no generalizations relative to the larger population can be made from a small sample size. Given recent Chinese history, issues of trust and confidentiality of responses were also of concern to the respondents. There were also limitations due to working within a community that is ethnically and linguistically different from those of the researchers. All interviews were done with the aid of a translator. As such, nuances in responses may have been lost or extremely compromised. At times, the researchers did not feel that the images had been successfully translated into words. The researchers were also constrained by time limitations imposed by their hosts. More in-depth interviews would have shed further light on the genesis of the need priorities arrived at by the villagers.

Aware that familiar objects or symbols may be inadequate to represent a concern, it must be acknowledged that some visual experiences may exist that defy verbal description, and that everything one can verbalize cannot necessarily be recorded as a visual symbol.

Despite the limitations, the study (1) provided an opportunity for villagers to consider their collective future, (2) encouraged the nascent ZU extension force to give some thought to what villagers perceive to be their urgent development needs, and (3) enabled the researchers to examine how the village and the university co-oriented with each other, leading to a set of recommendations for Zhejiang University to consider as it embarks on an era of enhanced engagement with its rural clients.

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Penchant for Print: Media Strategies in Communicating Agricultural Information

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Abstract

The news media provide much of the information the public receives about agriculture and agricultural issues, but they are not the only players in the communication equation. Sources supply the news media with facts and information that eventually direct public thought and opinion about agriculture. Therefore, agricultural communication professionals play a significant role in the dissemination of agricultural information through the news media. In an attempt to better understand the role of agricultural communication professionals, the purpose of this study was to explore their media strategies and choices—specifically their use of different media outlets for their communication efforts. The present applied–exploratory study utilized qualitative methods to gather data from participants. Through 12 in-depth interviews and three online focus groups, a purposive sample of agricultural communication professionals shared their media relations strategies and choices. Overall, the data suggest a preference for working with trade, print media outlets. However, participants also noted that the consolidation and reduction of agricultural media outlets, specifically the farm broadcaster, pose a challenge for the communicator who relies heavily on trade media for their communication needs.

Introduction

As a scientific industry with highly complex issues and information, agriculture faces the same hardships as other scientific industries, which include a strained relationship between science and the public creating increased concern from the scientific community (Gregory & Miller, 2004). To an extent, this concern stems from the declining public support for science and technology, which has been blamed, by some, on the news media's inattention to relevant issues (Hartz & Chappell, 1997). The news media have been linked to several of the causes associated with the declining support in science, including reporters' lack of scientific background and knowledge, their news-gathering norms, and the editorial pressures placed on them (Treise & Weigold, 2002). Nonetheless, Treise and Weigold suggested, "Effective science reporting is perhaps the only mechanism for most people to learn about fast-breaking events and exciting developments that affect everyone" (p. 310).

However, holding the news media solely responsible for the communication of scientific information would be an inaccurate representation of the media coverage process. The news media provide much of the information the public receives about science and scientific issues, but they are not the only players in the science communication equation. Sources supply the news media with facts and information that direct public thought and opinion about science (Stringer, 1999). Gans (1979) suggested that the shaping of news content starts with the source, and commonly that source is a communication professional. Turk (1985) also claimed that communication professionals have a considerable amount of influence on the media agenda and, in turn, the public agenda.

Agricultural communication is one facet of the broad discipline of science communication. De-

spite the significant role that agriculture plays in American society, news surrounding agricultural issues is limited (Stringer & Thomson, 1999), yet some of the most prevalent science communication issues in the last decade surround agricultural issues. For example, recent agricultural issues that have caused heightened public concern include mad cow disease, genetically engineered foods, food safety, agroterrorism, biotechnology, food sustainability, organic foods, and animal cloning. These issues in agriculture and their impact on the American economy make the need for communicating agriculture essential in creating an agriculturally aware public. However, as a component of science, agriculture is experiencing the same public understanding and awareness tribulations that have severely affected the public's attitudes and images of agriculture (Coon & Cantrell, 1985).

The importance of the news media in disseminating agricultural information is becoming increasingly fundamental for improving support of the agricultural industry in the United States. For example, a 1993 survey by American Opinion Research, Inc. suggested that 81% of respondents considered the news media to be their principal source of information regarding science topics, especially information on the environment and natural resources. Research specific to agricultural communication indicates that consumers are primarily informed about agriculture through the news media (Reisner & Walter, 1994; Rogers, 1983). Stringer (1999) established the ensuing connection between the reliance on the mass media for agricultural information and the lack of media coverage by saying, "Because agriculture is taken for granted and media coverage is sparse, the public has little understanding of agricultural issues" (p. 2).

While garnering media coverage for agricultural and other science-related fields may be difficult, there are strategies that can improve the media situation in which agriculture currently finds itself. Research suggests that effective media relations can augment the amount of media coverage devoted to agricultural information (Curtin, 1997; Grunig, 2001; Shin & Cameron, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Turk, 1985). As part of their media relations efforts and with the responsibility of disseminating agricultural information to relevant audiences, agricultural communication professionals need to make many decisions, including what information to share with the news media, how the information will be packaged, and which media outlets should be sent the information.

Theoretical Framework

Agricultural communicators have more mass media options now than ever before with regard to communicating agricultural information to their key publics. The Internet, newspapers, magazines, television, radio, video, and billboards are all part of the vast communication toolbox today, meaning communicators must make a decision on what communication channels to use in satisfying their various needs of information dissemination. Thus, the present study extends previous research on the theory of uses and gratifications by exploring the mass media choices of agricultural communicators in communicating with their target audiences through mass media channels.

Research that employs the uses and gratifications theory for theoretical support typically involves a study of the motives for media usage and the rewards that are sought from the use of that medium (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). From the perspective of the media consumer, uses and gratifications theory examines "how people use the media and the gratifications they seek and receive from their media behaviors" (Wimmer & Dominick, p. 349). At its core, uses and gratifications theory is viewed as an attempt to explain why people use the mass media and the satisfaction they receive from their use (Lazarsfeld & Stanton, 1944). Although used from a different perspective from the media consumer perspective, the theory of uses and gratifications demonstrates value to the present study in its ability to a) uncover how individuals in agricultural communications use mass communication to

gratify their communication needs, b) discover the underlying motives for their use of certain media in communicating their information, and c) identify the positive and negative consequences of their media use.

Organizational Media Use

Dobos (1992) applied the uses and gratifications framework to study media satisfaction and choice in organizations. Following this framework, numerous studies have indicated the importance of exploring user needs and need gratifications in explaining media choice within organizations (Bair, 1989; Rice & Williams, 1984; Steinfield, 1986). "The study of media choice making, variously defined as preference for or selection of a specific channel, has become more important with the increasing diversity of media options available in organizations" (Dobos, p. 33).

Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) proposed that media satisfaction and choice are linked to the gratifications users seek and uncover in the media. "Gratifications sought" can be defined as needs, expectations, or motivations for media use shaped by individual characteristics and the social milieu, whereas "gratifications obtained" refers to the fulfillment of media expectations by the available communication alternatives (Dobos, 1992). Media choice and media satisfaction differ in that media choice is the result from linking a need gratification to a particular medium that reflects individual evaluations of a medium's various dimensions like credibility. Media satisfaction refers to more of an immediate response associated with need fulfillment and comparisons to actual and expected outcomes (Palmgreen & Rayburn, 1985).

Based on the media choice and media channel discussions presented, this study applies uses and gratifications theory by exploring the choices of agricultural communication professionals in their selection of news media channels to communicate agricultural information. Previous research indicated that "communicators traditionally group their activities around their preferred medium" (Academy for Educational Development, 1985, p. 6), which could have implications on communication effectiveness. Thus, exploring the media relations environment for agricultural communication professionals is believed to be important to understand where and why these professionals are focusing their news media communication efforts.

Research Focus

Currently, the strategies of agricultural communication professionals with regard to the media relations practices mentioned is not known. At best, there are generally held assumptions about the media outlets that are commonly used by agricultural communication professionals in the dissemination of agricultural information. Therefore, the present study explores agricultural communication professionals' media choices and uses the following research questions: a) What constitutes effective media relations strategies in agricultural media relations? and b) What information decisions and media choice strategies do agricultural communication professionals make in disseminating agricultural news?

Methods

Approached from a qualitative research design, this study attempts to describe the strategies and choices of agricultural communication professionals when working with the news media. Through triangulation of in-depth interviews and online asynchronous focus groups, communication professionals from the U.S. agricultural industry provided insight into working with the news media.

Research Design

Qualitative research has been cited as being useful for studying phenomena on which little previous research is available and when the purpose of the research is exploratory and descriptive (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; McCracken, 1988). In the present study, a qualitative approach to data collection enabled the researcher to examine agricultural communication professionals' experiences and behaviors about specific areas of media relations from their personal frames of reference, therefore allowing the researcher to gain insight into the media relations environment of agricultural communication professionals (Johnson, 1997).

Participant Recruitment

Chain referral, a purposive sampling technique, was employed to identify and select participants who met the participant criteria for both interview and focus group data collection. Chain referral is a technique used to identify additional participants through another participant. Initial interview participants were selected based on a) their familiarity to the researcher, b) their level of media relations experience, and c) the type of organization in which they worked. The researcher thought it was particularly important to choose participants who have extensive experience in media relations in order to gather accurate, information-rich data that accurately described the culture of agricultural communication professionals. Furthermore, because the researcher was interested in exploring all facets of the agricultural industry, it was important that the participants represent university, corporate, and government entities. At the completion of each interview, participants were asked to refer agricultural communication professionals whom they viewed as adept in media relations and who could make significant contributions to the study. From these referrals, a list of potential participants was compiled, reviewed for overlap, and revised. The referral list, which included 43 agricultural communication professionals, was used to recruit online focus group participants.

Data Collection

Two data collection methods were used in this research: interviews and online focus groups. Commonly referred to as a "conversation with a purpose," the qualitative interview can be described as interactive and open-ended (Bingham & Moore, 1959; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). For the present study, 12 semistructured interviews were conducted over the phone and tape-recorded for transcription in March and April, 2005. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 55 minutes. The researcher opened and guided the discussion through a semistructured process, hoping to achieve a balance between formality and informality (McCracken, 1988). Prior to the interviews, a panel of experts from academic and industry organizations reviewed the interview guide. In addition, the interview guide was pilot-tested with three representatives similar to the study's participant sample. The interview guide was revised according to expert suggestions and observations made from the pilot interview. In conducting the interviews, the researcher scheduled at least 1 day between interviews (with the exception of three interviews), allowing transcription of each interview before proceeding to the next interview. Lindlof (1995) and Morgan (1997) suggested transcribing while still in the field so that the feel for each group can be captured accurately in the field notes, as well as keeping the moderator fresh for each interview.

Following the interviews, three online focus groups were conducted with an additional 22 agricultural communication professionals during the months of May and June, 2005. Focus groups are cited as being useful for producing "data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group" environment (Morgan, 1988, p. 12). Based on this premise, the second

method of data collection for this study utilized asynchronous discussion group software to conduct the online focus groups in an attempt to create meaningful interactions between participants. By conducting online focus groups, the researcher had the ability to extract information that could not be obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997). Using discussion board software developed and hosted by the researcher's institution, the focus groups were considered a follow-up method, providing elaboration and clarification for the interview data collected.

The three online focus groups each ranged in size from 3 to 10 homogenous participants. The number and size of focus groups fell within Mann and Stewart's (2000) suggestions for online focus groups. As is common with traditional focus groups and often applied in the virtual world, the researcher over-recruited participants by 20% in anticipation of no-shows (Morgan, 1997). Prior to the online focus group discussion, participants were separated into categories by the organization they represented. Separating the participants based on the sector of agriculture in which they work—industry (corporate and nonprofit), government, or institutional—was believed to create and sustain a healthy conversation as well as a comfortable and cooperative virtual environment (Morgan). Each online focus group was designed to serve as a discussion forum for the three communities of agricultural communication professionals, and as such facilitated discussion by allowing all participants to view and comment on participant responses.

Focus groups were conducted consecutively, each lasting 14 days. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), question schedules can be transmitted to participants in a variety of ways. The present study combined two suggested approaches by posting all questions at the outset of the study but allowing participants to access the questions over a 2-week period in which reminder e-mails were sent to participants at 3-day intervals. The researcher anticipated that this approach would allow participants enough time to contribute to the discussion at times convenient to them. Reminder e-mails were sent to encourage in-depth responses to all questions posted and to keep participants interested throughout the duration of the research. Throughout the structured discussion, the moderator responded to messages, probed for more information when necessary, and posed new questions based on the discussion to encourage equal contribution by all participants.

Although limited research is available on the use of the Internet in conducting qualitative research, there is evidence that supports the notion that online focus groups provide practical and economic research benefits without negatively compromising the quality of data (Crichton & Kinash, 2003; Jones, 1999; Mann & Stewart, 2000; Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Clapper, 1998; Oringderff, 2004). Thus, due to the time, financial, and geographic constraints of this study, the combination of traditional data collection methods with asynchronous online research methods was explored and utilized.

Data Analysis

To initiate the analysis process, interview data were transcribed and focus group data were formatted so the researcher was able to analyze full transcripts of all data collected. Because the researcher was able to save and store the text from the online discussions, transcription of the focus group data was not necessary, and records from the online interaction were used as transcripts. After the transcripts were compared with field notes and informal analysis techniques were completed, the data were analyzed using the inductive data analysis method outlined by Hatch (2002) and utilized the subsequent steps: a) read data and identify frames of analysis, b) create domains based on semantic relationships discovered within frames of analysis, c) identify salient domains and assign them a code, d) refine salient domains and keep record of emerging relationships, e) decide if domains are

supported by data, f) complete analysis within domains, g) search for themes across domains, h) outline relationships within and among domains, and i) select data excerpts to support the relationships. Following analysis methods similar to other important inductive models (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Spradley, 1979), the model of analysis used in this study searches for "patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (Hatch, p. 161).

Results

Interviews were conducted with 12 agricultural communication professionals. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants were as follows: 5 participants were male and 7 were female; 4 represented university agricultural communications, 2 represented government agricultural communications, and 6 represented industry agricultural communications. The media relations responsibilities of the participants varied from 10% to 85% of the participants' job responsibilities, with the average being 44%. The number of years working with the media ranged from 4 to 36 years, with the average being 20 years in the agricultural communications field. Job titles held by participants varied from public affairs specialist, press secretary, and director of public opinion management to marketing director and public relations coordinator. From the three focus groups conducted, little demographic information was obtained from the 22 focus participants due to the confidential nature of the online focus group environment. Three themes emerged as relevant to the study's research questions. The following three themes are based on the interview and focus group data gathered.

Theme #1: Attention to Trade Media

Participant responses varied when asked about the industry's current use of the mass media to communicate agricultural information. Although there were opposing opinions as to the industry's effectiveness, participants suggested that the agriculture industry was not very effective in its current use of the mass media in telling the story of agriculture. As an example, KB said,

> Actually, I think the agricultural industry—as a whole—barely uses the mass media. Sure, they take care of their base (e.g., farm radio, farm trade magazines and journals), but they don't venture into mainstream media in a manner that expands their audience. Given the number of new technologies and issues growing from agriculture, I think this tendency is at minimum, a deficit, and at worst, a liability.

This sentiment was echoed in the repeated response of participants that the industry tends to talk to agricultural media and audiences and ignore the consumer media and nonagricultural publics. As JR expressed,

> I believe the ag industry spends too much time talking to itself. You can't ignore ag trades . . . but if you don't reach out to mainstream media, you've got no right to criticize the unbalanced coverage that we often see.

HW confirmed this opinion by admitting, "The ag press is where we spend the most time, therefore neglecting the non-ag press." JH agreed, saying, "Agricultural communicators tend to contact only trade media." JA further explained this belief by providing her reasoning behind the focus on agricultural trade media:

> Ag media work tends to stick exclusively to ag trade media, farm broadcasters, etc. Two main reasons—clients want to use (sometimes limited) resources to target specific ag audiences. Secondly, there is the fear that consumer media may not understand some of the information or challenge the information beyond the scope of ag industry.

JG professed that it is "the friendliness of the trade media" that appeals to her and may be a reason that she tends to communicate with the trade media over the consumer media. JW commented that working with the trade media is "certainly easier than working with the consumer media that do not understand farming in and of itself." BB reiterated this belief by saying, "It is harder working with the mass media simply because I do not know them as well."

Yet another plausible reason provided for the focus on trade media and avoidance of consumer media is the challenge and difficulty of working with the consumer media, as explained by VM:

> As an agricultural communicator at a land-grant university, I work with the agricultural trade media and find these people are very interested in our information and, more importantly, in providing timely information to producers. When I work with the consumer media, there's often far less interest or understanding and facts can get messed up easily.

DR also expressed this difficulty, as well as the consequences of this tendency to focus on agricultural trade media:

> In the mainstream news media, agriculture is becoming less understood and appreciated as a major news beat, which leaves the industry essentially with only disaster and reaction stories to tell their story. Not a very good way to get a solid understanding of an industry.

Neglect of the consumer media in disseminating agricultural messages was not only evident in participants' responses to the industry's current use of the media, but also in the descriptions of their media relations strategies. Well over half of the participants indicated that they work with agricultural trade media on a regular basis and, only on "special occasion," will they work with the consumer media. MA demonstrated this strategy, saying, "Sometimes we will have some consumer media interaction but, in general, it is mostly trade media." Similarly, JH revealed, "A lot of my PR work for my clients is directed back to agriculture as compared to the general media." These findings reveal a potential deficiency of consumer media relations throughout the agricultural industry.

Theme #2: Consolidation of Media

As revealed in the aforementioned theme, media relations for the majority of participants means working with agricultural trade media outlets more than mainstream consumer media outlets. However, the current theme, media consolidation, undermines the viability of this strategy, as participants' opinions suggest that the traditional agricultural media outlets are becoming extinct. Specifically, TG explained,

> The biggest change that I see is the dying breed of farm broadcasters, who have always been close friends of agriculture. They are a dime a dozen because of layoffs and consolidation, so there is not that much farmer-friendly media out there anymore. Instead, we are having to get our story across with environmental reporters who really do not understand agriculture.

The consolidation referred to by TG was not only frequently alluded to as a change in agricultural media relations but also as a challenge, problem, and barrier for communication professionals in agriculture. JN maintained that consolidation is not only changing the agricultural media, but it is "happening within the agricultural world." JW agreed and implied that the consolidation of the agricultural industry and agricultural media was a domino effect:

> There has been a dramatic consolidation of companies within agriculture, and that cuts down on the number of entities that have advertising. The reduced advertising or more concentrated media purchases have an impact where the publications have to be pretty lean and mean, as well as farm broadcasters. There are fewer farm broadcasters and fewer reporters than there were half a generation ago.

Furthermore, MA projected that this consolidation will continue: "I would assume that the agricultural trade media will continue to consolidate and get smaller. Most major consumer publications are already getting rid of their agriculture beat." Illustrating this consolidation, DR said, "We don't have a single reporter in our state who is covering agriculture full-time. That makes it harder to connect, since we're not anybody's main beat." HW suggested, ". . . there is a lack of outlets interested in covering ag-related topics, let alone entire ag media outlets."

Again the implications of this change for agricultural communication professionals include increased direct communication and use of the consumer media for communication with various audiences. JH said, "With the reduction of the number of broadcasters and reporters that specialize in agriculture, it's going to be a lot of one-on-one communications, and that requires good personal skills." He continued, "There are less and less ag media with fewer and fewer outlets and time and space in those outlets. As a result, they have numerous stories to run in a short amount of time." SS recommended, "We are going to have to increase our focus nevertheless, on urban papers and just finding a way to reach a broader variety of reporters at the different papers and establishing those relationships."

Clearly, agricultural communication professionals are experiencing a change in how and with whom they are communicating. Although participants insinuated that this change is outside of their traditional comfort zone, it is one they recognized as increasingly evident and important to manage sooner than later.

Theme #3: Penchant for Print

"You've got a whole variety of media outlets. That has provided more choices and more voices out there competing for attention." This response from MA summarized the reasoning for the investigation into the mass media choices of agricultural communication professionals. As DR suggested, "Mass media ain't just your morning paper anymore." As a result, agricultural communication professionals have a choice of various communication tools for information dissemination. The assumption of the present study was that these choices hold implications for how and whom agricultural communication professionals are reaching with agricultural information.

Overwhelmingly, the findings suggest that participants choose print media to communicate their agricultural information. This is not only the media outlet they commonly target but also the media outlet with which they prefer to communicate. Exemplifying this shared communication preference, KF said, "Number one is always going to [be] print for me because that is the background I come from. But my least favorite is TV." Although KF explained this choice as being a personal preference, print was preferred for various reasons as demonstrated in the following responses:

MH: I tend to do more print media here than broadcast media, only because I think trade is a complicated issue and I don't think broadcasters can cover it as well.

TD: I am a retreaded newspaperman and still have an affinity for print because radio and TV are so ephemeral and so shallow.…Print media are more oriented towards agriculture.

BL: In general, print is the more conscientious and effective medium. Print is the preferred outlet for most of our information, and the agricultural press is the preferred subset.

LS: Ultimately, the stakeholders and policymakers pay more attention to clippings, so print. If you got a headline it seems to live longer. So what you want is exposure in the print media, your key newspapers.

BB: I have priority on print just because I think it is more effective for the ultimate groups of people you are trying to reach. I certainly do work with television stations, and the network

news has been here for various things, but it is not as enduring. It does not get the kind of recognition that the print does.

JW: We focus our efforts on the print side because again we see more effective results with that, and part of that is the ability to measure it. You know, we can clip print, but we cannot clip air…sometimes we are selling and explaining complex ideas or nutrition or things that are maybe a little more in-depth, and print sometimes is conducive to that.

DF: I would say print, and I think it is the fact that when you do something with broadcast media, it is there for that instant and may be remembered for a day or two, but then it is gone. With print, you have the record and people can make copies and distribute, and so it tends to have a longer life.

Although these responses capture just a few of the reasons provided for print preferences, they show the tremendous focus on print media for dissemination of agricultural information.

Interestingly, many of the same participants who indicated print media as their focus and preference as a mass media communication tool also suggested that print may not be the only valuable media outlet in terms of impact. For example, KF suggested,

For my purposes, I think print is always going to be much more valuable, but sometimes you know consumers love to see things that are positive on the pork industry on their TV sets, too. So to me, I hope to not turn anyone away, but let's put it this way…when CNN calls or News Hour with Jim Lehrer, I am not real happy.

Following this frame of mind, many participants indicated print as their preferred outlet and the one with which they most frequently communicated, but indicated television as the most valuable.

DG shared this perspective:

I tend to lean more toward working with the print media, and I think again it is because, compared to broadcast media, they take a little more time with the story. Print covers more angles of a topic, but I have to say if you get one good TV story, you generally get more public feedback than with one good print story.

Despite the inclination to work with newspapers most often, FP offered that print media are not "necessarily the most valuable." Instead, she suggested, "Sometimes 30 seconds on television can get you more bang for your buck than a half of a page in the newspaper." Similar to FP, LS focuses on print even though she "recognizes the great importance of television," leading her to guess they "should probably do more with television." Summarizing this contradiction in choice, uses, and gratifications in media outlets, SS shared,

In terms of people actually seeing and we hear that they see it, it would have to be print [used more often]. But there is nothing like television to get people here in our organization excited. You know, so-and-so from Channel 10 showed up, and that is pretty cool.

Media outlet choice was a self-selection process of each agricultural communication professional. Several participants implied that personal bias, previous experience, and personal success rate had the largest impact on their media choices for agricultural information dissemination. As a result, print is the medium of choice, despite the gratifications associated with television. However, manifest in this theme is the evidence that agricultural communication professionals may not be taking advantage of those different tools.

Conclusion

The significant findings of the present study concerned the predisposition to communicate with print media and, as a subset, the agricultural trade media. As evidenced in the data, there is a tendency

of agricultural communication professionals to focus their media relations efforts on the agricultural trade media—more specifically, the agricultural print media. However, an even more beguiling finding is the paradox presented through the investigation into the uses and gratifications of participants' media outlet choices. Participants indicated that they focus their efforts on print media for various reasons, even though they perceive television to have the most impact in communicating to their audiences. The second paradox in the data is participants' focused efforts on the agricultural trade media, although they suggest the trade media are diminishing and slowly becoming obsolete, slowly making consumer media the only viable mass media communication choice.

The tendency of agricultural communication professionals to work with agricultural trade media outlets implies that this lack of communication with consumer media could be a contributing factor to the limited media coverage of agricultural issues that has been reported in previous studies (Stringer, 1999). Literature supports the notion that sources of information play a significant role in the gate-keeping process and agenda-building practices of the news media. Salwen (1995) argued that the "media agenda is not created within the newsroom as much as it is shaped by the sources that provide information to the newsroom" (as cited in Burns, 1998, p. 1). Therefore, if agricultural communication professionals were to enhance their communication efforts with consumer media outlets, there is an increased likelihood that the amount of agricultural media coverage would also increase. Needless to say, this suggestion is not a simple solution; conversely, it is a solution that will take time and effort, and agricultural communication professionals may have to forsake their comfort level and communicate with a changing, less interested, and nontraditional media representative. Endorsing work with consumer media outlets, Reisner and Walter (1994) suggest that general interest media "cover agricultural events and issues for the nonfarming public, who depends on that coverage for their understanding of agricultural topics" (Stringer, p. 7).

Agricultural communication professionals not only have endured the ever-evolving media environment, but also are forced to deal with the changing field of agricultural communications, specifically the consolidation and reduction of agricultural media outlets. Participants revealed that there are fewer and fewer agricultural media outlets and reporters dedicated to covering the agricultural beat. Consequently, when dealing with consumer media, agricultural communication professionals are, by and large, not working with "one of their own." Although this finding is congruent with some of the challenges of communicating agricultural information, it reinforces the need for agricultural communication professionals to change their media relations practices in order to accommodate the contemporary and prevailing reporters covering agricultural information: the environmental, health, and lifestyle reporters. Furthermore, if the agricultural trade media are truly "a dying breed," then it is even more imperative that agricultural communication professionals concentrate on developing relationships with the consumer media as a practical alternative for reaching diverse audiences with agricultural information.

Also emerging from the data was participants' preference in communicating with the print media over other news media, such as radio, television, and the Internet. Print media were unmistakably the focus of most agricultural media relations efforts. While reasons for this predisposition varied, the implications of this finding are evident in the literature, which indicates print media as the source of information least accessed by individuals for information, as well as the source of information that is declining in circulation and readership (Brody, 2004). This association does not connote that print media are not valuable for reaching certain audiences or communicating certain issues; however, it does propose that the tendency to focus on print media, and generally neglect broadcast media, could be a contributing factor in the agricultural industry's perceived inability to reach nonagricultural

audiences. Nonetheless, the limited use of broadcast media by agricultural communication profes-sionals is, without doubt, excluding several segments of the population through selective information dissemination efforts.

Incongruously, participants did denote the value of alternative media by referring to the greater impact and reach of broadcast. Evidently, the impact and reach were not perceived important enough, or did not contain enough value for the communicators, to actually alter their media relations strate-gies and information dissemination decisions. Furthermore, recent research on the state of the mass media indicated that newspaper and magazine readership has declined, broadcast television viewer-ship has also declined, radio listenership has remained stable at 90% of Americans listening to radio, and Internet use is the only mass medium that has increased in audience use (Brody, 2004). Clearly, agricultural communication professionals who disregard such trends in their media relations efforts do so at their own peril.

Agricultural communication professionals' preference for print media also carries several impli-cations for the uses and gratifications theory that was used to guide this area of investigation. First, these findings are fairly consistent with the traditional assumptions associated with uses and grati-fications research. The theory states that a media user seeks out a media source that best fulfills the needs of the user. Previous literature supports this notion and relates it to the present context in that "communicators traditionally group their activities around their preferred medium" (Academy for Educational Development, 1985, p. 6). Participants in the present study indicated that they choose to work with print media for various reasons, including familiarity, the ability to communicate more complex information, more time to work with the medium, and more ease in establishing personal relationships. Demonstrating the central concept of uses and gratifications theory, this finding sup-ports the assumption that individuals actively seek out the mass media to satisfy individual needs even though these needs may not accurately meet the needs of the communication purpose. In other words, the findings revealed that although the gratifications of the target audience may be better met through other media channels, print media were primarily used to disseminate agricultural informa-tion for what appears to be the personal gratification of the communicator.

If these challenges in working with the news media on agricultural issues continue to be a con-stant in the agricultural communications profession, it is essential that agricultural communica-tion professionals unearth strategies to overcome them. It would be worthwhile for this culture of communicators to examine their counterparts in other fields of science communication because, as literature suggests, communicators in science are more than likely experiencing similar challenges regardless of their specific fields (Friedman, Dunwoody, & Rogers, 1999; Gastel, 1983; Treise & Weigold, 2002).

Recommendations

In addition to the implications this study carries for the agricultural communication profes-sional, a great deal can be learned from the study that can be applied in future research and practice in agricultural media relations. Although the use of this theory as a guide in the present qualitative investigation was nontraditional in the sense that it was used to explore the media choices in com-municating information rather than to access or retrieve information, assumptions of the theory were supported in the findings. Future research in this area should focus on testing the three initial objec-tives in developing uses and gratifications theory by exploring the following areas: a) to explain how agricultural communication professionals use mass communication to gratify their personal needs and their audiences' needs, b) to discover underlying motives for agricultural communication profes-

sionals' media use, and c) to identify the positive and the negative consequences of individual media use on the target audiences' media use.

Additional research on the theory of uses and gratifications, based on the findings from the present study, should include exploring the contradiction between the perceived greater communication impact of television and the overwhelming choice of print to communicate scientific information to external audiences. This phenomenon could be investigated using a relative theory to uses and gratifications theory, expectancy value theory. Through this approach, it may be possible to explore the communicator's biases that can influence media choices, applications, and consequences. Moreover, this partiality for print despite the professed value of television should be quantitatively measured in order to establish the validity of the finding within a larger population of agricultural communication professionals.

Finally, agricultural communication professionals should utilize mixed media strategies, determining the most appropriate media to reach the target audience and to communicate the message. Previous research presents the advantages of various media in certain situations and for certain audiences; therefore, print media are not the most effective all the time (Crowder, 1991). The utilization of all media outlets—broadcast, print, and Internet—will increase the efficiency and value of media relations efforts to the organization. Without doubt, each type of medium offers advantages and disadvantages; however, completely ignoring a type of medium could also be alienating the audiences that use that medium as their primary source of information. In fact, Hino and Jensen (1996) suggested that science-based messages were most powerful in effecting public opinion when delivered through the high-profile medium of television. Knowing that different media carry different returns, it is essential that communication efforts be designed based on the needs of target audiences instead of the media needs and interests of the communicators (Crowder).

In summary, as Evans has suggested and as evidenced in the present study, "agriculture and society will need new and improved agricultural information channels and services that are geared to the scientific, progressive, change-oriented dimensions of a culture" (as cited in Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000, p. 49). The intention of this research was to expand the literature on sources of scientific news and to provide direction for improving the information channels and services used in communicating agricultural information.

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Keywords

agricultural communication, media relations, agenda-building, uses and gratifications, agricultural media

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"The Stuff You Need Out Here": A Semiotic Case Study Analysis of an Agricultural Company's Advertisements

Emily B. Rhoades and Tracy Irani

Abstract

In today's mediated society, people are continually searching to describe relationships among themselves, the items they encounter in their physical environment, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they reside. By placing meaning-laden visuals in a medium as popular as magazines with rural audiences, advertisers are sending messages as to what rural life is. The 2004-2005 advertising campaign of the Tractor Supply Company utilized photographs of rural life to sell viewers "The stuff you need out here." This advertising campaign, which relied heavily on a humorous appeal to play into stereotypical images of rural life, was seen in a variety of magazines that reach rural audiences. Using semiology as the framework of how images construct meanings, this case study sheds light on the various messages behind these advertisements and how they convey the cultures of rural life to farm and non-farm audiences. It is apparent that these advertisements have a tendency to play into the dominant ideology of what farming and farmers look like. Through simplistic images playing into known stereotypes such as male domination, rural work ethic, and freedom, the dominant ideal is enforced through the selling of these products. By utilizing American ideals and colors, the advertisements played into the American ideal of patriotism.

Introduction

"We can only understand what advertisements mean by finding out how they mean" (Williamson, 1978, p. 17). In today's mediated society, people are continually searching to describe relationships among themselves, the items they encounter in their physical environment, and the cultural and historical contexts in which they reside. Advertising texts and visuals are cultural and social expressions that allow us to shed light on these relationships (Page, 2004). These images can be seen as "systematic masses of complex intricate soci-cultural relations that have been ordered in very specific ways to produce a variety of meanings" (Fuery, Fuery & Wagner, 2003, p. 87).

By placing these meaning-laden visuals in a medium as popular as magazines with rural audiences (Maddox, 2001), advertisers are sending messages as to what rural life may be. While the advertiser may or may not intentionally set out to portray these meanings in their images, they still can have an effect on the individuals viewing them (Bandura, 1986).

The 2004-2005 advertising campaign of the Tractor Supply Company utilized photographs of rural life to sell viewers "The stuff you need out here." This dynamic advertising campaign, which relied heavily on a humorous appeal to play into stereotypical images of rural life, was seen in a variety of magazines and on television channels that reach rural and urban audiences. To uncover the advertising's messages, this study will examine several of the print advertisements of the 2004-2005 Tractor Supply Company "The stuff you need out here" campaign. Through a semiotic lens, this paper attempts to shed light on the various messages behind these advertisements. Semiotics is a philosophical framework that seeks to discover how images construct messages through the study of

signs and codes (Rose, 2001).

Background into the company behind this advertising campaign will be provided to give a basis for these images. A review of advertising as a visual communication will follow, along with a brief overview of the methodology employed to evaluate the images and their meanings. An analysis of three images included in the 2004 campaign will be presented preceding an explanation of the implications for future analysis.

Literature Review
Tractor Supply Company

Tractor Supply Company (TSC), the largest retail farm and ranch store chain in the United States, was founded in 1938 as a mail-order catalog business offering tractor parts to family farmers. Located mostly in states east of the Rocky Mountains, the company claims to focus on "supplying lifestyle and maintenance needs of recreational farmers and ranchers, and others who enjoy the rural lifestyle" (Tractor Supply Company, 2005). In 2004, the company was named to Fortune Magazine's list of 100 fastest-growing companies. TSC, now headquartered in Brentwood, Tenn., reported revenues exceeding $1.7 billion in 2004, making it a leading retailer in its market. The corporate business mission of TSC is "to work hard, have fun, and make money by providing legendary service and great products at everyday low prices" (TSC, 2005). The highly visible efforts to communicate this mission are seen in the advertising campaign being studied.

Portraits of Rural Life

Farming and rural life in the United States have continually been portrayed throughout the 20th century as being subjected to a "domestic ideology" where men are farmers and women play a supporting role (Walter & Wilson, 1996). Media oriented toward rural audiences continue to project images of rural domestic life and gender roles that feed into these stereotypes (Walter & Wilson, 1996). Rural areas are typically composed of lower-income families with lower educational levels than those found in urban areas (Strover, 2001). While research has looked at how women have been portrayed in agricultural media (Walter & Wilson, 1996), only a few studies have analyzed how media portray farm life (Kellogg Foundation, 2002; Walter, 1995).

Agricultural businesses continue to see magazines and other trade publications as an important tool for reaching producers with their advertising messages (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000). Agribusiness advertising is a major source of revenue for most rural publications and broadcast stations. Advertisers are given many opportunities to display images of cultural life in these publications. By portraying images of rural life in these publications, advertisers confirm the relationships sought after by viewers between themselves, the product, and their physical environment.

A study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation looked at perceptions of rural America based on media coverage (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). While this content analysis of major print and television outlets mostly covered issues, the researchers looked at the common frames linked to rural and farm life. They classified their findings under three distinct frames: linking "rural" with agriculture and farmstead lifestyles; portrayals of people in rural areas as being impoverished, being "rednecks," or having backward lifestyles; and rural areas as a retreat from urban life that are "pastoral," "peaceful," and "quaint" (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). Research looking at rural publications has included analysis of the media's image of the farmer. Walter (1995) analyzed articles that featured successful farmers in agricultural magazines to determine if they are encouraging readers to form a model of what "success" in farming is. The researcher noted that all portrayals

showed farming as a business rather than as a lifestyle. Farmers were also shown in larger than average operations. The author argued that while the magazines may not have intentionally showed these images for these reasons, they still may have an effect on viewers (Walter, 1995).

A nationwide study of consumers was done by the American Farm Bureau in 1998 to see how the buying public views farmers. While this study did not aim to define the dominant ideology of agriculturalists and rural citizens, it did shed light on it. The report was developed out of a concern that farmers were being portrayed in advertisements as lacking in modern context (American Farm Bureau, 1998). Results of the American Farm Bureau study found that consumers perceived farmers in a very positive light, saying that farmers contribute greatly to society. Consumers reported describing farmers as "hard working," "honest," and having "good family values" (American Farm Bureau, 1998). Researchers concluded that while the results were a step into the right direction to defeating stereotypes of farmers in the media, there is still a long way to go.

While this portrayal of agriculturalists is common in most media (American Farm Bureau, 1998), very little research has been done to describe consumer perceptions, as well as media portrayals, of agriculturalists. In 1991, Mary Anne Higgins made a plea in the Journal of Applied Communication Research for more research looking at the communication gap between farmers and non-farmers, citing the fact that non-farmers hold farmers in high esteem, while holding an idealistic, romanticized view of farming.

Advertising as a Visual

Advertising, at its core, is a communication method that is mass mediated to a specific audience with the goal to persuade someone about a product, service, idea or way of life (O'Guinn, Allen, & Semenik, 2003). Advertisements have been described as one of the most powerful tools that can influence and reflect a culture (Gorman, 2004, p1).

Advertisements work to make a connection and transpose meanings between an object and an image (Williamson, 1978). Messaris (1994) discussed this association of juxtaposition in the visual organization of advertising images. The notion is that these images will transfer their meanings to one another just through association in the advertisement. Williamson (1978) noted that an advertisement's primary function may be to sell the product, but advertisements also create a structure in which they are selling us ourselves. By relating a way of life through juxtaposition, advertisements sell viewers a lifestyle that they would like to have. Advertisements, according to Williamson (1978), have an independent reality that allows them to link to our lives and the lives we hope to live. TSC clearly understands this notion. The vice president of advertising and marketing was quoted in a 2004 issue of AgriMarketing stating the company is striving to make its customers have an emotional connection to TSC (AgriMArketing, 2004) through its advertising campaign.

Several studies have looked at specific cultures and their representations in advertisements. Merskin (2001) analyzed the stereotypes that have been created and perpetuated by advertisers in relation to Native Americans. Through a semiological analysis of several American advertising brands, the researcher found that these brands (consisting of companies like Crazy Horse Malt Liquor and Sue Bee Honey) reinforce an ideology that has caused consumers to be blind to forms of racism against this culture group. Merskin (2001) concluded that stereotypical images of ethnic groups are not only trends of the past, but remain typical of advertising and product branding today.

Some cultural groups have worked to define the ideologies being portrayed in advertising about them. Firth (2003) described the regulation of cultural content in advertising in Southeastern Asian countries. By analyzing advertising in Singapore, Malaysia, and Vietnam, the researcher was able to

describe the distinctive methods of shielding local cultures through regulation of what international and national advertisers could depict in their advertisements.

These studies shed light on how other cultural groups are battling the stereotypes placed upon them through advertising images. Williamson (1978) argued that advertisements allow viewers to create meaning out of what they are seeing. As these stereotypes continue to be portrayed, will viewers reinforce these meanings in their own minds?

Purpose

Based on the preceding literature review, this study aims to explore the advertising messages presented in the 2004-2005 Tractor Supply Company "The stuff you need out here" campaign. By shedding light on the various messages behind these advertisements, agricultural communicators can better understand portrayals of rural life. The research questions guiding this analysis were as follows:

RQ1: How is agriculture and rural life portrayed in these advertisements?

RQ2: Do the images support or defy the stereotypes surrounding agriculture?

RQ3: How does the Tractor Supply Company portray its company in this campaign?

Theoretical Framework

To explore these connections, advertisements will be analyzed through the theoretical framework of semiology. Semiotics is a philosophical approach that seeks to confront the question of how images construct messages (Rose, 2001). The study of semiotics originated in the literary and linguistics realms of study, and has been developed further by the works of Pierce, Levi Strauss, and Saussure. Semiotics is the study of signs and codes that are used in producing, conveying, and interpreting messages (Rose, 2001).

Saussure developed a systematic understanding of how linguistics works through the use of the sign (Moriarty, 2005). A sign is the basic unit consisting of the signified — a concept or an object, and the signifier — the sound or image attached to the signified. Researchers assert that the relation between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and can mean different things to different people (Rose, 2001). For example a dog, the sign, can signify different things to different individuals. For some it means a companion, while others may see it as a guardian or threat.

Individuals who belong to a culture are said to interpret the world in similar ways with similar ideals that are set by rules and norms of the culture (Kates & Shaw-Garlock, 1999). Over time, these codes, constructed by legitimate social power relations, form what is known as ideology. Ideology is defined as those representations that work with the interests of the ruling class in mind (Rose, 2001). Codes are sets of conventionalized methods of making meaning that are particular to certain cultural groups. These codes allow a semiologist to come in contact with the wider ideologies at work (Rose, 2001). Advertisements are created with images loaded with ideological assumptions that reach audiences with a preconceived message (Merskin, 2001).

Ronald Barthes took semiotics further to describe how researchers must move beyond the common and obvious meanings of signs to see the hidden meanings in complex messages (Barthes, 2002a). Barthes' theory describes a bi-level reading of messages that must take place. The initial level, denotation, is a starting point in which one reads the direct, specific meaning of the sign. This is followed by the connotation, second level, in which the meaning that is evoked by the object is read. Barthes describes connotation as something that reflects the cultural meanings, mythologies, and ideologies. For example, an image of a tropical island would have a basic denotative reading of a tropical location, and a possible connotative reading of a vacation or relaxation and slow living. These

meanings can reach mythological status as the text and the ideology work together to give a deeper meaning. Barthes describes myth as a second-order meaning of the signifier and signified that brings about more cultural meanings (Barthes, 2002b).

Williamson (1978) stated that through semiotic theory, advertising associates specific feelings with objects. Many products start with no basic meaning to a viewer. However, after they are placed in a specific situation, they are given value through the process of signs. As viewers of an image, audiences are the host to the meaning. They must insert themselves into the advertisements and find signs within it. By seeing images that naturally would not be connected placed in the same visual, viewers associate those meanings together.

This paper analyzes three advertisements that are dominated by visuals of rural life. The analysis recognizes the dominant visuals, their function as signs, and the denotative and connotative messages they convey, as well as the overall ideologies.

Methods

Semiology, as a method, offers many analytical tools for researchers to use to dissect an image and describe its meaning in relation to the world around it (Rose, 2001). This study will focus on the idea of the sign and how it makes meanings in the advertisements. Semiology studies tend to concentrate on the image itself in terms of composition and social modality. This study uses these methods to develop a case study of three advertisements used in the TSC campaign.

Bloom (2004) described the "The stuff you need out here" campaign as engaging and effective. The campaign developed by Carmichael Lynch (Bloom, 2004) reflects the organizational mission of the Tractor Supply Company. TSC's vice president of advertising and marketing described the campaign as "we present a situation along with our unique products and we solve the problem" (AgriMarketing, 2004). While several television commercials, as well as print advertisements, were included in the campaign presented by TSC in 2004, three specific print advertisements were selected for this study. These three images were selected because beyond being interesting, creative, and offering a unique rural perspective, they were run in several agricultural-focused publications. While a total of 12 different print advertisements were found by the researcher in various magazines, the selected three were published the most out of all of the ads.

The magazines in which the ads were taken include America's Horse and Western Horseman. The researcher also chose these advertisements since they were in publications the researcher could identify with as part of the target audience. Western Horseman described its readership as being educated individuals who live in rural areas and are involved in the western and equestrian lifestyle (Western Horseman, n.d.). The researcher fits into these categories. By being familiar with the genre, the researcher can understand the intertexuality of the images –their relationships with other text and images (McKeown, 2005). However, these were not the only publications in which these advertisements were published; they were published in a variety of magazines reaching rural audiences and small farms, like Hobby Farmer. TSC is attempting to reach audiences who members are part-time farmers, own horses, or are returning to small towns across America (AgriMarketing, 2004). While 10% of TSC's customers are full-time farmers, 15% are part-time farmers, and 30% own horses.

Moriarty and Sayre (2005) noted that the single "expert-reading" approach was the traditional method used in semiotic analysis. This is the method that was utilized in this study, as well. One researcher analyzed these images individually without taking into consideration the text surrounding them on the page. Once the images were located and selected, the researcher utilized the steps out-

lined by Rose (2001, p. 91) to identify and explore the connections between signs. While many paths can be chosen for semiotic analysis, this method is supported in the literature (Rose, 2001). First, the images were dissected to identify the individual signs relevant to the analysis. Next, these signs were explored in terms of what they signify by themselves. Third, they were analyzed in relation to other signs and text within the advertisement. The advertisement images were next examined to determine the denotative and connotative readings of the identified signs. Lastly, the ads were analyzed as a whole to describe the ideology that was being utilized to reach the viewer. When analyzing signs, as was done in this study, there is an understanding that they are polysemic in their nature, as they are open to different interpretations depending on the individual and the culture (McKeown, 2005). Signs were identified based on the research presented in the literature review. Through the analysis steps, thorough field notes were kept and the researcher continually referred back to the literature when looking for meanings. After the analysis was completed, an impartial researcher looked at the field notes and offered further analysis with the findings.

Analysis

Each advertisement in the campaign is designed with an identical look that quickly connects the reader to the company. While text is not initially seen as the most important part of the advertisement, upon closer inspection it was designed on the advertisement to appear three-dimensional, and in turn very important. All ads are laid out in a horizontal plane, with the viewer at eye-level with the subjects in the advertisements.

Each advertisement was placed toward the middle of the publication as a half-page advertisement on the bottom of the page. When the ads were run, there were typically three ads run in a row on three consecutive pages; however, no two ads could be seen at the same time.

Each of the images utilizes a photographic technique that makes it appear as if it was a snapshot of someone's day in rural America. The layout of the image appears to be an individual's personal photograph based on the format and size of the image. Photographs are successful as advertising visuals because they are thought of as picturing reality instead of a premeditated message (Gorman, 2004). By portraying this "ruralness," the advertisers are reaching farmers and non-farmers alike. Farmers are able to place themselves easily into the advertisement, as it is a picture of their daily life, while non-farmers who romanticize farming (Higgins, 1991) are able to place themselves into this lifestyle they see as relaxing and serene.

The text is then "posted" with what appears to be duct tape onto the image so it stands out and draws attention. The duct-taped note plays into the imagery of hard-working (Strover, 2001) rural America. Duct-tape, as a product, prides itself on being rugged, industrial strength, and for those working on demanding applications (3M, 2005). By positioning a product that is seen this way by the public, the advertisers are juxtapositing these qualities onto the TSC product. These stand-out images are also shown in a sepia tone, indicating they are old. By tying into this tone, the advertisement is connoting a historical way of doing business and a company that is based on traditional values.

These posted messages appear to be cut out of another magazine or a newspaper that someone put onto the image as a humorous side note. One would consider these to be humorous as the object they are selling in this pop-out advertisement is usually in contrast or a solution to what is happening in the image itself. Williamson (1978) described how advertisers rely on these visual puns to draw viewers into the advertisement and involve them in the image.

Considering the very mixed audience of the magazines in which these ads were published, it is interesting that the dominant person in all three advertisements is a male figure. Only one advertise-

ment contains a woman, who is very passive, and in the background. She is sitting between several men in the advertisement, and while they are all very open in their sitting by being sprawled out on the chairs, she is closed with her arms and legs crossed. As Gorman (2004) described, this is seen as being powerless or subordinate as she has lowered herself and made herself smaller, in comparison to the men around her. These ads play into the dominant ideology of the white, male farmer in rural America (Walter & Wilson, 1996).

Many semiotic studies of advertising images have pointed out the use of sexual symbols in order to place a "male gaze" into the advertisement (Messaris, 1994). While these ads do not use blatant sexuality to sell their images, they portray a male gaze in which they confirm the males' comfortability with his sexuality and his active role in life. This is achieved by the viewer seeing all of the men in the advertisements doing something or seeing them in a position where they have just completed a task.

The images utilized in the TSC advertisement campaign show a product in order to juxtapose viewers into a lifestyle of agriculture and stereotypical rural lifestyle. These ads serve as an answer to viewers' problems.

The Manure Fork

This first advertisement (Figure 1) appears near the beginning of the February 2005 issue of America's Horse. Its bright colors and three-dimensional appeal, with the taped advertisement popping out of the photo, draw the viewer's eye straight to the advertisement. Upon first inspection, the viewer sees an older, white-collar, politician speaking at a lectern. He is stationed in a farmyard in front of a classic red barn, signifying the ideal farm setting. This

Figure 1. Tractor Supply Advertisement for a Manure Fork

plays to the viewer's romanticized picture of rural life that has been shaped through media, such as movies and television programs.

Four people are placed in mis-matched chairs off to his left side. By using chairs that do not match it appears as if this image is real and was not posed. These people came here on their own, bringing their own chairs. The four onlookers are an eclectic group who, by their posture, appear to have been listening to the politician speak for a while. The three males are dressed in stereotypical farmer clothing: bib overalls, jeans, baseball caps, and flannel shirt. Another person appears to be on the right side of the speaker; however, you can see only his arm and leg. He appears to be dressed nicely like the politician, in contrast with the farming audience.

The setting for the image is something that most minds conjure when thinking of farming life: the red barn, green grass, clear skies, wood fence, and crops in the background. The green grass and blue skies in the advertisement connote freedom and purity by showing the beauty of nature. The barn, fence, and crops continue to play on the image of rural America, bringing the idea of simplicity, hard work, and trustworthiness to the viewer's mind. These connotations are then transferred to the

advertisement, showing the company as holding these qualities. By arranging this political speech in this setting, the advertisement is playing into the stereotypical farm scene putting viewers in an idyllic setting they would like to find themselves. Viewers are not supposed to wonder how there is a lectern with a microphone stuck in the middle of this scene and why they are not indoors.

The audience of onlookers plays into the common ideal of what a farmer might appear like, as well. The four people to the right of the speaker include an elderly farmer, a woman, a man in a flannel shirt, and a man who appears to be drinking something. The elderly farmer plays into the ideal of the rural person. He wears coveralls, a farm hat, and work boots. He is also the only one in the advertisement looking at the politician. This could symbolize his age and wisdom, and that he is the only one actively engaged with the politician. The other two male farmers do not appear to be paying attention to the speaker. Both men are relaxed and show no interest in the events going on in the scene. One of them is looking off toward the viewer and the other is taking a drink of what appears to be coffee. The coffee again helps to convey to the reader that this is a realistic scene that the advertiser did not pose.

The four people who are sitting alongside the politician are all smug in their expressions. The elderly man appears as if he is just about to respond to the politician, showing that he is paying close attention. However, the other three are either looking off into space or have their eyes closed, connoting that they are not concerned with what the politician is saying and are wanting to be somewhere else.

The politician is shown gripping the lectern and wearing a white, collared shirt with his sleeves folded. He is looking out at what that viewers assume is the audience with a concentrated look. This image connotes a hard-working man who is willing to roll up his sleeves to do the work. This meaning is transferred into the product being sold, showing that it is hardworking and ready to get the job done. The image is also shot to where the viewer appears to be below him. The angle of the shot connotes that he is in a position of power.

The only woman in the advertisement plays the role of the typical farm wife. While she is seated before the two younger men, she is obviously the most passive person in the advertisement. She is sitting closed with her legs and arms crossed, while the men in the advertisement are open in their sitting style. As mentioned earlier, this connotes her lack of power and submission to the men (Gorman, 2004) who by spreading out are seen as showing their power and comfort with the situation. Walter and Wilson (1996) discussed how women in rural media are portrayed as farm support as opposed to farm managers. They are seen as the spouses and siblings, and the woman in this advertisement plays into that stereotype because one can obviously notice a ring on her hand. This ring indicates that she may be there as a listener or as a support to her farming husband.

The elderly gentleman is one of two people in the advertisement holding a small American flag. His flag is held predominantly showing off his patriotism. The younger man in flannel is also holding a flag, but his is pointed out of the image and he appears not to be paying attention to the politician. This difference in how the flags are held plays into the difference in the way the men are paying attention, as well. The signs connote that the older farmer is more concerned with what the politician is saying and could be more patriotic, and that the younger farmer seems to be less concerned with these things. By the younger farmer turning his gaze away from the politician, he can be seen as withdrawing from the situation and the communication with the political figure (Goffman, 1979).

The image of the flags being held connotes a patriotic image when thinking of this company. Tractor Supply is aligning itself as the all-American company by using such images. The dominant colors in the advertisement play into this image of Americana, as well. While the majority of the col-

ors in the advertisement are dull, the red, white, and blue colors in the image stand out and continue to add to the connotation of patriotism (Kellogg Foundation, 2002).

The sign on the front of the lectern plays into this ideal as well. By showing the patriotic swag, as well as the traditional political sign, the patriotic meaning is continually transferred to the product and the company. The political feel in the advertisement also connotes that this company is concerned for the future of agriculture.

Another connotation can be read into the sign of the text presented in the advertisement. The torn, paper that is duct-taped to the advertisement contains the logo, the slogan of the campaign, and a brief description of what is carried in the store. The satire of the advertisement comes into play with the image of the object they are selling and the title, "6-tine manure fork." While this image is denoting a political speech and farm life by the association of the product for sale, it is connoting a message that what the politician is saying is "manure" and to solve your problem of boredom and get rid of this filth in your life, you need the product. This advertisement could be playing on a mythical level by providing signs that support the idea that politicians are full of manure.

The Deluxe Shade

The next advertisement (Figure 2) from the campaign to be analyzed appears near the middle of the March 2005 issue of Western Horseman. The advertisement is placed as a dominant image on the lower half of the page, in contrast with a continuing article featured at the top of the page featuring a black-and-white image. Its bright colors and three-dimensional appeal draws the viewer's eye directly to the advertisement over the article.

In this advertisement, the viewer again sees the apparently cut-out advertisement that has been placed on the image with duct

Figure 2. Tractor Supply Advertisement for a Tractor Shading Canopy

tape. The duct tape again connotes the strength of the company and the product being presented. The image in this advertisement is very simple compared to the previous advertisement. An older gentleman, presumably a farmer because he is standing in a field with what is considered a "farmer's tan," is featured in the foreground of the image facing the viewer at eye-level.

Behind him is a typical rural scene of rolling fields, trees, and a dirt road. The background of the image connotes the freedom and openness of the scene. This naturalistic scene shows the viewer a simple life that allows one to feel the serenity of the image (Kellogg Foundation, 2002). By transferring this idea onto the product, the viewers feel that by buying the item, they will experience the same freedom to explore nature and live a simple life. The farmer in the advertisement is shirtless and wearing blue jeans. By using an older gentleman, the advertisement symbolizes his age and wisdom. He demonstrates the classical "farmer's tan" with a burnt face, neck, and arms, and a pale chest and shoulders. This plays into the idea that farmers are typically out in the field for many hours and will have burn lines around their shirt. This does contrast with his age and wisdom, showing he had a lapse in judgment by allowing himself to get burnt. By looking straight at the viewer, he appears to be saying, "I am you and if you do not want to be in the same pain I am, you should buy this product."

The "farmer's tan" also connotes the ideological notion of farmers being hard-working people who participate in manual labor. By showing this through the image, the advertisement is transferring this ideal into the company, showing that TSC is also a hard-working business that is willing to do manual labor to get the job done right.

It is interesting to note that out of the three ads, this is the only advertisement in which the image appears to have been created electronically. The man in the image looks as if he was digitally placed into this scene of a bright green field and bright blue sky in order to accentuate his redness. The strong background connotes the idea that this is a naturalistic setting and could be seen anywhere in America. This red-and-white person continues to play into the patriotic theme seen in the previous advertisement, by placing him against a bright blue sky, again connoting that TSC is an American company. Research has shown that non-farmers trust farmers and romanticize their profession (Higgins, 1991; American Farm Bureau, 1998). By showing stereotypical farming scenes and tying it into the ideal of Americana, TSC is positioning itself as a hard-working, trustworthy, American company that the viewer should want to visit.

The pop-out advertisement duct-taped to the image is exactly like the previous advertisement, but the product advertised this time is a deluxe shade for the riding lawnmower. The answer to his pain and his "farmer's tan" is this product sold by TSC. The man in the image is also not physically fit, indicating undesirableness by today's society. Through juxtaposition, the viewer feels that by buying this shade you will not look like the individual in this advertisement.

The Deluxe Insulated Coverall

The final advertisement being analyzed (Figure 3) is similar to the tractor shade advertisement. This advertisement was two pages behind the previous advertisement in the March 2005 issue of Western Horseman magazine. Just like the previous two images, this advertisement was dominantly placed at the bottom of the page underneath a story featuring a black-and-white image. This advertisement was also placed near the middle of the magazine, but due to its contrast to the text above it, it was able to stand out to a viewer flipping through the publication.

Figure 3. Tractor Supply Advertisement for Insulated Coveralls

This advertisement depicts a larger, middle-aged man sitting in a lawn chair in the snow. He is wearing a head band, hat, shorts, and pool shoes. The man is sitting in a lawn chair, which symbolizes the spur of the moment reality of the image. It is obvious that it is snowing around him, and you can see a hot tub sitting in a barn in the background, indicating he possibly could have just gotten out of it. His shorts appear to be made for swimming and are obviously wet.

There is a sense of innocence about the man, as he is holding a cup and smiling at it as if he was trying to capture the snowflakes that are falling around him. Goffman (1979) described how advertisers will present men in ludicrous or childlike poses to make them appear unreal, and in turn preserve the image of strong, smart men. This connotes that while this man appears to be childlike, he is still manly, and as the mission of TSC states: "work hard, have fun, and make money…" The man

in the advertisement is smiling, showing that he is having a good time, and by putting yourself in his place, you could, too. The advertisement seems to say, by buying the product advertised or shopping at TSC, you can still be successful and have fun, while maintaining your manly image.

The man is obviously cold, indicated by the pale color of his skin and the few red marks on his bare stomach that could be from frost bite. Farmers and people living rural areas are usually seen as less-educated populations in America (Strover, 2001). This advertisement plays into that ideal by showing a man on a cold day sitting outside half-dressed and wet who is simplistically amused by the snow. By sitting in the snow with so little clothing, this advertisement is also connoting the freedom that was seen in the other two advertisements. While this advertisement does not show the green rolling hills as the other two advertisements, the white purity of the snow and the random falling flakes connote a simplistic lifestyle and a sense of freedom.

Interestingly, this advertisement plays into the idea that TSC is an American company just as the previous two advertisements have. The lawn chair he is sitting on is red, white, and blue; his clothing is all blue and white, while he is holding a red cup. These colors, while subtle, continue to place this company as an American organization that is founded on rural, hard-working traditions. By buying their product the consumer is also buying into this farming lifestyle, which by this advertisement shows, is not all work.

As in the previous ads, TSC tries to tell the viewer that by buying the product on the pop-out advertisement you can combat this stereotype and solve your problem. The product being offered by the duct-taped note is TSC's deluxe insulated coverall. By calling this a deluxe product, TCS continues to play on the idea that this is a product that is strong and reliable in any situation you find yourself facing.

The duct tape used in this advertisement is different from that used in the other three advertisements. It is shown as being more wrinkled than that of the other two. This helps to connote the ideal of hard working. While in the other two advertisements, they show how the product is hard working, in this image they are showing a fun scene. This wrinkled tape appears to be struggling to keep the advertisement posted and in turn is working hard for the advertisement. This meaning is again transferred into the product.

Conclusions

Due to the importance of visual images in today's mediated society, it is essential to take inventory of what these images are portraying and saying about rural culture and ideologies. Semiological analysis offers a unique opportunity for researchers to analyze such images and determine the messages that they portray.

Based on this analysis, it is apparent that these advertisements shown in rural magazines have a tendency to also play into the dominant ideology of what rural life looks like. Through simplistic images playing into known stereotypes, the dominant ideal is enforced through the selling of these products. By utilizing American ideals and colors (Kellogg Foundation, 2002), the advertisements played into an American need to be patriotic. The romanticized ideal of farmers living a serene lifestyle (Higgins, 1991; Kellogg Foundation, 2002) in picture perfect settings is continuously portrayed in the ads analyzed. For the most part, the farmers are seen to be middle-aged, hard-working men (Kellogg Foundation, 2002; American Farm Bureau, 1998). These ads also play into the ideal of the subordinate farm wife who is there to support her husband.

Many classical advertising techniques are utilized to draw in viewers and allow them to put themselves into the images and make specific meanings out of those images (Williamson, 1978).

While these techniques have allowed the advertiser to juxtaposition the qualities of hard working Americans and rural life onto their products, they have also played into the myth of farming life. The images portrayed through these images continue to emphasize the same stereotypes previous researchers have warned about (Walter & Wilson, 1996).

Further analysis of other advertisements used in the "the stuff you need out here" campaign or a more comprehensive analysis of all advertisements in the campaign, as well as triangulation with audiences could shed more light on the contexts and messages being presented. By analyzing the television spots as well as the print advertisements, one could gain a broader picture of what this campaign is saying about rural life. Since signs and signifiers are polysemic, or able to have multiple meanings, in their nature and are open to different interpretations depending on the individual and the culture (McKeown, 2005), it is important to note that these findings are the readings of one individual in the target audience of TSC. Thus, other researchers should look at these images and consider other denotations of the images.

It is imperative as communicators that we continue to study how rural cultures are portrayed in the media. It is apparent through this analysis that negative stereotypes about farmers are still being presented. There is hope in that many positive ideals are also being presented. As future studies explore these ideologies, it is important to realize how information presented by these cultural groups is read by non-farming audiences. Farmers are seen as stewards of the land, and must be trusted when presenting information to publics. Researchers must continue to track these stereotypes if communicators want to be able to effectively portray farming in the media.

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Keywords

Rural Images, Advertising, Semiology, Qualitative Case Study, Tractor Supply Company

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To Bother or Not to Bother? Media Relationship Development Strategies of Agricultural Communication Professionals

Amanda Ruth-McSwain and Ricky Telg

Abstract

As the media relations function becomes increasingly important for organizational visibility, accountability, and ultimately survival, it is imperative that effective media communication strategies be employed to develop mutually beneficial relationships with the news media. Based on the conceptual framework of dialogic communication, this study is an investigation of the media relations practices and strategies of agricultural communication professionals in their role as the sources of agricultural information for the news media. Findings from the study indicate differing media relations strategies and relevant themes; however, a notable theme that materialized was the perception of having mutually beneficial relationships with the media that lack regular dialogue. An additional finding of interest was the change in media relations strategy from a passive approach to an active approach; participants suggested that their approaches to working with the media tended to be reactive in nature, but indicated that they have recently developed proactive initiatives in establishing media contact. Overall, the study identified effective media relations practices and provided insight into areas that could benefit from enhanced media relations strategies for agricultural communication academicians and practitioners.

Introduction

Agricultural communication professionals have a challenging job, in that they are responsible for educating and informing the American public about an industry that is highly complex—technologically and scientifically—increasingly invisible, and progressively more controversial. These communication professionals also play a significant role in communicating agricultural information to the news media in an attempt to reach various—and increasingly diverse—publics. The importance of their role is supported by Reisner and Walter (1994), who suggested that the news media's lack of understanding of agricultural issues and their reliance on sources for agricultural information affects the way agriculture is reported to the public. In addition, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) indicated that "journalists can't include in their news reports what they don't know about" (p. 178), and since today's journalists generally do not possess in-depth knowledge about agriculture, agricultural communication professionals can have a tremendous impact on media content. Therefore, the news media are dependent on the agricultural communication professional for three things: a) accurate, newsworthy agricultural information, b) a translation of that information for a nonagricultural audience, and c) an explanation and understanding of agricultural issues.

Gans (1979) suggested that the shaping of news content starts with the source, and commonly that source is a communication professional. Turk (1985) also claimed that communication professionals, serving as the source of information for the news media, have a considerable amount of influence on the media agenda and, in turn, the public agenda. As such, the agricultural communicator serves as the link between the agricultural industry and the public by disseminating relevant agri-

cultural information through the news media. This implies the need for a strong, positive working relationship between the sources of agricultural information and the news media in order to have a positive impact on the public's understanding and awareness of agricultural issues.

This study seeks to identify agricultural communicators' role in the dissemination of agricultural information. It is assumed that understanding the media relations perceptions, strategies, and behaviors of this group will provide insight into the process of disseminating agricultural information, as well as facilitate effective media relations behaviors of agricultural communicators.

Theoretical Framework

Existing research suggests that effective media relations can enhance the amount of media coverage devoted to agricultural information (Curtin, 1997; Grunig, 2001; Shin & Cameron, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Turk, 1985). Therefore, a focus on media relations practices may be more important for the agricultural industry today than ever before. Most definitions of media relations refer to the establishment and maintenance of the source-reporter relationship. As a supporting theory, dialogic communication can help to explain that relationship component of effective media relations.

Media relations critics commonly cite monologic communication as a major weakness in media relations activities (Thomlison, 1990). Monologic communication takes a one-way transmission approach to communication with the media. Communication that is monologic typically involves manipulation, coercion, exploitation, and control (Thomlison). In consideration of many traditional media relations efforts, it is apparent that they consist of one-way communication efforts: sending press releases, developing fact sheets, and holding press conferences. Botan (1997) agreed that the model of media relations primarily used by communication professionals is monologic and blamed this one-way communication on the inherent lack of relationship building with media publics.

In accounting for some of the criticisms of media relations efforts, researchers have identified a relational or dialogic theory of communication that emphasizes relationship building as the central responsibility of media relations activities (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Dialogic communication specifically "refers to a particular type of relational interaction—one in which a relationship exists" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 323). It is considered a dialogue that involves an effort to recognize and appreciate the value of the other in the relationship; to view the other in the relationship "as an end and not merely as a means to achieving a desired goal" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22). In its basic form, dialogic communication facilitates communication in which each participant is concerned for the other party in the communication process. In fact, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that "dialogue is not a process or a series of steps," but instead it is "a product of ongoing communication and relationships" (p. 24). Further, Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett explained (1994) that, "Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self-interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interest in access than in domination" (p. 2).

Kent and Taylor (2002) offered several ways that dialogue can be achieved in media relations, two of those being interpersonal and mediated efforts. Building dialogic interpersonal relationships can occur only if the organizational member who communicates with the media is comfortable in engaging in dialogue. Skills necessary for dialogue to occur through interpersonal relationships include listening; empathy; ability to conceptualize issues within local, national, and international frameworks; ability to identify common ground between parties; emphasis on long-term rather than short-term objectives; interest in individuals with opposing viewpoints; and solicitation of a variety

of internal and external opinions on policy issues. Mediated efforts toward dialogic relationships can reinforce an organization's commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction between communicating parties. Establishing mediated dialogic relationships means "placing e-mail, Web addresses, 800 telephone numbers, and organizational addresses prominently in advertisements, or organizational literature and on all correspondence" (Kent & Taylor, p. 31). In addition, Kent (2001) proposed that out of all the mediated communication tools available in the media relations toolbox, the Web comes closest to the interpersonal ideal. By using the Web, practitioners can build the mediated dialogic relationships that are so favorable to effective relationship building and media relations.

Research Focus

Based on the literature presented, the following research question provided the foundation for the present study: How do agricultural communication professionals approach the source-reporter relationship? The following questions provided specific direction for the present inquiry: a) How do communication professionals perceive the importance and value of media relations?, b) What constitutes effective media relations strategies in agricultural media relations?, and c) What strategies do agricultural communication professionals use to establish and maintain effective relationships with the media?

Methods

Approached from a qualitative research design, this study attempts to describe the media relations behaviors and experiences of agricultural communication professionals. Through in-depth interviews and online asynchronous focus groups, communication professionals from the United States agricultural industry provided insight into working with the news media.

Qualitative methods have been cited as being useful for studying phenomena for which little previous research is available and when the purpose of the research is exploratory and descriptive (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; McCracken, 1988). The qualitative approach to data collection enables the researcher to examine agricultural communication professionals' experiences and behaviors regarding specific areas of media relations from their personal frames of reference, therefore allowing the researcher to gain insight into and rich description of the media relations environment of agricultural communication professionals (Johnson, 1997).

Chain referral, a purposive sampling technique, was employed to identify and select participants who met the participant criteria for both interview and focus group data collection. Initial interview participants were selected based on a) their familiarity to the researcher, b) their level of media relations experience, and c) the type of organization in which they worked. The researcher thought it was particularly important to choose participants who had extensive experience in media relations (5 or more years) in order to gather accurate, information-rich data that accurately described the culture of agricultural communication professionals. Furthermore, because the researcher was interested in exploring all facets of the agricultural industry, it was important that the participants represent institutions as well as corporate and government entities.

At the completion of each interview, participants were asked to refer agricultural communication professionals whom they viewed as adept in media relations and who could make significant contributions to the study. A list of potential participants was compiled from these referrals, reviewed for overlap, and revised. The referral list, which included 43 agricultural communication professionals, was used to recruit online focus group participants.

Two data collection methods were used to achieve the purpose of the present study: interviews

and online focus groups. Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded for transcription. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 55 minutes. The researcher opened and guided the discussion through a semistructured process, hoping to achieve a balance between formality and informality (McCracken, 1988). Prior to the interviews, a panel of experts from academic and industry organizations reviewed the interview guide. In addition, the interview guide was pilot tested with a representative sample similar to the study's participant sample. The interview guide was revised according to expert suggestions and observations made from the pilot interview. In conducting the interviews, the researcher scheduled at least 1 day between interviews (with the exception of three interviews), allowing transcription of each interview before proceeding to the next interview (Lindlof, 1995; Morgan, 1997).

Following the interviews, three online focus groups were conducted with an additional 22 agricultural communication professionals during the months of May and June, 2005. The online focus groups were conducted utilizing asynchronous discussion group software in an attempt to create meaningful interactions between participants. By conducting online focus groups, the researcher had the ability to extract information that could not be obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997). The focus groups were considered a follow-up method, providing elaboration and clarification for the interview data collected.

The three online focus groups each ranged in size between 3 and 10 homogenous participants. The number and size of focus groups fell within Mann and Stewart's (2000) suggestions for online focus groups. As is common with traditional focus groups and often applied in the virtual world, the researcher over-recruited participants by 20% in anticipation of no-shows (Morgan, 1997). Prior to the online focus group discussion, participants were separated into categories by the organization they represented. Separating the participants based on the sector of agriculture in which they work was believed to create and sustain a healthy conversation as well as a comfortable and cooperative virtual environment (Morgan). Each online focus group was designed to serve as a discussion forum for the three different communities of agricultural communication professionals.

Focus groups were conducted consecutively, each lasting 14 days. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), a question schedule can be transmitted to participants in a variety of ways. The present study combined two suggested approaches by posting all questions at the outset of the study but allowing participants to access the questions over a 2-week period in which reminder e-mails were sent to participants at 3-day intervals. The researcher anticipated that this approach would allow participants enough time to contribute to the discussion at times convenient to them. Sending out reminder e-mails was intended to encourage in-depth responses to all questions posted and to keep participants interested throughout the duration of the research. Throughout the structured discussion, the moderator responded to messages, probed for more information when necessary, and posed new questions based on the discussion.

To initiate the analysis process, interview data were transcribed and focus group data were formatted so the researcher was able to analyze full transcripts of all data collected. Because the researcher was able to save and store the text from the online discussions, transcription of the focus group data was not necessary and records from the online interaction were used as transcripts. After the transcripts were compared with field notes and informal analysis techniques were completed, the data were analyzed using the inductive data analysis method outlined by Hatch (2002), which includes searching for "patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161). Specifically, the inductive analysis methods utilized followed the subsequent steps: a) read data and identify frames of analysis, b) create domains based on semantic

relationships discovered within frames of analysis, c) identify salient domains and assign them a code, d) refine salient domains and keep record of emerging relationships, e) decide if domains are supported by data, f) complete analysis within domains, g) search for themes across domains, h) outline relationships within and among domains, and i) select data excerpts to support the relationships (Hatch).

Results

Interviews were conducted with 12 agricultural communication professionals. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants were as follows: 5 participants were male and 7 were female; 4 represented university agricultural communications, 2 represented government agricultural communications, and 6 represented industry agricultural communications. The media relations responsibilities of the participants varied from 10% to 85% of the participants' job responsibilities, with the average being 44%. The number of years working with the media ranged from 4 to 36 years, with the average being 20 years in the agricultural communication field. Job titles held by participants varied from public affairs specialist, press secretary, and director of public opinion management to marketing director and public relations coordinator. From the three focus groups conducted, little demographic information was obtained from the 22 focus participants due to the confidential nature of the online focus group environment. The following results are presented using pseudonyms selected by both the interview and focus group participants.

Theme #1: Value of Media Relations

Literature suggests that people are more inclined to participate in a specific behavior if they expect a certain value to result from the behavior (Fishbein, 1967; Lazarsfeld & Stanton, 1944). Therefore, in exploring the role of agricultural communication professionals in communicating agricultural information to the news media, the present study investigated the perceived value of media relations for this group of professional communicators. As a result, many participants indicated that there is a tendency among industry professionals to avoid media attention. For example, KF corroborated this assumption by saying, "There are a lot of people in this business that tend to shy away from doing press. There is a nervousness, you know, a fear, about saying too much is going to get more negative press." Furthermore, JH referred to this evasion of media work in saying, "I think the biggest challenge for me is doing a better job selling them on what media relations can do for them." Based on these responses, understanding the perceived value of media relations may help explain this evasion of the news media.

Participants mentioned several valuable aspects of media relations; however, the financial support and third-party endorsement that result from media relations efforts were perceived as the most valuable outcomes. Although these findings do not present new information, they do show a dichotomy in the agricultural communications profession. Interestingly, the value of media relations was different for governmental and university agricultural communication professionals than it was for industry agricultural communication professionals. Governmental and university agricultural communication professionals perceived the value of media relations to be the financial support gained, while industry agricultural communication professionals perceived the value of media relations to be the third-party endorsement.

Almost all participants representing government and institution entities mentioned financial or monetary support as the true value of media relations. Many participants implied that media coverage garnered from good media relations is like a free lunch…or at least a "relatively low cost" lunch.

As LM said, "Effective and measurably successful media relations helps to ensure that our funding lines continue." Furthermore, SS suggested,

> You can't run an organization and expect to get any kind of financial support, public support without the public knowing who you are and what you do. So without media relations efforts, without having your name in print, without having some of your key people looked upon as valuable sources for the media, you are not going to achieve public awareness…then your financial future is also dismal.

As another testimonial to this concept that media relations is the beginning of a process that results in financial support, KP asserted, "Many stories have been shared with us by Extension specialists and Experiment Station scientists who note that their efforts were funded/increased after receiving media attention." Confirming this connection, VM explained the value of media relations for her organization:

> It [media relations] keeps us in the public eye. It helps us fulfill our mission of providing objective information that benefits our citizens. Earned media is extremely valuable—you can't buy the stuff. I have faculty who credit news coverage with boosting their grants, helping them find partners for projects or commercialization opportunities.

All of these statements exemplify the finding that financial support was seen as most valuable by institution and government agricultural communication professionals. Based on this finding, one could assume that agricultural communication professionals from academic institutions and government agencies may have more motivation to work with the media simply because the dollars that fund their jobs depend on it.

For agricultural communication professionals working in industry positions, the earned attention and support that the media provide were seen as the most valuable aspects of media relations efforts. Not only was the value of media relations mentioned as reinforcement for messages that are communicated, but credibility was also recurrently associated with the third-party endorsement concept for participants. MA contends that the value of media relations is the "unique value of its credibility":

> If you write a good piece about your company's product or their position on some issue, that will be more credible when your audience reads it than any advertisement or any direct mail or anything that they could use to communicate to that audience or customer. I mean, there are other things that media relations is valuable for, but that is the unique thing that other modes of communication do not possess.

The third-party endorsement that the media provide for organizations may be more valuable to the agricultural communication professionals working in industry because business and corporations are not necessarily trusted sources of information. Literature supports the notion that the media choose government sources and university sources because they are perceived to be more trusted and credible sources for the reader or listener (Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). Therefore, media endorsement may prove most valuable when an organization lacks the trust or credibility that government and university sources inherently possess. JN summarized the affirmation value of the media by saying,

> I think it's [media relations] a good third-party confirmation that the products and services you offer are of value to the reader, to the listener, to the ultimate consumer. Oftentimes, information that is generated from a company in and of itself alone is not seen as credible as, say, a third-party reporter including it in a story would be.

Although not revolutionary, this concept of the media providing a third-party endorsement as the motivating factor behind practicing media relations has not been widely documented in previous

studies or literature (Bland, Theaker, & Wragg, 2000; Schenkler &Herrling, 2004).

Whether the value of media relations is to secure financial support, place your organization in the public eye, combat negative perceptions or coverage, or acquire third- party affirmation, the true value of media relations efforts is immeasurable. As participants said, without media relations efforts, "survival is difficult if not impossible."

Theme #2: Source-Reporter Relationships

As mentioned in the literature, media relations efforts should be grounded in establishing and maintaining relationships between communication professionals and their various publics, which for the present study is the media. A clear divide between participants surfaced from the interview and focus group data collected. There was a philosophical point of view that separated those professionals who worked as broadcasters and reporters before assuming their current positions and those who did not. Interestingly, all participants mentioned building relationships with the news media somewhere in their responses; however, this divide revealed that some participants gave false piety to relationship-building efforts with the news media.

Participants could be distinguished based on their philosophical view of how to establish and foster a relationship with the news media. At some point throughout the discussions, all participants revealed that building strong relationships is the characterizing trait of effective media relations. However, further investigation indicated that some of the perceived relationships were not as strong as initially revealed. Participants who possessed a journalistic background shared that a true relationship with the news media means contacting them frequently to keep in touch, taking them out to lunch, getting together over a drink, or sponsoring sessions at media conferences. Those participants who had not worked in journalism throughout their careers suggested that less contact with the media is better, so as to not "bother" them.

Describing the approach to the source-reporter relationship that is truly dialogic and not widely represented in the findings, JW shared,

> For the vast majority of my relationships, it is mutually beneficial because I do think obviously the media does provide a service that we need, but I also think we provide a key service to them as a resource for information and for story ideas getting and confirming data. You occasionally have those media relationships that are a little more challenging, but I would also say that those are definitely few and far between.

Although participants mentioned this mutually beneficial relationship with the news media, few actually demonstrated a dialogic approach in their relationship strategies. One participant who mentioned the lack of dialogue currently taking place in the industry was KF:

> Well, I definitely take a different stance than people who work in my fellow industry organizations. I have actually been trying to get them to do more of what I do thinking that it would be helpful for them. I host happy hours for the press, I truly do have friendships with some of the people that cover us. I really try to create friendships with those members of the press—I know my relationship building is sharing personal information with them and a drink every now and then. I mean, how do you truly build a relationship over the phone or e-mail simply talking about working issues?

She followed by saying that every communication professional has to know what reporters like: "When I was a reporter, I liked people to feed me . . . number one." Working as a reporter, as exemplified by KF, seemed to play a significant role in the relationship-building strategies practiced by agricultural communication professionals.

Similarly, MD, whose "entire staff worked in secular media" at one point, suggested,

> We know what reporters want, understand their deadlines, and give them things we wanted from such organizations when we were reporters . . . including regular lunches and dinners. We also call them up (on Mondays, slow news days) and drop story ideas in their laps.

Conducting comparable media relations, MH "goes out to lunch with them [reporters] to find out more of what they are looking for." In addition, she calls them frequently to chat, to ask for feedback on media events, and to give them feedback about their material. Some participants still demonstrated this frequent contact and dialogue with the media despite their disinclination to actually wine and dine news media members. As DL explained,

> My staff members and I have all been members of the news media, so we always try to put ourselves in their shoes. We make media visits and participate in local, state, and national media organizations to strengthen our relationships. We are in regular contact by phone, e-mail, and personal meetings.

"To establish relationships, I find out who they are and keep feeding them story ideas [and] offering experts for things I know they are working on," KP said. She explained that it is "imperative that you know what it is like to have been a reporter." It is this experience that KP credited to her strong relationships. "It's a caring relationship . . . caring about their jobs, and caring about them as people who are often under a great deal of stress to get good, accurate stories." This philosophy of frequent interaction and personal relationship development with the news media represents that concept of dialogue that has been cited as essential in practicing dialogic communication; it is dialogue, no matter what shape and form (lunches, drinks, weekend picnics, phone calls, conferences), that is required for a true source-reporter relationship. SS said,

> The greater the dialogue between reporters and PR staffers, the more open the relationship will be and the more likely these reporters will be to call you, since they know they're going to get something of value rather than spin.

In opposition, and equally as vocal, several participants communicated their philosophical views of the source-reporter relationship as being the "do not bother" approach. JN articulated his approach as such:

> We don't bother them a lot; I mean, we are not constantly on the phone with them haranguing then about things. We just pick up the phone once in a while when we think we've got something that they may be interested in.

MA agreed, stating, "I mean, you never call a reporter just to chat. They are way too busy."

"We try not to bother these people because they are busy," JN said. "We don't call them and talk to them unless we think that we have something specific that they would be interested in."

Although these participants approach the source-reporter relationship using different strategies, they still perceive their strategies to be relationship-building efforts. VM pointed out:

> I try to stay in touch with reporters, but I do not pester them. I contact them only when I have an idea or useful information. . . . They get our news releases mostly electronically. Additionally, I e-mail them and phone them; not much time for face-to-face chats on their part or mine.

There is a clear differentiation of approaches to the source-reporter relationship within the media relations strategies of participants. The data do not reveal which approach is more effective; however, this limited interaction approach to the source-reporter relationship practiced by many of the participants lacks a number of the characteristics of the dialogic approach.

Theme #3: Pitching Strategies

The third theme that emerged from the data was related to the information dissemination strategies of agricultural communication professionals, which appear to be changing from a passive media relations strategy to a more active media relations strategy. As with any transition or change, there are champions and there are laggards; some who initiate the change and some who struggle or even refuse to change (Burke, 2002; Rogers, 1995). Nonetheless, it is change that agricultural communication professionals are currently experiencing with regard to their information dissemination strategies.

SS explained this transition in information dissemination strategies:

The old way of doing business was passive. I think that this has changed a lot—but the old way was to send out a whole lot of press releases, kind of with the hopes that somebody will pick something up. I think today we've realized that your job is not really done until a story is placed; writing a press release is not the end of the job. But I think more work needs to be done in that area. I think that we need to spend more time providing media and targeted media with the information that they need in the way that they need it.

It is the targeted media strategy SS described that provides the foundation for this change. Without doubt, there are agricultural communication professionals leading this change, including DF, who explained, "We try to match the message with the medium and tailor it for a particular outlet whenever possible. If we have a story with strong visual elements, we target appropriate media: television and print photographers interested in the topic." JW sends out information based on a subject matter and timing strategy, targeting the media that are most appropriate based on the subject matter and the immediacy, while JH considers geographic reach in addition to subject matter and timing. MH described her change in strategy from passive to active this way:

I guess we do a better job today in many ways than we did back then. I think we are a lot more aggressive in identifying reporters' targets and sending out information. Back then, it was just like the shotgun approach—sending things out and hoping somebody got it. Then we were encouraged to find out who the reporters were—the exact reporter we wanted to target, get to know the reporter, find out things that the reporter had done . . . that type of thing.

LS experienced a similar passive-to-active transition in her organization's strategies:

When I first got here, we were very passive. I mean, we sent out a very big press packet to about 600 different outlets, and it had anything in it from ag news to environmental to family and consumer sciences, 4-H, you name it; anything we did, we sent out and everybody got everything. One of things that we do now is target our approach and send out information based on its relevancy to each media outlet that we work with.

Although a targeted approach to information dissemination is not an innovative concept to media relations, the majority of participants were not implementing a targeted approach in their media relations strategies. The opposite of a targeted media strategy is nontargeted strategy, referred to as the "scatter plot approach" by DF:

One of the things that I've run into and believe some other communicators get caught in, is that if you take the scatter plot approach and send everything to all media outlets, after a while they think that most of it is not relevant to them and they begin to not even read your stuff. That is why it is so important to target and focus in on what is going to be of interest to them, and you have a much higher success rate if you can hit the target.

Unexpectedly, many participants insinuated, without hesitation, that the scatter plot approach was their media strategy. As JN shared, "We send all information to everyone. I will say that we

provide it [information] to everyone, but in doing follow-up, we are more in-depth." Or as RR suggested, "We have two mailing lists here. It goes out to main trade or main trade and the agriculture media lists. . . . We don't segment our stories." For FP, if the story is "big enough for television, it usually goes to everybody; it goes to all radio, TV, and newspaper outlets that we work with." Finally, HY's media strategy epitomizes the scatter plot approach: "In deciding what media outlet to use . . . for the most part, we don't decide. We let them decide. We pitch our news to all media and subscribe them to our services."

There are numerous repercussions associated with the "scatter plot" approach, aside from the obvious inattention to the widely held standards and expectations of media representatives. In fact, DF explained one of these repercussions:

Oh, they [reporters] can be really quick with that delete key, trust me. They used to at least have to open the envelope when it was mailed, but now they can see it is from a certain organization and say, 'Oh, not again' . . . delete. So if you keep it relevant, you have a much better chance of getting it through.

Specific reasons for their choice in information dissemination strategies were not given by agricultural communication professionals; however, a few participants implied that the targeted media strategy was "time consuming" and "challenging," which could explain BB's reasoning of why agriculture "organizations are somewhere in the middle of the cultural change" of transitioning from widely distributed information to targeted, tailored communication efforts.

Theme #4: Cultural Change

Throughout the interview and focus group discussions, participants recurrently made references and recommendations regarding the future of agricultural media relations. Most of these suggestions could be classified into three focus areas for agricultural communication professionals and the agricultural industry in general: change in media mindset, cohesive efforts, and communicator strategies. In analyzing these three areas of focus, media mindset and cohesive efforts appear to be changes to cultural norms and values, while communicator strategies is simply completing the slow transition already taking place in agricultural media relations. However, from the suggestions made for the future of agricultural media relations, the need to improve strategies for communicating with the mass media is most relevant for the focus of this research paper. These improved strategies included everything from building stronger relationships with the consumer media to making information relevant to the end user.

The suggestions and recommendations of the participants indicate that there is not a single solution for the trials and tribulations that the agricultural communication profession is currently experiencing with regard to media relations. However, they do reveal room for improvement, as well as some direction in making that improvement.

Conclusion

Although this study revealed many relevant findings to the research question under investigation, the most significant finding was the lack of authentic dialogic relationships taking place between the sources of agricultural information and the news media, although agricultural communication professionals perceive that the relationship exists. Many participants referred to establishing relationships but followed by indicating they strive for the least amount of dialogue with the reporter so as to not "bother" the reporter. There were, however, participants who fostered a strong dialogue with reporters and viewed the relationship as a caring, mutually beneficial, trusting relationship and

clearly typified this view in their communication strategies.

In the examination of the source-reporter relationship between agricultural communication professionals and news media representatives, participants presented two different philosophical viewpoints. The first viewpoint included those participants who worked as broadcasters and reporters before assuming their current positions. Their view of the source-reporter relationship was representative of the theory of dialogic communication. Alternatively, the other participants, most of whom had not worked in the news media, claimed that they would "never bother the news media by calling them just to chat." Even though these participants also referred to having a relationship with members of the news media, their actions revealed that a focus on a true dialogic relationship was absent from their media relations strategies.

This finding implies that agricultural communication professionals do not identify with true dialogic relationships, nor do they fully understand how to establish and foster the dialogic relationships that prove to be most effective in media relations. Again, the lack of dialogic relationships between sources of agricultural information and news media representatives provides yet another plausible explanation for the lack of agricultural coverage in the news media today. In support of this assumption, Soloski (1989) found that reporters believed their closeness with a source affected the way they wrote their stories and how the source was treated in the text. Further, Gieber and Johnson (1961) noted that some reporters admitted they sometimes wrote for their sources rather than their editors or audience. Herein lies the importance of a true dialogic relationship with the news media that many participants in the present study lacked; clearly, the strength of the source-reporter relationship can impact reporters' coverage of a story.

Closely associated to the findings that portrayed the concept of dialogic communication was the dichotomy in the media relations strategies of agricultural communication professionals. There was not a clear divide among participants inherent in this finding; yet, participants noticeably differed in their information dissemination strategies. When supplying information to the news media, many participants described their approach as "targeted," meaning that they send information only to the medium considered most important in reaching the target audience. The alternative approach to information dissemination was referred to as the "scatter plot" approach, which is best characterized as a mass e-mail strategy, meaning that information is sent to every media outlet that is listed in a database with the hopes that someone will be interested in the story.

Participants noted that these differences in information dissemination strategies illustrate the move from passive media relations to more active media relations. Prior research suggests that those communicators implementing a "scatter plot" approach in their media relations strategies are alienating members of the news media by inundating them with irrelevant information, potentially causing irreparable damage to the credibility of their role as the source of agricultural information. Furthermore, literature supports that targeted media efforts are more effective than the mass distribution of information (Bland et al., 2000; Caywood, 1997; Howard & Mathews, 2000). While it is reassuring to know that some of the participants have implemented a targeted approach to their information dissemination, it is important that all agricultural communication professionals become more selective in their information dissemination strategies.

It is important to note, however, that responses revealed that participants were not necessarily ignorant to effective media relations strategies (i.e., developing dialogic relationships and targeting approaches to information dissemination). Instead, participants implied that the effort and time required of these effective strategies were either not in their capacity or were not seen as worthwhile in comparison to the extra effort. From the researcher's point of view, it would have been more en-

couraging if participants were unfamiliar with strategies for effective media relations rather than just being apathetic to them. This finding insinuates that moving from a traditional passive practice of media relations to a more contemporary active practice of media relations may be more challenging and take more time to adopt within this culture of communicators because of preconceived attitudes.

Finally, an encouraging finding was that the majority of participants alluded to necessary changes that need to take place to successfully survive as continued sources of agricultural information for the news media. Exposed in these suggestions is an abstract plan for making changes in the agricultural media relations environment.

Implications for Research and Practice

Dialogic communication provides a substantial area for future media relations research. For example, future research on the theory of dialogic communication should assess the perceptions of the dialogic aspects of different communication tools used by communication professionals in working with the news media. In the present study, many participants believed they were establishing relationships with the news media; however, the communication tools and media relations strategies implemented by participants provided contrary evidence. The first step in moving the practice of media relations in agriculture from a monologic approach to a dialogic approach would be to uncover the knowledge and perceptions agricultural communication professionals have about dialogic communication tools to further explore the discrepancy that currently exists between perception and practice.

Another area for future research into the theory of dialogic communication is to determine the approach to the source-reporter relationship that is preferred by the members of the news media. Further investigation into the dichotomy between those professionals with a journalistic background and those without would provide verification of the observation that these two professionals approach the source-reporter relationship differently. Additionally, including an investigation into the news media's preferred approach—personal relationship or business relationship—to the source-reporter relationship may help to repudiate one of these assumed approaches offered by participants.

Based on the results of this study, there is great potential for improvement in the media relations work of agricultural communication professionals. However, it is important to consider the differences present in this culture of communicators when discussing or applying these results to future research or practice. Clearly, the assumption going into the study that this was a coherent culture with shared media relations norms is not completely accurate. Even different organizations within the same industry drastically differ; therefore, viewing this group of communicators as a single culture may not prove fruitful in future efforts. Instead, viewing this group of communicators as communication professionals communicating about different aspects of the same industry is more appropriate. Even so, all agricultural communication professionals can benefit from this research in that it provides an indication of where the profession currently resides in media relations and a clear direction for where it needs to go.

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agricultural communications, media relations, dialogic communication, news media, relationship development

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