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Abstract

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Communications Newsletters and Extension: A Survey

Mary F. Laurent

Good communication skills are essential in any business. They are becoming increasingly important to the mission of the Extension Service. One way to foster development and growth of these skills is with a communications newsletter. This is the story behind the resurrection of a communications newsletter for Extension agents and specialists at the University of Kentucky.

The Need

At the University of Kentucky, evidence abounded to support the need for a communications newsletter for agents and specialists of the Extension Service.

Agents were surveyed in 1984 about their training needs; promotion and publicity, media presentations, using audiovisual equipment, and other communications-related topics ranked at the top of the list.

In 1985, the College of Agriculture proposed to the University Senate that the communications requirements for the B.S. degree in agriculture be tripled from three to a minimum of nine credit hours.

In that same year, 25 percent of the 170 recommendations of the Extension Advisory Council were directly related to work performed by the public information department in the form of publications, print and broadcast news, public awareness campaigns, exhibits, audiovisual materials, and our teletext service.

The Survey

In response to a clear need for more ongoing communications training, the University of Kentucky College of

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Agriculture's public information department conducted a survey to gather information about communications newsletters published by state Extension offices.

In February 1985, a letter was sent to the communications departments of each state's Cooperative Extension Service. The purpose of this letter was fourfold: 1) to identify states that publish or have published a communications newsletter; 2) to learn the objectives and audience of these newsletters; 3) to find out why publication ceased, if this was the case; and 4) to obtain copies of currently published and discontinued newsletters for future reference.

Response

Of the 50 states surveyed, 27 responded. State offices in Alaska, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington said they currently publish a communications newsletter. Six states had such a newsletter for several years, but for a variety of reasons that will be elaborated on later, ceased publication. These states are Arkansas, California, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Texas. Oklahoma (State) presents a special circumstance. The Cooperative Extension Service there currently publishes a communications newsletter and they published another newsletter in the past. However, neither newsletter originated in the Department of Agricultural Communications. One newsletter was in the College of Home Economics and the other was in the Department of Agricultural Education.

Kentucky also published a newsletter about audiovisual media for several years. Tennessee did not have a newsletter at the time of this survey, but provided a proposal for one. It is now being printed on a one-year trial basis. Florida began publishing a communications newsletter in January 1986.

Respondents from the following state colleges reported they have no communications newsletter: Connecticut, Kansas, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Rutgers, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. Of these states, several have general Extension newsletters that occasionally include news about activities in the information department. Kansas State includes a "tip sheet" in their monthly packet to home economics agents. It often deals with a communications topic and is intended for the agent only. Mississippi State often does something similar in the cover letter of its weekly packet to agents.

Purposes of Newsletters

Of the states that have or had a communications newsletter, the audience was nearly always county Extension agents and specialists, and sometimes faculty and other professional staff. The following purposes of these newsletters were identified:

- to provide communications training;
- to serve as a follow-up tool for in-service training;
- to warn agents and specialists of upcoming media releases so they would be prepared for inquiries;
- to announce new publications and reprints;
- to encourage media planning among agents and specialists;
- to pass on information regarding procedures including penalty mail regulations, printing and distribution concerns, equipment maintenance, etc.;
- to supply fresh clip art;
- to promote the agricultural communications department, its staff and other resources, and its service capabilities;
- to serve as a vehicle for communications effectiveness surveys;
- to provide up-to-date information about communications technology.

Publication of communications newsletters ceased for a number of reasons. Most often, it was due to organizational changes such as promotions or resignations of newsletter editors or department chairmen. Budgetary constraints were another cause. In some cases, lack of interest, either on the part of the readers or the writers, resulted in a decision to cease publication. In the case of Texas A&M, the decision was made to switch from a newsletter to a series of publications about communications. In another state, due to travel restrictions, communications staff never visited county offices and lost their feel for their audience. Many letters were received from states wishing they could institute a communications newsletter, but resources or key administrative support was lacking.

Findings

Content of newsletters varies from laundry lists of new publications, forthcoming media releases and recent

audiovisual procurements to heady discussions of communications theory. Items in newsletters seem to fall into two broad categories: 1) subject matter information about various aspects of communications—clear writing, public speaking, photography, and working with the media are exemplary topics and 2) practical information, often of a technical nature, which agents and specialists can use in their program planning and execution. Examples are clarifications of regulations and procedures, fresh sources of clip art, selection and maintenance of audiovisual equipment and recent and forthcoming activities of the agricultural information department.

Newsletters are produced in one of three ways. 1) One person writes the whole thing. 2) Various specialists submit items to an editor, who reports to a chairman. 3) In other cases, the responsibility for individual issues rotates among specialists. Thus, each issue emphasizes a particular area of communications. Some facts of publication about past and present communications newsletters published by Extension and obtained by this survey follow:

Newsletters currently in publication

Alaska: "Letter From the Editor;" published when needed or when time permits; samples 2 pages, 1 column, typewritten on colored stock; used to pass along important items regarding communications, penalty mail, printing, etc.

Colorado: "News Notes and Communication Tips;" usually published monthly, since 1972; 2 pages, 2 columns, typewritten with Presstype heads on colored stock; thematic issues; recently rejuvenated, after a 4 1/2 year break in publication, from "Communique," a 4-page, typewritten, bimonthly newsletter.

Georgia: "Media Mate;" published quarterly; magazine format, 8 1/2 × 14-inch paper, folded and saddle-stitched; sample issues 8-10 pages (after folding) including one or two sheets of clip art; 2 columns, typewritten on white stock; typewriter font intentionally chosen to show agents that attractive publications need not be typeset.

Florida: "The Practical Communicator;" premiere issue January 1986; 1 and 2 columns, folded, typeset in 18 pt. type.

Idaho: "Open Line;" published monthly; 4 pages, 2 and 3 columns, typeset on colored stock; seven years old; sample issues contained articles about new communications

technology, new titles and reprints, occasional surveys and results on communications topics such as readership of news stories; training articles about using clip art, writing effectively, working with printers, etc; and activities of information staff.

Oklahoma: "M*E*S*H*: Media Exchange Serving Home Economics;" published bimonthly by home economics department; 4 pages, stapled, colored stock; samples 2 and 3 columns, typewritten with Presstype heads; regular columns included "Let's Talk Video," "Tips to Clip," "Questions and Answers," and attachments.

Oregon: "CommunicAIDS;" 8-12 pages (with inserts); one 26-pica column with heads to left; typewritten on word processor for camera-ready reproduction; each issue contains two inserts: "Status Report" of publications and "Backgrounder" for lengthy, training-type articles; newsletter and inserts are color-coded.

Tennessee: "Extending Communications;" published quarterly for a 1-year trial period, beginning July 1985; standard 4-page layout, 2 columns, typeset; each issue printed in a different color; regular columns entitled "Publications," "Visual Media," "Audio Corner," "Print News," and "Art."

Vermont: "Inside Information;" published monthly; 2-4 pages, 2 columns, typewritten on white stock.

Virginia: "Extension Network;" published monthly, with several gaps in publication, since 1955; 4 pages, stapled, colored stock, 1 column, typewritten; short tips, training ideas, and publications update.

Washington: "Cues for News etc;" published monthly, with several gaps in publication, since 1955; 4 pages, stapled, colored stock, 1 column, typewritten; short tips, training ideas, and publications update.

Newsletters No Longer Published

Arkansas: "The Synergist;" published between 1971 and 1974; single sheet (front and back), 2 columns, typewritten.

California: "Educational Media Sense;" published between 1974 and 1982; 2-12 pages, sometimes typeset, 1 column, heavily illustrated; designed for academic and professional staff statewide.

Kentucky: "A.V.I.D. Tips;" prepared by A.V. specialist, usually bimonthly, from 1956 to 1969; A.V.I.D. is Audio Visual Information Department.

Minnesota: Title unknown; began as a monthly, changed to quarterly; originally typewritten, later typeset and illustrated with photos.

New Mexico: "Informingly Yours;" published quarterly; won several ACE awards; new chairman hopes to reissue.

Oklahoma: "Spotlight on Communication;" a training letter published monthly between 1979 and 1983 by the Department of Agricultural Education; 2-6 pages, typewritten on green paper; also distributed to Wyoming Extension professionals through a purchase arrangement.

Texas (A&M): "Communication Tips;" published monthly from 1981 to 1985; 2 pages, 2 columns, typeset on colored stock; publication ceased with decision to go to a factsheet format.

A Newsletter is Born

With the information gleaned from this survey, the decision was made to publish a quarterly communications newsletter for agents and specialists. A 3-person committee was appointed to draw up a proposal outlining audience, purpose, content, design, editorial responsibility, press run, frequency, distribution, and other particulars of publication.

The committee proposed a quarterly newsletter with a standard, 4-page layout, to be typeset and to include a page of clip art with each issue. We decided to go with thematic issues focusing on print, broadcast, graphics, and photography. Each issue will also include two regular columns, one profiling an information specialist in the featured area, and the other answering a frequently asked question, usually also relating to the theme of the issue. A single editor is responsible for coordinating submissions and publication.

A contest was held among public information staff to find a name for the newsletter. The winning entry was "P.I. Pointers," former title of a series of factsheets on communications published sporadically by the department from 1964 to 1966.

The proposal for "P.I. Pointers" was accepted, with the stipulation that it be printed on a trial basis for one year. At the end of the trial period, the newsletter will be evaluated via a readership survey to determine if it should be changed or discontinued.

At this writing, the first issue of "P.I. Pointers" has gone to press. We have already experienced our first problem: a

3-month delay due to a special job taking priority over all other typesetting, layout, and printing needs. Also, because of the resignation of the artist assigned to the newsletter, the premiere issue contained no insert of clip art, as called for in the proposal. Gliches such as these are apparently commonplace on new ventures. Since they are in-house projects, communications newsletters are often put on the back-burner in favor of more pressing departmental responsibilities.

In this era of marketing the Extension Service, good communication skills are almost as (if not more) important to the effectiveness of agents and specialists as knowledge of agriculture and home economics. It would be nice to have at least one communication specialist in every county office. Since that is not possible, the next best thing is to teach Extension agents and program and subject matter specialists to do-it-yourself to the greatest degree possible. A communication newsletter, coupled with ongoing in-service training, is one way this can be done.

Since this study was initiated in February 1985, at least three states—Tennessee, Florida and Kentucky—have instituted communication newsletters, while Colorado and Washington have rejuvenated communication newsletters that had been out of publication for some time. As the Extension Service becomes aware of the necessity of good communication skills in the fast-approaching information age, the birth, resurrection, or rejuvenation of communication newsletters is inevitable.

Note: The author acknowledges the many Extension communication specialists who responded to this survey, in particular Alisa Harrison of the University of Tennessee, and welcomes questions and further input, especially from representatives of those states that did not respond.
