

Using Electronic Mail. . .now and if and when

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Abstract

When Hal Taylor, Stan Prochaska and I had those extended conversations about moving the U.S. Department of Agriculture's news dissemination systems into the new world of computer electronics, never did I have the idea that I would soon become one of the early users.

Using Electronic Mail ...now and if and when

**By AGC011
(Formerly James C. Webster)**

When Hal Taylor, Stan Prochaska and I had those extended conversations about moving the U.S. Department of Agriculture's news dissemination systems into the new world of computer electronics, never did I have the idea that I would soon become one of the early users.

But then, even though the career expectation of a political appointee at USDA is ever short, it never occurred to me that one day I would be involved in a cottage industry in the basement of my home, connected to the global village by telephone lines.

Never mind that many of the information departments of the land grant system were light-years ahead of USDA (as often is the case) in electronic communications, it didn't take Hal and Stan long to convince me that the department would remain hopelessly in the green eyeshade era unless we adopted the emerging technology.

That awareness carried with me in January 1981 when I cleaned out that cavernous office on the second floor of USDA's administration building and set up shop in a 9x14 room which had once served as my eldest son's bedroom.

But one starts a newsletter and writing business modestly, so a couple of used electric typewriters had to serve for the

Webster was assistant secretary of agriculture for governmental and public affairs during the Carter Administration. Now, as president of Webster Communications Corporation, McLean, Va., he publishes two agricultural newsletters, *The Food & Fiber Letter* and *Dairy Industry Newsletter*, writes regularly for four farm and cooperative publications in the U.S. and Canada, and provides farm policy analysis for a radio program and a public television show. He is recently elected ACE director for associate members.

first year and a half until the cash flow permitted the acquisition of what Taylor disparagingly refers to as my "Trash 80," a Radio Shack TRS-80 Model II computer, rigged out with a daisy wheel printer and a direct connect modem.

Nearly a year of using it (almost exclusively as a word processor, I might add; the adage about old dogs learning new tricks certainly applies to my comprehension of this machine as a device for my bookkeeping and list maintenance), has convinced me even more firmly that mastering this technology is essential to keeping up with today's business of information.

And one of the uses that has been most significant in my learning process has been the ITT Dialcom system and access to it through associate membership in ACE.

Every Dialcom user has, no doubt, a different need and a different use for the system. Mine is primarily to obtain information (I almost wrote, "to access information", but then I remember that "access" used to be a noun, before computers changed our grammar).

Dialcom not only has made my work easier, it also has changed my work habits. Because it and similar information banks charge more for "connect time" during normal business hours, my typical work day begins (in bathrobe and slippers) between 7 and 8 a.m. with a call to the Dialcom computer.

After making the connection, I peruse the day's United Press International file for any stories about agricultural legislation in Congress, or anything which may have been written about agricultural policy the day before. Although it's not foolproof, by trial and error one learns the key words to give the computer to search for those dispatches in which one is interested, without spending a lot of time on extraneous material.

Next, I'll scan the USDA news releases issued the previous day. If there are any of interest, they go into the RAM (that's for "random access memory," for those of you as computer-illiterate as I was a couple of years back), to be recalled and printed later.

My office wall is bedecked with papers such as the 1983 calendars of USDA's Crop Reporting Board and the World Agricultural Outlook Board. If a major crop report or outlook and situation report was to have been released the day before, I'll type in "CRB" or "OASS" to read it.

I'll also check the mailbox, in the vain hope that Dialcom has sent ACE a bill for last fall, and Taylor has forwarded on my disproportionately large share, or with the thought that

USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service may have sent a milk market order press release (for our "Dairy Industry Newsletter"). If there's something brewing in one of the USDA agencies, or if I need a larger document, I may also send a note to that agency's information director, asking to have it mailed through the still-essential U.S. Postal Service.

This limited use of Dialcom has been both a timesaver and a moneysaver, despite the fact that our first month cost \$250 for several hours of games — all completely extraneous to the business of news. Webster Communications is about 12 miles from USDA; in Washington traffic, it would take an hour or more and about \$4.80 (at 20 cents a mile) to drive there, pick up a press release, and return. It takes 10 minutes and about \$1.35 (less before 8 a.m.) this way.

I'm determined to make greater use of it. I fully intend one day to send messages to the University of Wisconsin and the University of Minnesota, asking for dairy stories for our dairy letter, to Louisiana State and Texas A&M to see what they're doing that would interest "The Rice Journal," of which I'm associate editor.

If I ever get the hang of it, I'm going to send a broadside message to all extension and university editors, asking them to keep us in mind for anything their economists do about agricultural and food policy, for "The Food & Fiber Letter," which was our first publication and still our flagship.

And then I'm going to talk to Bill Kibler, administrator of the Statistical Reporting Service, and Ben Blankenship, his information director, to see whether they'll ever get on the stick and get the crop reports into Dialcom in a timely way.

