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Abstract

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Free-Lancing and Service to Agricultural Publications

Harold B. Swanson

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doesn't interfere with their jobs.**

"What's the role of free-lance contributors to agricultural communications?" That question was considered by a panel at the 1980 Agricultural Communications Conference at the University of Missouri.

This article will review some of the panel members' ideas. Major emphasis, however, will be on how college and United States Department of Agriculture communicators service magazines and how they handle free-lancing. This was my contribution to the panel and is based on an informal survey of North Central and USDA ACE communicators. Either the head of each staff or the person largely responsible for magazine efforts replied.

"Free-lance contributors play a vital role in agricultural publishing," Richard Krumme, managing editor, *Successful Farming*, believes. "In fact, put on a pure economic basis, one page of copy produced by a staff editor is somewhat more expensive than the same page produced by and purchased from a free-lance contributor."

Krumme divides free-lancers into two groups: the inde-

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pendent free-lancer and the "educator" free-lancer. Independents should be viewed as small business persons or entrepreneurs and be treated in that way.

The role of the "educator" free-lancer is essentially one of placing appropriate information in the various media. Krumme suggested we could improve by watching the independents with their more effective targeting. Communications staffs would be more effective in ultimate use and total exposure if they produced material with a specific audience and medium in mind. The concept of wholesaling, as reported by Vacin (1979), is an important breakthrough.

Legislation, too, has revolutionized copyright procedure and the way magazines deal with free-lance contributions, Krumme emphasized. The Copyright Act of 1976 essentially gives the author preferential treatment with respect as to who owns the copyright. Publication is no longer necessary for federal protection.

The copyright is now federally protected as soon as the work is created... "as the pen is lifted from the paper." This has created problems for the magazines that cannot be brushed aside, Krumme believes.

Independent free-lance writer and wheat-farmer photographer, Vance Ehmke of Healy, Kansas, says independents can take the pressure off farm magazines by giving specialized and often more practical coverage of certain stories.

Although he had few complaints, Ehmke calls on magazines to move faster on rejection or acceptance. He says some magazines and agencies are overkilling on copyright laws to protect themselves, especially in regard to pictures. Occasionally, too, he has been perturbed by losing a byline to an editor when the article is largely his own creation.

Another approach to free-lancing was voiced by Gary Myers, vice president, Bader Rutter and Associates, Brookfield, Wisconsin. Myers is in charge of the public relations arm of the company.

"It is possible to serve three masters in our profession—the farmer/reader, the editor and the client," Myers maintained. "By placing the reader first in importance and the editor second, we have a built-in, fail-safe mechanism that automatically assures us a high level of success with our clients."

An agency can develop stories and story ideas and can cut through corporate red tape. Many agencies make extensive use of free-lancers, often in overload situations. He predicted, too, that agencies will be writing on assignment for agri-

culture magazines (in a sense free-lancing) and that more firms will be employing public relations agencies.

The rest of this article will deal with the results of the informal survey. Questions were open-ended and do not lend themselves to quantitative analysis. Also, I have injected (and noted) my own personal reactions.

Service to Magazines

Most states consider state, regional, national and specialized magazines just as important—or the most important—of all outlets for their information. Some mentioned radio as equally important, especially for spot news and marketing information.

However, most states do not provide a special service to magazines. They rely on their regular releases or a selection from their regular releases. Some provide a regular tip service to magazines. They may list important research and extension projects and provide tips of possible features.

At least one state staff plans closely with their state farm paper, coordinating some of their efforts. Most maintain close relationships with their state farm papers and some with other magazines. They largely provide service to magazines serving their own specific state or area.

Many respondents feel they are not doing enough—that the potential for working more effectively with agricultural magazines has not been fully realized.

My own view is that agricultural magazines are most effective in reaching farmers with agricultural technological and management information—what we call agricultural subject matter. They ordinarily are not as important as certain other media with spot news, general information, "generalized awareness," nonagriculture news and possibly policy or broad economic and social issues.

Most communications offices have obligations that make it difficult to fully use their opportunities to work with magazines. One is the policy all North Central states follow—equal treatment to various media in "breaking" or "spot" news. They also try to serve all the media to the best of their ability with the resources they have. Finally, they recognize their responsibility to serve county extension workers, providing them equal access to important university and USDA developments and research. Agents, as representatives of the colleges and the USDA, are embarrassed if they do not know about important discoveries and developments when asked.

Unlike an advertising agency or a company, a university or governmental agency is somewhat restricted in its choices of outlets (its media mix) because of this need to treat various media the same. However, this largely applies to spot news. They should still do the painstaking market analysis and choice of media and other methods to reach specific educational or public relations objectives. Although we cannot always place our efforts in the media that will serve our specific objective best, we can in most instances. This means working closer with the magazines.

Another question relates to checking stories with the source for accuracy. To some this may seem to be a violation of journalistic principles, but most land-grant college communications staffs are "service" or even "advocacy" journalists and are not strictly reporters.

My survey indicates that all states require checking or as a practice do check their stories with the source. USDA agencies often check stories with several people. This does not impair relationships with magazines. In fact, most magazines expect this and even check back their own stories with sources on land-grant college campuses. All are concerned that their audiences get absolutely reliable and accurate information.

Another frequent question centers on the first announcement of a new discovery. Practically all the states surveyed have either written or unwritten policies that any new discovery must be first released or checked through the communications office or through some other office in the college. They recognize the importance to researchers and their careers of having simultaneous release of their discoveries in their professional journals.

Free-Lancing

The question of free-lancing by both free-lancers and communications staffs is one fraught with implications and conflicting philosophies.

Serving Free-Lancers: One respondent indicates this might be "the communications office's blind spot, our Achilles heel." Apparently most states do not have close relationships with free-lancers. Some invite free-lancers to their media days; others do not. Four states encourage free-lancers to come on campus. Most answer their questions. Thus, free-lancers can come on the campus and are directed to the most fruitful source of information but are not con-

tacted or encouraged by the communications staff. They do not get the service provided magazines and other outlets.

Some states feel that one of the problems encountered with free-lancers is that a few do not adequately check their sources for accuracy and consequently may damage informational and educational programs. On the other hand, competent free-lancers present few problems but may compete with collegiate staff who have similar aspirations.

Free-Lancing by Staff: Only a few states have rules regarding free-lancing by staff. Most rely on rules for consulting or upon unwritten (and probably not very well understood) practices.

Although this article deals largely with free-lance activities in the publications field, there is considerable free-lancing (for pay or gratis) and consulting by communications staff in other areas--photography, art, radio-TV, editing, training. These do not seem to come under the same scrutiny as writing for outside publications.

Rules or practices regarding free-lancing vary greatly. And individuals in our profession in the same states have different approaches. Some say free-lancing is unethical and presents a conflict of interest; others wink at free-lancing; and a few even encourage staff to free-lance. Most states have a feeling of uneasiness about attacking the issue. As a result most states have a *laissez-faire* approach, neither encouraging or discouraging.

Some states definitely forbid free-lancing. One person replying indicates he encouraged free-lancing but forbids taking pay for it. Others say it was permissible but that the person involved must do the work on his or her own time--evenings, weekends. My feeling is that staff should be allowed the opportunity to free-lance, but as one respondent said, "It must not interfere with job performance and must not prejudice university program performance." To me this means that the person free-lancing on a state staff must be highly professional and must recognize his or her prime responsibilities. My criteria for professionalism were reported in both *ACE* and *Extension Journal* (1965, 1975). I question the professionalism of a staff member who free-lances to the detriment of other work or programs or who is primarily motivated by personal profit or gain. And, free-lancing cannot result in giving one publication a break over another serving the same area.

Although the idea that free-lancing should be done on one's own time has merit, it overlooks the professional na-

ture of our work which is not an eight-to-five, five-days-a-week proposition. As professionals, and in many cases as faculty members, we do or should have the privilege of working with outside interests a certain part of our time if it enhances our capabilities to be better professionals and do a better job for the university or the organization for whom we work.

My survey did not cover some important questions. One concerns the contributions communications staff make to other specialists who free-lance to magazines and other publications. Should communicators share in the pay received by other specialists? I think they should.

Another important problem communications staffs face concerns specialists who free-lance material before making basic information available to communications units. What can or should communications staff do in such situations? There is no easy answer. However, one must question the professionalism of the specialists involved.

Academic Freedom and Free-Lancing

One question seldom alluded to in communications circles is that of academic freedom of communications staff. More properly this probably should be divided into two areas — academic freedom and journalistic responsibilities and activities.

Unfortunately, I only asked one question, "Do you feel that communications staff should have the same academic freedom as Extension and other collegiate staff?" All respondents said "yes." But I question if we really either have worked for or have achieved this freedom. There should be no question in our own field of expertise—communications. But does this extend beyond our own field? The issue is how we handle other people's expert information and perhaps, as one respondent indicated, this may be more a question of ethics rather than academic freedom.

The question not answered or even asked was, "Do we have journalistic privilege and responsibility to report fully even though such reporting may cause some temporary embarrassment to our organization?"

The issues of academic freedom and journalistic responsibilities are controversial not only in staff free-lancing but also in the entire operation of our departments. They are too complex to discuss here.

Summary

Agricultural colleges and the USDA regard magazines as one of the most important outlets for their material, but they do not design special services for them. They will help free-lancers but generally do not make extra efforts to keep them informed. The policy on staff members free-lancing varies greatly. Some feel that free-lancing by staff is unethical, a conflict of interest; most do not encourage it; and several tolerate it or allow it to occur.

Although several states indicate that they welcome free-lancers, it seems that very little positive effort is extended to help them. As with every area of the communicator's work, there is room for considerable improvement. We can, as Enlow (1979) said, merchandise our product better. One way is to merchandise by using free lancing and free-lancers more effectively.

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