

Reaching The Hard To Reach: The Less Affluent

John M. Bentley

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Abstract

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John M. Bentley

The term “less affluent” covers quite a broad range of people and circumstances. Therefore, for practical purposes, we will generally confine our discussion to one group—those who may be considered economically disadvantaged (that is, those who are existing at or below the government’s official poverty level). For this or any other group, we must ask some basic questions:

- (1) Why are they hard to reach?
- (2) What are we currently doing to reach them?
- (3) If our current methods and materials are not successful, why?
- (4) Are we the problem or are we the solution?

If I may suggest an answer to only the last question, I would propose that the answer lies somewhere in the middle ground between the two extremes. We are a part of the problem, and, most assuredly, we are a part of the solution. We cannot claim, be blamed, or accept total responsibility for either. The problem (or if you are a positive thinker, make that opportunity) is larger than agricultural communicators, larger than 1890 Colleges, larger than the Cooperative Extension Service, EFNEP, the Forest Service, experiment stations, Gold Kist, *The Progressive Farmer* or any other single entity.

Bentley is an editor and information specialist with the Cooperative Extension Program at Fort Valley State College, Georgia.

Fortunately, we are not alone out there as public agents or agencies. Even in our smaller communities we are one of several agencies providing or with the potential for providing services to hard to reach (less affluent) clients. However, in too many instances, clients are not utilizing or are underutilizing available services because:

- (1) They don't know that we exist.
- (2) If they know of us, they cannot see a positive relationship between us and their problems.
- (3) If they know of us, they don't know how or don't feel competent to come to us and articulate their problems.
- (4) They have no perceived problems.
- (5) We are isolated from them. Our environment is not comfortable to them.
- (6) We have in many instances only information and ideas to offer.
- (7) Our programs and materials do not meet their real or perceived needs.
- (8) Our resources are limited and already severely taxed.

Given these conditions, then, what can we as agricultural communicators do to reach the hard to reach—the less affluent? Fundamentally, we can be effective only to the degree that we understand the target audience and can draw upon this understanding to develop effective educational programs.

Let's briefly consider some generally accepted characteristics of the disadvantaged and relate these to program development. I cannot emphasize too strongly that these are only general characteristics and are not intended to present a definitive picture of the economically disadvantaged client. They are not a homogeneous group and are as individual as you and I. As a starting point though, we may assume the following conditions:

1. POOR:

The economically disadvantaged person is poor in terms other than financial and physical resources. He or she may also be poor in terms of motivation and self-confidence. Recurring failure to achieve success has led to discouragement and, in many instances, resignation to what he considers his fate. Added to this is the fact that he probably also is poorly educated. He does not read well and has difficulty interpreting printed materials.

2. FRUSTRATED:

The disadvantaged client often has a low frustration level and, as a result, may give up trying to improve his or her

life. He lives for today because today is enough of a challenge.

3. **FEARFUL:**

The disadvantaged client often fears elements of a society which he does not understand. He fears agents of that society are out to take what little he has rather than to help him.

4. **ISOLATED:**

The disadvantaged client may be mentally and/or physically isolated from the larger society. He may be shy and withdrawn, lacking the courage, knowledge and motivation to play a more assertive role.

5. **RELIGIOUS:**

He or she probably is strongly or at least mildly religious and attends church regularly.

6. **MATERIALISTIC:**

The only aspect of middle class life to which he regularly aspires is the acquisition of material comforts and conveniences. Today is what counts and today is much more pleasant with a color TV, stereo, car, etc. Insurance, savings and medical checkups are all parts of tomorrow.

7. **PHYSICAL:**

Neither abstract ideas nor abstract ideals appeal to him because he has a physical orientation to life.

Each of these seven "characteristics" has strong implications for program development. Those implications may be summarized in three ideas:

- (1) People learn most when success is neither too easy nor too hard. The goal must be set somewhere between boredom and frustration.
- (2) Concepts and abstract ideas are best taught by way of concrete, specific examples of situations that are familiar to the learner.
- (3) People learn what they want to learn when they are ready to learn it. They will learn best if it is taught in a situation similar to the one in which the knowledge will be used and shortly before it is needed.

Admittedly, that last idea sets up an idealized learning situation difficult or impossible to realize, given the conditions under which we must work.

Yet, there are some things we can do to effectively reach the disadvantaged client. Some we are already doing. Others will require changes in the way we do business. For example, we often speak of "dumbing down" publications from a higher to a lower level. I fully endorse the adaptation

of high level reading material to meet the needs of persons with lower reading abilities. But we, editors and subject-matter specialists, must assume the attitude that this is an integral part of the publication process and not an added detail or, worse yet, an afterthought. Publications in print represent a valuable storehouse of information useful to disadvantaged clients, if made available in a usable form. Adaptations should reflect the quality of the original publication and should give no suggestion of second class status, either in terms of artwork, paper, reproduction method or any other factor. Beyond adaptation, however, we must give due consideration to the development of high quality original publications for this special audience.

However, some considerations are more basic than publications and other learning materials. Our total delivery system must be evaluated in terms of its ability to serve the economically disadvantaged client. Materials are worthless if their chief function is to grace well stuffed racks in the county agent's office.

I suppose the most basic thing of all is awareness—awareness on our part that here is an audience which needs and wants to be served—and awareness on the part of the audience that here are agencies with something to offer and which are going to make real efforts to provide their services to all who need them, within the limitations of their resources. Perhaps, then, we need, as a first step in reaching this hard-to-reach audience, a well planned, well executed awareness campaign. To be successful, such a campaign, must fully use existing channels of communication within the disadvantaged community. It must recognize and utilize community leaders, groups and meeting places. There are no Lions, Rotary, or Civitan Clubs. However, there are, civic leagues, social and savings clubs, burial aid societies, assorted church-related groups, fraternal lodges and other active groups whose aid may be enlisted.

We must face some practical problems. We noted earlier that the disadvantaged client may be shy and withdrawn, uncomfortable outside his familiar environment. For us, this means that the client is not coming to the information. So we must take the information to the client. It means meeting him on his turf in one-on-one or small-group settings. It means that we as agricultural communicators must be ready to propose workable means by which the impact of a single county extension agent may be amplified so that these individual or small-groups sessions may be made possible. Program as-

sistants (paraprofessionals) and communications technology are one combination that offers promise of helping us meet this objective. Admittedly, as editors, we probably have little input into a decision to employ paraprofessionals in the delivery system. However, I believe that there is an adequate record to demonstrate their effectiveness in amplifying the outreach capabilities of the extension office. We as editors can help insure the success of these aides by working with subject-matter specialists to develop not only high quality publications, but also visual and experiential teaching materials including slide-tape sets, filmstrips, video cassettes, posters, flip charts, demonstration kits and other support materials.

With or without program assistants, nonprint materials must play a central role in our efforts to serve less affluent audiences. The importance of such materials goes well beyond the obvious fact of helping to deal with limited reading abilities. They enable us to package that most basic of all extension teaching techniques—the demonstration—and present it in a broad variety of ways with or without the physical presence of the professional extension agent. This means that we can enlist the aid of volunteers—individuals and organizations—and use them in the delivery system while maintaining some reasonable assurance that accurate information is being transmitted.

Video cassettes, one of the brightest stars in the educational technology arena, offer particularly exciting opportunities to deliver educational programs to less affluent audiences. For this group, television is already a familiar and trusted medium. It's also an educational medium. If you don't believe me, try counting the number of children with names like Erica, Tara, Monica, Stephanie and others with roots in both the soaps and prime time. I'll even lay a light wager that there's a bunch of little J.R.'s toddling, crawling or kicking their way around some where out there.

In the Fort Valley Extension Program, we are firmly committed to video cassettes as an educational tool and are preparing to introduce them into our paraprofessional delivery system at the earliest possible date. Using portable one-half inch players and small, lightweight receivers, we will be employing them in one-on-one and small group learning situations throughout a 19-county middle Georgia area.

We believe that this is only one way in which video cassettes may be used to deliver educational information. Cable television offers another exciting possibility. Opera-

tors of the cable system in Fort Valley, for example, tell me that subscribers are about equally divided between low-income and non-low-income households. Now, a sophisticated, dial-access video distribution center using a cable channel is well beyond our means. We couldn't afford the hardware or the technical personnel to maintain it. However, a more modest operation substituting humans, volunteers if possible, for sophisticated electronics is completely feasible. Briefly, we envision a small operation using a couple of playback decks and some form of basic switching hardware tied to a local cable channel. In operation, a person manning the center would select and play tapes from a published library in response to phoned-in requests from persons desiring specific information. During periods when no tapes are being played a black and white camera might be trained on some form of "Community Message Center."

Other possibilities include playback stations set up in waiting rooms, Neighborhood Service Centers, public libraries, and places of employment.

The working low income client presents a real challenge. When we're at work he's at work and when he's off our office is closed. Again, technology may offer a partial answer, but it is certainly no panacea. I have some ideas, but I won't pretend to have the ultimate answer. One final note. As I drive through small towns in the state, I notice the number of vacant stores in downtown areas and wonder if we couldn't set up storefront operations in some of these and "market" information the same way surrounding stores promote their wares. Many low-income rural people still have a tradition of going to town on Saturday, so this might be one way of establishing contact.

In summary, if we are to effectively serve the less affluent client, we must (1) win his confidence, (2) make full use of individuals and institutions familiar to him and (3) follow through with high quality programs and materials designed to meet his special needs.