

Reporting and Selling the Agricultural Research Story

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Abstract

Science communication - the reporting of the outcomes of science, the process of science, and of events in science and about science that are important to others to know - tends to take a backseat in some land-grant university information units. But that may be changing. (Papers from the National Agricultural Science Information Conference, Ames, Iowa.)

Reporting and Selling the Agricultural Research Story

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Science communication--the reporting of the outcomes of science, the process of science, and of events in science and about science that are important to others to know--tends to take a backseat in some land-grant university information units. But that may be changing.

One force for change was the National Agricultural Science Information Conference at Ames, Iowa. This event brought together 130 professionals from all over the country—from most of the land-grant universities and most of the USDA agencies involved in research. For the first time in many years, professionals in this area got together to talk with each other about their jobs, and to hear and talk with experts in various areas related to their profession.

The following excerpts from the speeches of four program participants will give you some flavor of the Conference--its concern with quality in science reporting, its concern that more effort be expended on science information, its air of stimulation and excitement through the sharing of ideas, practices and experiences.

Dr. Jarvis Miller, president of Texas A & M University, represented one of the "significant others" for the audience--a land-grant administrator who had been a research director

Mason E. Miller, communication scientist, SEA-CR, USDA, Washington, D.C., was a prime mover in implementing and conducting this national conference. His introduction helps place the four papers in perspective.

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at that University for many years. Some of us underestimate the support we might have from experiment station directors for being more aggressive in communicating for and to them. Dr. Miller saw the need for aggressively "using" the media--in the very best sense--to let people know what is going on in science and what is being found out. He urged us to learn to deal with them. He saw the need to use the latest technology--and to do communication research applicable to our jobs. He stressed the need for scientists, information staff, and administrators to work on the problems and programs of science communication together--sharing concerns, aspirations and needs, and from those to develop communication goals they all can work together to attain.

Dr. Richard L. Lee, agricultural editor, University of Missouri, came at the science reporting topic from another point of view--the very pragmatic one of the head of an information staff for whom science information is only one concern. He talked of information staff credibility with administrators--the need among other things, to advance ourselves academically--and credibility with scientists and the media.

Dr. James E. Grunig's paper is a jewel. He pulled together the research on science communication and on science communicators, both in the media and those working for research organizations. As a member of the University of Maryland Journalism faculty for a number of years, he has done considerable research himself on these topics. He did a great service for us by collecting as much of this literature as he could and then giving it some order and clarity for our use. The following pages present a selection from his presentation. The complete version will be carried in the proceedings from the Conference.

The final paper is one by Robert E. Enlow, in charge of the SEA-AR North Central Regional Information Office at Peoria, Ill. His is a very practical paper--about experience and success that a regional staff has had with "marketing" science news.

These four reports from the Conference are the proverbial tip of the iceberg. When Don Wells spent nine months working with me a couple of years ago, one of his findings was the sorry state of too much of the science news coming out of our universities and agencies. Much remains to be done. And not just in science reporting. There is a real need, in my opinion, for a continuing effort to monitor and upgrade what we are doing in this whole field of science communication. We all need to be growing and developing and improving.

More than with extension communication, science communication demands assertive effort, self-starting and pacing by the professional communicator. Extension's whole life and purpose is communication. Research's is to do research. But also to communicate about that research! Because the public reporting responsibility is often less evident to scientists and research administrators, less rewarded, sometimes resisted in research units, the job may be harder to do. And it certainly will depend more for its nature and success on what the professional communicator decides needs doing and is important.

So--read the following papers carefully. They are important. And let's find ways to keep the momentum these and other speakers generated in support of science journalism and its improvement.

