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Abstract

The U. S. Agricultural scene is vast and has been explored many times from many angles. The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze an element of agriculture that has gone largely unnoticed and unresearched - the communicator working for an agricultural input company.

The Input Communicator: Who Is He?

K. Robert Kern and Charles H. Kelly

THE U. S. AGRICULTURAL scene is vast and has been explored many times from many angles. The purpose of this study was to describe and analyze an element of agriculture that has gone largely unnoticed and unresearched—the communicator working for an agricultural input company.

Besides knowing communication techniques and skills, the input communicator has to understand the product and its purpose. There are a variety of ways to communicate the attributes of the product to the farmer, but the optimum method may change from year to year or even month to month. Government policies, economic conditions, weather conditions and farmers' attitudes all play an important part in the way a message is introduced and handled by the input communicator.

What are agricultural input companies? Six separate categories are usually set out: petroleum, farm machinery and equipment, fertilizers, chemical pesticides, livestock feeds and farm credit. In the past quarter of the century, agricultural input companies have grown increasingly important.

Statistics indicate that input purchases by farmers have risen dramatically since 1940—about 72 percent. Nonpurchased inputs—mostly labor—have fallen by about 38 percent during the same period.

This study is based on information compiled from communicators working for farm input companies in Iowa. Agricultural input firms are distributed geographically throughout the United States. Probably, several thousand individuals could be identified as farm input communicators, as considered in this study. Two main factors limited this study to Iowa communicators: (1) resources of

money and time were not available to sustain a national study; and, (2) prudence suggests that one explore in a small way before plunging into a largely unknown environment.

The Problem

Primarily, the study attempted to discover how communicators gained the insights and knowledge they use as professional communicators with agricultural input firms. The study also sought information on sources of training, including college communications training or other communication training. In turn, the study sought to discover just how valuable communicators rate their formalized and less formal training in relation to the communication responsibilities of their jobs.

The types of communications and the methods used by communicators were also sought, with evaluation by the communicators themselves as to how much effect they perceive each type of communication and method having.

The results of this information may suggest areas of communication training—for college undergraduates and for working communicators—that would benefit students preparing to enter, or professionally engaged in, this specialized field. The findings could give a student a larger perspective of what would be expected of him as a communicator in this field.

In analyzing and describing a population that is largely undefined, some basic fact-finding is required to discover the population's locality and environment. In gathering information for the first sample, names of 110 input companies were compiled through farm magazine advertisements and manufacturers' directories. The preliminary questionnaire was sent to the 110 firms thought to employ an agricultural input communicator. Of the 110 questionnaires mailed, 80 were returned (73 percent).

The initial survey was used to determine how much time for communications was being allotted by each firm. Firms not having individuals spending more than 30 percent of their time in communicating to the firm's farm audience were dropped from the second sample. The first sample also gave some indications as to what types of work the communicators are involved with.

Five of the six input categories discussed earlier were represented among the firms contacted. The farm credit category was not represented, so a special sampling was made of that group. A random sample of 15 credit firms was drawn and contacted via a telephone survey. None of those responding said they spend more than 20 percent of their time in developing communications for the farm audience. In fact, 11 of the respondents said they spend less than 10 percent of their time on communications.

A second sample was then made of 73 Iowa agricultural input communicators. The second survey was an in-depth look at input communicators; a 10-page questionnaire was used. Sixty-two of the 73 questionnaires (85 percent) were returned.

The questionnaire used in the more extensive second survey had three main objectives. First, it sought to discover the amount of time communicators spend on different types of communications, and the communicator's opinion of how effective each type of communication is in conveying a message to the intended farm audience. This section of the questionnaire sought to identify the company's decisionmaker at 11 different ongoing steps in forming a communication message, and to identify the person responsible for carrying out each step.

Second, the questionnaire sought the amount of education or training each communicator had in preparing for his position. The questionnaire also asked how communicators evaluated various phases of their education.

Questions were asked that fulfilled the third major objective of the study—describing. These questions were used to describe the communicator's opinion on farmers' abilities to understand new ideas or methods, his opinion of research conducted by universities and government, his experience background and his view of his status within the firm.

Findings

Most (84 percent) of the agricultural input communicators in this study attended college, and 58 percent of the communicators in the study hold either graduate or undergraduate degrees. Despite the high number of communicators attending college, only 13

were journalism majors. The remainder had a variety of college majors. However, 55 percent of the communicators (including the journalism majors) in the study had at least some communications classes while in college.

A high number of communicators have sought new communications skills or knowledge, or brushed up on old skills and knowledge, by attending communications training sessions. Seventy-four percent of the communicators either attended a communications short course, company training session, night class or other forms of communications training.

Although much formal or informal communications education was reported, communicators seemed to attach higher values to their first five years of on-the-job experience, and to self-teaching required communications skills and methods. Well over half placed credit on self-teaching for learning writing, editing, layout and design, marketing, advertising and public relations skills (Table 1).

A high number, more than 64 percent, spend at least "some time" in communicating to the farm audience through farm demonstrations and field days, fairs and exhibitions, and farm shows. These personalized outlets were the highest time commitment areas in communications work, according to study results. Training dealers and salesmen was another related area where communicators spend at least "some time" (Table 2).

Communicators said they "constantly require" skills in writing, editing and creativity in message design. Multi-media, photography, layout and design, interpersonal relations, advertising writing, interviewing sources of information and public speaking are other skills "required sometimes" by a majority of the communicators.

Knowledge of basic marketing techniques, public relations techniques and advertising techniques; understanding how to plan effective marketing, advertising and public relations strategies; how to relate a product to the audience's needs; and how a message travels through a communication channel; are all areas of communications knowledge that a majority of communicators said they "constantly required."

Communicators also seem to be the major decisionmakers for the companies in developing, producing and evaluating communi-

Table 1. How communicators developed present skills

Skill area	respondents (percent)					Total
	On the job training	Self-taught on job	Through classwork	Working on college publication	Not part of job	
Writing	15 (24)	42 (68)	2 (3)	1 (2)	2 (3)	62 (100)
Editing	17 (27)	37 (60)	4 (7)	2 (3)	2 (3)	62 (100)
Layout and design	12 (19)	34 (55)	5 (8)	0 (0)	11 (18)	62 (100)
Advertising	17 (27)	39 (63)	3 (5)	0 (0)	3 (5)	62 (100)
Public relations	13 (21)	45 (73)	2 (3)	0 (0)	2 (3)	62 (100)
Marketing	20 (32)	39 (63)	1 (2)	0 (0)	2 (3)	62 (100)

cations. However, company size plays little importance in who the decisionmaker is; communicators from small-, medium- and large-sized companies appear about equally included among the major decisionmakers (Table 3).

Communicators in this study also tended to rate the effectiveness of a particular communications channel or method positively with frequency of their own use of the method or channel in their communications efforts.

As a whole, communicators declare their present jobs interesting and more satisfying than past positions; they feel that they play a part in major management activities and belong in the high or middle management level of the company.

Iowa's agricultural input communicators apparently believe they are communicating with a reasonably intelligent audience. Sixty-seven percent of the communicators believe their farm audience either understands new ideas very well or reasonably well.

However, communicators' opinions were more dispersed about the adequacy of research produced by universities and government in relationship to its application to farm audiences. Forty-five percent said the research produced was highly adequate or adequate, but 30 percent said it was highly inadequate or inadequate. A significant proportion of the communicators—24 percent—said they didn't know.

Discussion

Four recommendations resulted from the information compiled during the study. The recommendations are tempered by need for further research. The four recommendations are:

(1) Communications teachers—such as college journalism professors—need to put their insights and teaching skills together for in-service professional short courses for agricultural input communicators. The training needs to cater to the gaps evident from these data: traditional journalism skills; the strategy of marketing; and media skills not dealt with in typical college curricula—farm shows, demonstrations, field days, fairs and exhibitions;

(2) The high value associated with developing journalism skills while on the job suggests that a professional curriculum in journal-

Table 2. Time devoted to communication tasks

<i>Communication areas</i>	<i>Little or no time</i>	<i>Some time</i>	<i>Much time</i>	<i>Totals</i>
	respondents (percent)			
Television advertising	48 (77)	10 (16)	4 (7)	62 (100)
Radio advertising	25 (40)	33 (53)	4 (7)	62 (100)
Television farm shows	56 (90)	5 (8)	1 (2)	62 (100)
Radio farm shows	41 (66)	18 (29)	3 (105)	62 (100)
News releases	10 (16)	46 (74)	6 (10)	62 (100)
Fairs and exhibitions	11 (18)	29 (47)	22 (36)	62 (100)

Farm demonstrations, field days	22 (36)	23 (37)	17 (27)	62 (100)
Farm shows	18 (29)	24 (39)	20 (32)	62 (100)
Public relations	14 (23)	35 (57)	13 (21)	62 (100)
Company brochures	3 (5)	21 (34)	38 (61)	62 (100)
Advertising by direct mail	21 (40)	30 (48)	11 (18)	62 (100)
Training programs for dealers and salesmen	14 (23)	36 (58)	12 (19)	62 (100)
Working with advertising agencies	19 (31)	19 (31)	24 (39)	62 (100)

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Table 3. Communication decisionmakers*

<i>Communication step</i>	<i>General management</i>	<i>Sales management</i>	<i>Communicator respondents (percent)</i>	<i>Service staff</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Total</i>
Determines need to communicate message	11 (18)	13 (21)	38 (61)	0 (0)	0 (0)	62 (100)
Selects specific audience	2 (3)	14 (23)	45 (73)	1 (2)	0 (0)	62 (100)
Develops approach or strategy	6 (10)	10 (16)	44 (71)	1 (2)	1 (2)	62 (100)
Selects communication channel	1 (2)	7 (11)	50 (81)	3 (5)	1 (2)	62 (100)
Assembles message	0 (0)	5 (8)	45 (73)	6 (10)	6 (10)	62 (100)
Edits, revises, polishes	1 (2)	7 (11)	48 (77)	6 (10)	0 (0)	62 (100)

ACE QUARTERLY

Produces the communication	2 (3)	6 (10)	34 (55)	12 (19)	8 (13)	62 (100)
Places message in channel	2 (3)	8 (13)	32 (52)	11 (18)	9 (15)	62 (100)
Gathers feedback	2 (3)	11 (18)	40 (65)	7 (11)	2 (3)	62 (100)
Evaluates message effect	4 (7)	11 (18)	44 (71)	2 (3)	1 (2)	62 (100)
Determines need of followup message	6 (10)	12 (19)	43 (70)	0 (0)	1 (2)	62 (100)

*In this table are 11 identifiable steps in a communication. We asked each respondent to consider the communication decisions in his working situation, indicating the position of the person who makes the final decision related to each step.

ism should include the opportunity (and perhaps a requirement) for the undergraduate to serve an internship as part of preparation for practice with agricultural input firms;

(3) Assuming continued expansion of employment of communicators in agricultural input firms, the special needs identified in this study would justify efforts to develop curricula specifically pointing toward this role. A possible curriculum could be based in journalism and communications with supplementation from other specializations, particularly business and marketing;

(4) Data in this study should permit academic advisers of journalism students to feel confident in pointing to the possibilities and satisfactions in this phase of agri-business.

This study was exploratory, a first look at a particular population. It was limited geographically by available resources. It was limited in breadth and depth of its concern by its mail survey methodology. Findings, however, seem to justify recommendation of more research.

A national study of this population should yield the kind of base on which journalism schools could examine their potential to serve this sector. Journalists, of course, move in a national market. Many of the firms in the agricultural input sectors are national or international in scope of their operations. It is believed that methods utilized here would provide a starting point for design of a national study.

Respondents to this study indicated their relative time allocations to various communications channels and methods. No evaluation of the effectiveness of their work was attempted. Without qualitative data, important knowledge is lacking to include both in college training and in continuing education. Lacking such qualitative data, the agricultural input communicator must rely on informal ways of evaluating his work. Scientific evaluation should yield much information that would help both the practitioner and the teacher. Hopefully, university journalism departments will move toward research needed in this area. Also, there may be some communication research conducted internally by the agricultural input firms; the profession would be strengthened to the extent that such research could be evaluated and shared.

This study explored superficially the decision processes surrounding communications activities of the agricultural input firm. It was viewed only from one vantage point, that of the communicator. More sophisticated study of this process should be valuable to the communicator and also to others in his firm, both superiors and subordinates. From such study there might develop more specific role prescriptions. Such data would be useful to the teacher or trainer and, possibly, to the firm.