

All in the Family: Extension Editors Aren't Perfect Either

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Abstract

While traveling about the state, helping county extension staffers work up efficient, hard-hitting publicity, PR and advertising for their local efforts, it dawned on me that many of the bad examples I told them about came from material extension editors had prepared.

All in the Family-- Extension Editors Aren't Perfect Either

Jack Belck

WHILE TRAVELING about the state, helping county extension staffers work up efficient, hard-hitting publicity, PR and advertising for their local efforts, it dawned on me that many of the bad examples I told them about came from material extension editors had prepared.

Sure, my lengthy list of communications no-no's, boo-boo's and archaisms had plenty of amateur contributions, but the pro's whose job it is to turn the worst pedantry and driest non-news into exciting, stimulating prose contributed more than their share.

Scanning the extension publications from around the nation, for example, turned up dozens of "Table of Contents" where only "Contents" belonged; too many "List of Tables" entries instead of simply, "Tables." And far too many stuffy items like "purchasing a residence" slipped through instead of being translated into "buying a home."

It's not always easy to decide whether such gaffs result from authors' resistance of editors' muffs, but whoever is at fault, we can ill afford to get by with the inferior at a time when the communications explosion deluges the public—*our* public—with beautifully done commercial messages of all kinds.

So, it might be a good idea to run down some of the most glaring extension editorial/creative weaknesses, with the hope that the guilty parties will take their cue and bring the extension editor's average up to the very best any of us has to offer.

Press Problems

It's safe to say that if a member of extension is bored by a news story about his very own paycheck source, it's not a very good

story. And how many of the releases that drop on our desks do we enjoy reading? We are flooded with datelined, printed stuff from everywhere, including a steady stream of prose from the endless corridors of the U.S. Department of Agriculture in Washington. (I sometimes suspect one of Extension Services' status symbols is a GS rating that allows its holder to put out his own newsletter.)

But what sort of stuff is all this? The varicolored, franked news pieces we all get appear uniformly dull. Indeed, the highlight of these dutifully cranked out fluffs seems to be the reporting of some staffer's heart attack or death.

Further down the line, state news offices continue to churn out releases whose mediocrity can only be partly blamed on the irresistible forces which decree that every \$2,500 research grant must be announced forthwith to all America. The majority, I'm afraid, suggests only too plainly that many news editors have long since run out of inspiration.

The problem here may be that the year-in, year-out demand for catchy leads has burned our extension scribes out. (Why don't they have fellow staffers contribute leads?)

Worse yet, our news people suffer from the endemic problem of having to assume that what is important to, say, farmers is, *ipso facto*, important to everybody.

As a case in point, during the recent public uproar over soaring food costs, a neighboring state cranked out a news story chortling over the great news that its dairy farmers' gross incomes had shot up 15 percent in one short year.

Great PR, huh? The public agonizes over the price of milk and extension tells all that the farmer is getting rich. The horror of this particular idiocy is that anyone even vaguely knowledgeable about dairying knows gross income bears precious little resemblance to net. Which means that the news office could probably have shown the public that dairymen were going broke, despite higher production and dollar inflow.

Elsewhere, as Americans worry about inflation, wars, and the delights of Watergate-style messes, they are bombarded with news items informing them this or that ag professor has landed a \$10,000 grant to study ways of breeding the all-too-well-known

plastic variety of vegetable that tastes like nothing but will withstand the beating of some newfangled mechanical picker some other ag professor is designing with the help of another grant.

This kind of puffery is often the result of in-house demands for personal or subject matter publicity with no regard to consumer needs. Still, I believe even these kinds of yarns can usually be twisted and bent so the reader "out there" will get the message that whatever is going on is ultimately to his benefit.

(While we're on the subject of releases, how about the still-current mania for affixing "Mr." or "Mrs." or "Ms" in front of people's names? It's the favorite of the style-leading *New York Times*. ("According to reliable sources, Mr. Himmler ordered the murder of 10,000 innocent . . .") but I often suspect these useless appendages are there only because it makes it easier to plug in that favorite extension title, "Dr." But the man on the street could care less about degrees; at least, I've never seen any of the media hack away at such inanities as, "Henry Kissinger, Ph.D., told newsmen . . ." Besides, 200,000,000-plus Americans are used to General Motors, IBM, and White House inhabitants who hold only bachelor's degrees, so they aren't exactly overawed with those who have spent more time in school.)

Broadcast Problems

If there is a plenitude of Dullsville in the news releases pouring from extension typewriters, the situation in television is even worse. Here, the typical extension offering too often fails to rise above the level of a 1947 travelogue.

It hurts, let me tell you, to listen/watch a program that begins with this sort of drivel:

"The Cooperative Extension Service of Land Grab University, in cooperation with your local 4-H and Youth Clubs, presents Dr. Agnes Dud, Extension Specialist-Family Relations, who will talk to us today about the importance of good nutrition among youth."

Not that the producers of this kind of rubbish aren't at least subconsciously aware of how horribly dreary their production is: ten to one, in the background will be some bubbly, Lawrence

Welk type music, a half-hearted attempt to hype some life into this auditory anesthetic.

On the interview program, we get a continuance of unimaginativeness:

“And now, Dr. Agnes Dud. Good morning, Agnes.”

“Good morning, Harry.”

“I’m sure our listeners will enjoy our little get-together today as we talk about the importance of good nutrition to our youth.”

“I’m sure they will, Harry, because good nutrition is not only important, it should also be *fun*.”

“Fun? My, that doesn’t sound like the sort of word one would apply to nutrition, does it?”

(Laughs gaily) “And that’s my point, Harry . . .”

By this time, the channel/station switch has been turned by the typical American who has a distinct aversion to being bored by something that is as bad as a tenth rerun despite its being a brand-new program entry.

This resistance to modernity is what I call the “Title Page Syndrome,” a carryover from the prints. Bear in mind that paper and budget stringencies still don’t force many an editor into examining the ridiculousness of a cover which says, for example:

“Psychoanalytical Parameters of the Black-footed Leaf Miner in Indiana Poplar Trees, by Augustus Quirk, Ph.D., Agricultural Experiment Station, Glitchville University, Gorbles, Indiana.”

Then, having waded through this muck, we turn the Lusterkote cover back, and what do we see? Yup:

“Psychoanalytical Parameters of . . . etc. . . . etc.” The same stuff as before!

Thus, the title page syndrome continues a method long since discarded by most electronically carried things—the dead opener.

I tell staffers to skip the actual titles of what they’re doing and get right to some essential, audience-grabbing ingredient. Not, “the 4-H Nutrition Program in Fozzle County,” but, “How does a mother keep her kids from eating garbage everytime her back is turned?” Or some other, attention-getting, “you” oriented opener.

Having done what they can to kill audience interest at the be-

ginning, too many extension TV'ers continue in the same vein with outmoded parallel literalism.

For example, as the narrator intones, "The Foozle County 4-H Nutrition Program is centered in the Central High School," the camera focuses on—yup—Central High School. It would be more exciting to go back to the idea of kids eating garbage, showing them wolfing candy bars and Cokes at some drive-in, and then use the voice-over to state the problem the nutrition program has set out to correct.

When I try to come to grips with the question of why so much extension broadcast fare is old-fashioned, ineffective and dreary, the only reasonable answer I can come to is that—sorry about this—too many of our media people are *uncommercial*.

Where the professional at NBC, CBS, or ABC is attuned to audience appeal, the academically trained extension type too frequently worries only about technical perfection. He frets over camera angles, synchronization, lighting, timing, and perfectly clear delivery of soggy script lines. That what he ends up with is technically correct but qualitatively rotten is beside the point.

(To be fair, it's not unusual for some other extension people to resist to the death any attempt to dramatize their efforts. When I suggested to one 4-H staffer in another state that he begin his film on driver education with a shot of a badly smashed up car, he recoiled in horror. Shock the little kiddies with anything as awful as an accident? Of course not! Instead, get some lummoX in a business suit to stand alongside a new car and mouth some non-sense such as:

"While the automobile is considered a necessity in America, it is important to remember that it is also the number one destroyer of human lives. As responsible citizens, all of us surely don't want . . .")

Well, you get the idea. Be formal, be proper, be correct, and if the viewers turn their backs and switch to Jacques Cousteau, who really knows how to educate entertainingly, blame it on the fact that the stations, for some unfathomable reason, won't run your stuff on prime time.

When you get around the country and talk to the living, breathing people who make up extension communications staffs, it's not unusual to find them a depressed, if dutiful bunch. But, interestingly, jiggle their synapses a little, and they quickly awaken and pour out one good idea after another. They have the professional skills to do things right, and yet something seems to keep them from using these skills to the best advantage.

What is it? From here, it looks very much as if we suffer from being wedded to bureaucracies. The good ideas, spirit, and imagination we came to the organization with too often appear to be squashed as we get bogged down in "Administrivia." We are rebuffed so often when we present contemporary ideas that we tend to back down to an unartistic though acceptable level. It's a safe thing to do, because—and this is really awful!—our job ratings are determined, not by the people "out there," but by administrators, bookkeepers, and subject matter specialists whose expertise lies more in critical than creative areas.

Too many newspapers run our material on a *pro forma* basis, not because it has actual inherent reader appeal. Too many radio-TV stations run our stuff because it's free, makes them look good with the FCC, and helps fill dead time.

We are largely immune to Nielsen, Pulse, Roper, Hooper, you-name-it rating surveys that force us to battle for reader/viewer attention. No sponsor has to be convinced of the viability of our programs. If the man on the street opts for the funny page instead of an extension story, prefers "Gunsmoke" to "Living Creatively in the Middle Years," or if a smart little tot likes "Mod Squad" better than our current efforts to copy "Sesame Street," why, it's *their* fault.

Nuts. It's *our* fault. For all the bureaucratic friction losses in the extension organization, we have the goods at our fingertips. What our co-workers are doing with housewives, farmers, kids, and others is enough to fuel the media many hours and column inches a week.

All we have to do is take a hard look at what the competition is

doing, how magazines pull readers, how television programs draw millions, and then apply well-known techniques to get our share of attention.

Let's play down the plaudits of in-house workers who don't always share the public's interests or biases and let's assess what we're doing on the basis of how the people "out there" respond to our work. The findings may be a bit depressing, but so what? The message is there, we've got the ability, so let's get with it! Fight tradition when necessary, argue with the literalists, poke your fellow communications workers into exercising the talent they have.

The people at the newsstands and in front of America's radio and TV sets deserve that much. And so do you.