

## A Better Mouse Trap is Found

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## A Better Mouse Trap is Found

### Abstract

There is a small village market in a developing African nation where three cents will buy you A BETTER MOUSE TRAP! A mouse trap different than any you have ever seen.

# *A Better Mouse Trap is Found*

JOHN L. WOODS

THERE IS A SMALL village market in a developing African nation where three cents will buy you A BETTER MOUSE TRAP! A mouse trap different than any you have ever seen. It resembles a small "horn-of-plenty." A villager can easily make one using dried grass. Operating the mouse trap is simple. A kernel of corn is put inside. The mouse goes in after the corn and gets stuck.

This mouse trap is better because it perfectly fits the needs of the African villagers. The mouse trap catches mice that would otherwise eat valuable crops the people desperately need. Mice, which villagers call "African Sausage," also provide an excellent source of meat protein for human diets.

In this same developing country was an agricultural information office which was established with the help of AAACE members through an American aid program. The better mouse trap story seemed to be a perfect idea for an educational information campaign. However, when the idea was suggested to the information staff, their first reaction was, "Wouldn't this idea be best handled by the lowly village level extension worker? With all of our new sophisticated equipment and all of our United States training in communications theory and program planning, this story is really below our professional status!"

After spending several months conducting surveys, analyzing scientific reports, and doing a great deal of deliberation, the information staff decided to do the campaign. In fact, the decision was made almost immediately after the Minister of Agriculture said, "Do it."

The information staff set about their task with the desire to do the best job ever. The first item prepared was a 16-page publication entitled, "Better Mouse Trap Educational Information Campaign." The publication included loads of scientific

background data, a detailed explanation of the sociological implications, and a complete media plan.

The key media usage included: (1) A series of newspaper articles with a giant picture of a mouse; (2) a 24-page publication with a four-color cover, numerous drawings, and lots of copy explaining the sociological impact of the mouse trap; (3) a feature color film to be shown in movie theatres and to be entered in the next International Film Festival; (4) a television special featuring interviews with the Minister of Agriculture, an engineer from the university, and other specialists; (5) a large exhibit showing massive drawings of mice; (6) a self-instruction, "programmed learning" package; and (7) a tele-lecture hook-up with regional offices. All this and more for the three-cent mouse trap.

### *It Didn't Work*

If you have ever worked in a developing country, you know the probable results of this campaign—a happy Minister of Agriculture looking at an impressive pile of "communications goodies AND an almost totally uninformed village audience!

The campaign didn't work because most of the media used did not reach the village audience, and the treatment of the message was wrong for this audience.

In many developing countries, newspapers, magazines, television, exhibits, and films seldom reach the village people. The printed word has little value if people cannot read. A message that is loaded down with theory or symbolism cannot be understood. In many cultures, people even have difficulty understanding drawings.

The above campaign is actually fictitious. However, as many of you know, similar types of campaigns have been tried in developing countries.

The three-cent mouse trap is real. My wife discovered this mouse trap in a small Malawi village market. The idea represented by the mouse trap was the motivation for writing this article.

The three-cent mouse trap is perfectly suited for the Malawi village situation, but not practical in the United States where sophisticated chemical controls are commonly used. Similarly, the above sophisticated communications campaign is practical in the United States, but definitely not in Malawi or other developing countries.

*A New Approach Is Needed*

There is a growing feeling among some agencies that the best way to meet the needs of a developing country is through the creation of an "intermediate technology." One definition of intermediate technology is "something more effective and more viable than the indigenous, traditional technology and at the same time far cheaper and simpler than the modern."<sup>1</sup> These same people point out that modern technology was not created in one great leap, but through evolution. In other words, the recommendation is to teach developing countries how to walk before trying to run.

The intermediate technology idea must apply to our information activities in developing countries. Much too often we have tried to bypass the intermediate steps when establishing agricultural information offices. We have looked to our stateside information offices as an example to follow. The resulting problems can be put into the following categories:

1. The staff is not trained adequately to carry out their jobs at home. Staff training is by far the most important ingredient in a successful information operation. Many times foreign trainees are toured through a number of information offices in the United States to "look, but don't touch." We generally show them fancy office facilities, big sophisticated machines, and our most spectacular communications efforts. What they don't see, which is by far more important, is all the staff experience, planning, organization, distribution, and just plain hard work that goes into our jobs. This must be misleading for the foreign trainees.

What they need is practical training in basic skills using equipment they can afford at home. It seems silly to teach a trainee communications theory before he knows how to write a news story, or do a radio broadcast, or operate a camera, or perform whatever his task is at home.

2. The equipment given to a developing country is often not suitable for the situation. Equipping an information office in a developing country presents one of the most difficult problems to solve. Many times the information staff wants the biggest

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<sup>1</sup> SCHUMACHER, E. F. September 1966. *Economic Development and Poverty*, ITDG BULLETIN, Number 1, Intermediate Technology Development Group Ltd., 9 King Street, Covent Garden, London WC2, pp. 3-9.



most sophisticated equipment, like what they saw in the United States. This course can only lead to trouble.

The equipment must be able to produce the materials needed. For example, an 11 × 14-inch press cannot produce picture posters. The equipment must be simple enough for a semi-trained operator to handle. Most labor saving accessories are not necessary because manual labor is extremely cheap. Every item must be as rugged and maintenance free as possible. Equipment should be selected that can be maintained locally and, if possible, have a local dealer for spare parts.

3. Often the country cannot finance the information office program. Operating budgets must be kept to an absolute minimum. The information program established must guarantee a good return on the money spent. Budgets are extremely tight in developing countries. For example, the entire government budget (national, state, and local) for Malawi is less than half the yearly budget for the University of Missouri! So, don't create something they cannot afford to carry on.

4. The newly established communications program many times is more suited to the United States than to conditions in a developing country. For example, every agricultural information office in developing countries prints tons of farmer publications each year. Why? Who reads them? I would guess that many of these publications get used like the Sears catalogue in the back house.

A third-generation carbon-copy of our information offices is not good enough for developing countries. They deserve something that is especially designed to fit their needs, not ours. I feel that AAACE members working together can come up with fresh new ideas that will work in developing countries.

### *What Can AAACE Do?*

Most AAACE members are involved in international communications either by teaching foreign trainees or by working overseas. The following suggestions are offered for AAACE members to consider when working on communications projects overseas or training foreign trainees at home:

1. Keep in mind the idea of intermediate technology and the conditions in the developing country.

2. AAACE members working overseas should publish their successes, failures, experiences, and ideas.

3. The International Committee should establish an International Communications Reference Library. The committee should request members with overseas experience to submit plans of work, final reports, training materials, surveys, examples of communications materials, and recommendations for others doing similar jobs overseas. These materials should be made available to anyone who is scheduled to go overseas.

4. The International Committee should hold "media sessions" at national conventions. AAACE members and outsiders should be brought in to give reports, and the reports published.

5. The International Committee should compile a list of organizations (both home and abroad) that work in communications training for developing countries. Copies of their publications, magazines, training program outlines, etc. should be in the International Communications Reference Library.

6. AAACE should encourage foreign assistance agencies (A.I.D., foundations, etc.) to handle more information staff training overseas in the developing country. Where this is not practical, establish overseas regional training centers.

7. AAACE should encourage the sponsoring agencies to stop their established practice of "touring" foreign trainees from one office to another and from seminar to seminar. Place the trainees in one location for in-depth practical experience. AAACE should consider the recommendation of establishing an "International Model Communications Training Center" which is specifically designed to meet the needs of trainees from developing countries.

8. AAACE should investigate the possibilities of creating a pool of international communications experts who would become a semi-permanent overseas staff.

Working overseas in developing countries is like switching from your present media speciality to an entirely new area of communications because the situation is so different. Of course, that is what makes overseas work so interesting and challenging.

Most ideas for information offices in developing countries cannot be found in the "ivy towers" or "communications research institutes" in the United States or any other developed country. Like the Malawi mouse trap, practical ideas for communicating to village people can be found only in the developing country.

Maybe someday, the efforts of AAACE members will result in an article entitled, "A Better Communications Program For Developing Countries is Found."