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Communicating with Consumers

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Abstract

As I understand it, the American Association of Agricultural College Editors is composed of news writers, publication editors, radio and television broadcasters, and visual aids specialists at land grant universities, state agricultural experiment stations, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Communicating with Consumers

ROBERT ROSS

AS I UNDERSTAND IT, the American Association of Agricultural College Editors is composed of news writers, publication editors, radio and television broadcasters, and visual aids specialists at land grant universities, state agricultural experiment stations, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

As I understand it, consumer education and related communication problems are of vital concern to you, as members of this association.

As I understand it, you inherit a long and distinguished tradition of communication concerning agricultural problems and problems centered in rural and farm living and working.

As I understand it, the winds of change have been blowing in your world, and year by year your responsibilities grow and expand to provide new kinds of information to new kinds of audiences—urban audiences, suburban audiences, and, in many ways, new kinds of rural-farm audiences.

If this is a reasonably accurate condensation of reality, then it raises a variety of very interesting and difficult questions, some of which I will try to confront here.

For example, are you really doing work that needs to be done? Are you—slowly but surely—becoming obsolete? Is the velocity of social change so great that your traditional messages are no longer relevant to these troubled times? Will there, one wonders, be a need for an association of agricultural college editors by—1979 say? For it seems clear that the declining trends in farm population are relentless. It seems equally clear that the industrialization, mechanization, and computerization of the American farm will continue to show a strong uptrend. The traditional American farm will soon be a memory. Can we say the same for traditional farm communication? And here's another question: If traditional agricultural communication is, in fact, changing, is,

in fact, adapting to new audiences, urban and suburban, are the changes adequate to the tempo of the times? Are the messages right or wrong? Good or bad? Relevant or irrelevant? Indeed, if changes in communication style **are** needed, what kind of changes are we talking about? What kind of style?

What Are New Audiences?

And what—precisely—is involved in the term "new audiences"? How **do** you communicate effectively with city people? Low-income consumers? City youth? Black people? Working mothers? And isn't the big-business farmer a new audience too?

Before coming to grips with these questions, let me point out that this isn't my specific field. I have almost **no** experience in your work and my views are **not** based on years and years of hard-won practical knowledge.

My field is, of course, communication in its broader sense, and some of the things I think I know may apply to your work. But I'm really not sure and only you can decide—since only you have that hard-won practical knowledge I mentioned. That knowledge and experience is reflected in the examples of your work I've studied in preparation for this assignment.

We asked for a variety of materials and, by actual count, 217 items came in to my office from information offices of seven universities. They consisted of bulletins, circulars, folders, booklets, releases, slides, film, tape recordings . . . you name it.

For a city mouse it was quite an education. I found myself deeply involved in subjects I've never really thought very much about before.

Here's a sample cross-section of some of the printed material:

1. Buying Quality Eggs.
2. A Clean Wash Depends on You!
3. Make Your Own Curtains.
4. How to Buy a Fresh Christmas Tree.
5. Furniture Arrangement.
6. "Cents-Able" Meat and Poultry.
7. What is Life Insurance?
8. Are You a Sharp Shopper?
9. A Will of Your Own.
10. "Hypocrisy of Adults."

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Time prevented me from a careful reading of all 217 items. But I did scan them all and I did read many of them with scrupulous care.

From where I sit, I'd say you've got some problems.

Consider this, keeping in mind that it is **one** sentence: "Standardization of water supplies by the addition of fluoride at the concentration of one part per million has proved to be safe, economical, and an efficient way to reduce the incidence of tooth decay, while the prolonged systemic effects of optimum fluoride consumption in elderly persons has resulted in reduced bone fractures." For the statistically inclined that's 52 words, and I must tell you that I found no exceptions to the rule. From every school came material crawling with monsters like **this** one.

Do people know what "systemic" means? "Optimum?" "Incidence?" Maybe you think the sentence is fine just the way it is. But I'd prefer something like this:

> The day of the big dental bill is just about over. Millions of American kids will go thru life without ever feeling the dentist's drill. A tiny touch of fluoride in our drinking water does it. One part per million is all it takes. It's safe. It's economical. It works. In fact, over a period of time, it helps to strengthen the bones of elderly people.

That's just a little bit longer, by word count, and consists of **eight** sentences. Maybe you think it's not the way to do it, but from my vantage point it's considerably cleaner.

Writing and Design Problems

So I see a problem—a general problem—in writing style.

I see another problem—equally general—in design and graphic standards. In terms of graphic standards, most of the work I reviewed is old-fashioned in its general tone. The art is often amateurish. The layouts convey a sense of 1938. The typography is drab and obvious. Not enough of it is inviting, clear, interesting.

This should be the moment you're about ready to tell me how little I appreciate your many problems. Budgets are low. Time is short. Deadlines clamor for attention, and the people above you are so conservative that anything remotely resembling a fresh idea could give them a stroke or stimulate a legislative investigation.

I'm very sensitive to the fact that I'm not an expert in your field. But if we **are** talking about effective human communication then too much of what you are writing and designing isn't doing the job in my judgment.

Your audience today, all of your audiences, whether rich or poor, young or old, black or white, rural, urban or suburban, male, female, white collar, blue collar are exposed to television and Dustin Hoffman and "The Graduate." They are aware of the foldout pages of *Playboy*. They watch and read about our nation's moon-shot explorations in space. They know about the pill, the Students for a Democratic Society. They know who Stokely Carmichael is and James Farmer and Floyd McKissick and Dick Gregory and they've talked about and thought about Black Power.

I take this long to tell you what I am sure you already know simply to underline—with just a little bit of detail—the implications of effective human communication in this troubled period of our nation's history.

The trusted cliches of the 1930's and the 1940's simply aren't good enough any more. If we insist on holding on to outmoded verities then we must be ready to join the dinosaur. It was big and strong and it disappeared because it could not adapt, it could not change.

Change or Become Obsolete

There is a chance that you, too, will be obsolete by 1979, unless you exert some energy to change. Change what you say, change how you say it, change your target audiences, change in ways I cannot know.

That's all well and good you say—but it **is** 1970 and I **do** have inadequate funds, too few people, too many urgent deadlines, and too many deans and directors, officers who are committed to the verities of the good old days.

To which I make this reply!

You may not have enough money to work with—but you do have some. You may not have enough time to work with—but you do have some. You may have too many deadlines—but if you're not a raw beginner you know what they are and can do **some** planning. You may have too many conservatives sitting in judgment on your work—but maybe you haven't used all the

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arguments or made the best possible case or maybe you've given up too soon.

One simple truth that occurred to me as I went through the 217 items: You probably could reduce the quantity of your annual production by as much as one-third. I think you try to do too much. Much too much.

I can't help wondering if you produce 50 to 75 releases a year because you've **always** produced 50 to 75 releases.

Reducing Output May be Helpful

I can't help wondering if it wouldn't be better to produce 15 or 20 releases a year—each one planned and produced so that it really registered, really communicated, really produced an impact.

I can't help wondering if this doesn't apply with equal force to the barrage of bulletins, the flood of folders, the cascade of circulars, the endless parade of printed material that pours out in a never-ending torrent.

If you simply decide to cut down on quantity—couldn't you spend more money on each job you **did** decide to produce? Couldn't you reach for a higher standard of quality, therefore? Wouldn't you be able to do a better job because you had more time to do a better job?

I think we live in a time when 34 more bulletins on how to shop for mouse milk or 101 new recipes for owl pudding may have outlived their usefulness. Isn't it possible that you need new kinds of messages to confront new kinds of problems?

I have chosen one project to give you a demonstration—a 38-page booklet entitled "Food Stamps are Marvelous."

By any objective standard it compares more than favorably to the majority of work I looked at. The paper stock is of moderately good quality, the cover design is reasonably good, the art elements inside have a certain simple charm, the writing is fairly good. That's the sad thing. The work is moderately good, reasonably good, fairly good. The whole thing hovers on the outer edge of excellence . . . and never quite makes it.

This booklet is a diary. But a very unusual diary. Here's how it came to be written:

> The author, Mrs. Mary ..... was asked by an extension home economics agent to keep a diary of how she used the Federal Food Stamp program to improve her family's nutritional standards.

Inside, Mrs. ---------- says things like this:

> My budget allows $88 a month for food, but by buying Food Stamps, I pay $61 in cash and receive $89 worth of stamps – a bonus of $28.

Salted and peppered throughout the pages you find some wonderfully warm touches:

> I didn't expect in this day and age that kids could get so excited over groceries. But we have a grand time finding places for all the goodies.
>
> I discovered I'd forgotten orange juice on my list. That means another trip to the store. If I can keep my eyes closed 'til I get to the juice section, I won't spend more than we can afford.
>
> For cooking, I use non-fat dry milk. It also makes a very good topping. I'll tell you about this later.
>
> No matter how well I plan my list, it seems there's always something left out. These extra trips to the store threaten the budget.
>
> I find that it is much cheaper to buy an inexpensive roast and cut it up for stew meat. There is no need paying to have meat cut up when I can do it at home.

It seemed to me, as I studied this project, that it was rich in human experience, human feelings, human values. But it was all trapped, frozen in a form that hid its true qualities.

I thought the author had quite a story to tell — so I tried to let her tell it.

> "This is my family.
>
> "This booklet tells you how I used the Federal Food Stamp program for one full month.
>
> "That's three meals a day for a family of five – day by day, meal by meal, for 31 days.
>
> "Total cost: $61 in cash, which bought $89 worth of Federal Food Stamps."

And here's how the story might be told on television, or—somewhat modified—on radio:

> "This is Carla . . . and Steve . . . and Tom . . . and Corrine . . . the ---------- family. My family.
>
> "I'm Mary ---------- – the head of the house since my husband passed away nearly two years ago.
>
> "So . . . we've had to watch our pennies.
>
> "Feeding my family is quite a job, and I've been asked to tell you how the Federal Food Stamp plan has helped us.
>
> "I've put it all down in this little book . . . a diary of how I feed my family . . . three good meals a day for a family of five . . . for 31 days . . . for $88. $88 a **month.** In food stamps.

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"You can send for it. Write to the University of ..... . It's free – and it may help you the way it helped us."

I hope this conveys a more conversational tone, a more informal flavor. Because I believe effective communication ought to talk with people, and not **at** them.

And when you judge your work, why not try these three questions:

Is the message **relevant** to the target audience?

Is the message **appealing** to the target audience?

Is the message **believable** to the target audience?

If you will begin to judge your own work on these three simple guidelines, I think you will begin to edit your own output with greater care.

Creating messages that are relevant, appealing, and believable is not easy. Indeed, it is very very difficult. Yet, when you begin to challenge your own work with these guidelines in mind you, yourself, will begin to change. You will find yourself modifying a phrase, changing a word, revising a picture, rejecting the ordinary in a search for something better.

Communicating More than Transmitting

To create a message that truly communicates calls for more than the simple transmission of information.

If I give you some information the circuit is open. But only when you respond is the communication circuit completed.

This imposes an enormous burden on the way you form your message; the words you use, the design and graphics, the sound, the pace, the style itself. What makes a message relevant? Here you must search for the reward, the benefit, the virtue, the feature that does something for the audience. It might be an ego reward or a social reward or a sensory reward or a rational reward—things like economy or convenience or versatility, for instance. What makes a message appealing? This is a matter of style, flair, ingenuity, imagination. "To be or not to be . . . that is the question." Powerful words that raise profound human questions. Suppose Shakespeare had, instead, written, "To live and exist and survive, or not—that is the problem." The first has the power to touch us, appeal to us. The second does not.

What makes a message believable? To tell the truth is, of

course, obvious. But to tell the truth so that it is **believed** is not quite so obvious—and needs thought and work.

So, if there is a power on your campus, burning with his traditional zeal to publish the new set of Poultry Wisdoms, stop a moment.

See if you can create an issue that can get him a guest shot on a local radio or television interview show. See if you can create a story sharp enough to make the newspapers or newscasts. See if you can create an idea around which you can build a feature story for a magazine.

Our Poultry Pundit wants to publish his traditional set of ancient wisdoms because he doesn't know what **else** to publish. And, as I am trying to say, I don't blame him. I blame you.

I don't say it is easy to find issues and stories and ideas. It isn't. But if you are going to break out of the constraints that force you to produce more and more of the kind of stuff that gets less and less attention, I guess the initiatives are up to you.

I know very few deans and directors, but if they're anything at all like the men I deal with, you'll probably find them reasonably responsive to an invitation to do a guest shot on television.

Once they begin to get the idea that it is your creativity that is producing this exposure, you'll find them considerably more sympathetic to other ideas you bring them. Like spending more on fewer projects, for instance. Like changing things. Like rocking the boat.

I see this as part of the challenge you confront if you are to grow in significance and value in the times to come. It is better, I think, for you to be perplexed by all that I have said . . . so that you ask yourself, "What shall I do?"

For to tell yourself that you can do nothing, that nothing can be changed, that what you did in 1959 is fine for 1969 and fine for 1979 is to walk the remorseless road to obsolescence.

It's a short question. Four words. But in a sense, it's my whole message. What shall I do?

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