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Abstract

This project utilized a network of 300 agricultural specialists, a network of rural radio stations, and an Internet backbone agricultural information archive to develop an innovative new agricultural and rural development communication system for Russia. Experts were encouraged to share their research findings and field recommendations with the project, and in return they received a quarterly packet that included similar recommendations from the other experts. Rural radio stations were given raw scripts or taped program materials via CDs or Internet links for local broadcasting, and in return were asked to send the project copies of local scripts they developed and broadcast. The overall project was coordinated by Moscow State University, but also collaborated with and shared radio script information with the Press Video Center of the Ministry of Agriculture. By the project's fifth year, the Internet site was receiving more than 1 million site visits per month. One innovative aspect of the project was a feedback form placed into each quarterly packet. Responses were received from 30 percent of recipients. Project staff found that recipients were willing to fill out very detailed feedback forms if they perceived that this would influence future materials they would receive.

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How can agricultural communicators identify what information agricultural producers need, and then create a participatory network that provides the information across a country that spans nine time zones? That was the challenge for the Russian Rural Information Network Project. The solution utilized innovative methods for identifying relevant agricultural information

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to meet farmer needs and gathering needed materials, a Web-based backbone archive, and a network of participating local radio stations to both provide and deliver information.

The Russian Rural Information Network Project (RIN) is a project of Russia's Foundation for Agrarian Development Research (FADR, 2003) and Canada's Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (DCFRN, 2003a). It was established in 1998 with the financial support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) to provide information support to agricultural producers through the development of an alternative extension system. The objective of the project was to increase agricultural production and farmers' income by providing access to advanced agricultural practices and knowledge through a network of rural broadcasters (DCFRN, 2001).

Providing needed agricultural information for Russia's agricultural producers and rural communities has been a major issue in Russia since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the adoption of a more market-based approach. The collapse of the government's centralized "command and control" information system has led to a number of efforts to construct an effective agricultural information system (Abbott and Ukhanova, 2000).

Project designers had to overcome a number of major challenges. In 1998, there was no national extension service, and no mechanism for collecting, synthesizing and disseminating relevant agricultural information around the country. As agricultural producers were forced to abandon crops and livestock practices that became unprofitable, pay unsubsidized prices for fertilizer and chemicals, and compete in a global marketplace, they needed a tremendous amount of new information about alternative crops, conservation tillage practices, and new technologies. In addition, communicators were needed who understood the social and cultural situation of agricultural enterprises and rural areas.

The project began by surveying rural audience information needs, and studying the existing information environment, including information sources and dissemination channels. Based upon the survey and study, the following four cornerstones of the project were designed:

1) **Internet Backbone.** Because the project was based at Moscow State University, it had access to a high-speed Internet connection and server capabilities. Although at this time the Internet had not been used extensively in Russia as a backbone for an agricultural communication system, and although few rural agricultural producers had access to the Internet, the decision was made to use the Internet as the base

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to store communication messages. Included on the Internet database were a library of agricultural materials, a catalog of agricultural resources on the Internet, a Web discussion forum and Web agricultural bulletin board, a radio archive and a print publications archive. This made it possible for anyone with Internet access to obtain and utilize project materials. While the Internet could not serve as the primary source of information for producers, it could be used effectively as an archive and as a base for design and delivery of materials through more traditional channels. Internet-based archiving systems and dissemination systems such as RadioSource.net are also being developed by agricultural communicators in the United States.

2) **Specialist Network.** A second project cornerstone was a collaborative approach linking agricultural producers and specialists across a wide spectrum of private and public organizations. FADR had conducted a number of previous projects in Russia that permitted it to identify and collaborate with these information sources. From 61 regions of the country, the project recruited 300 specialists to provide needed locally relevant information. These included 106 local leaders, 63 extension agents, 26 educators, 34 newspaper and magazine journalists, 15 representatives of key agricultural NGOs, and four local administrators. These individuals agreed to provide materials to the project that could be used as the basis for agricultural messages to farmers. This provided the needed locally relevant information about agricultural problems and their solutions. In return, these individuals received a quarterly package that included practical agricultural advice collected from all members of the network, a project newsletter, and an evaluation form. This was a "win-win" situation for the project and its members. The project received a steady supply of expertise from the field providing news of the latest developments and recommendations in these regions. The members received regular reports about what those in other regions were doing and recommending. Given the lack of regular interactions across regions and across different types of organizations (government, private, NGOs, etc.), such interactions were of special importance.

3) **Information-Dissemination System.** A multichannel information-dissemination system was designed emphasizing radio. Although television is nearly universal in Russia, few agricultural programs survived the transition to a market-based television system. In addition, much of the television system in Russia is national in scope, while agriculture has significant regional differences. The radio component of the

project emphasized local stations that can target specific content relevant to farmers in that region as well as news from other regions. Building upon past approaches of the Developing Countries Farm Radio Network (Bennett, 2001; DCFRN, 2003b; Thomas, 2001), RIN, through ACDI/VOCA's Farmer-to-Farmer Program, invited two volunteers (ACE members Eldon Fredericks and Harlan Lynn) to assist the project in developing a radio strategy and learning how to write effective radio scripts. Although RIN project staff had extensive experience as agricultural communicators, they had not utilized such a radio network before this project. In two weeks of intensive training, and with support of the Ministry of Agriculture's Press Video Center, RIN initiated a rural radio program on the central cable "Radio Russia." This program discussed a number of agricultural issues including practical hints on how to grow field crops and farm livestock, taxation and farm ownership, legal issues, land rights, agricultural legislation, and management methods. In addition, these programs and other radio scripts were placed on CDs for distribution to radio stations. Printed copies of scripts were made available to stations that could not use CDs and lacked Internet access. In return, radio stations were asked to send back copies of new scripts about agriculture that they used on their programs so that they could be shared with others. During the project's first five years, 236 scripts were developed that were disseminated in 14 quarterly packages (5,430 packages circulated to network members and nonmembers). In addition, 363 CDs with RIN radio programs were distributed. The project also trained 565 rural communicators at 49 training workshops in the area of modern communication technologies and communication development strategies.

4) **Feedback System.** Participatory projects have been shown to stimulate stakeholder involvement and action in rural development projects (McKee, 2000). During the project, feedback concerning farmer needs, radio station program interests, and ideas of members received special attention. One major tool for gathering feedback was a feedback form included in every quarterly package that asked recipients what kind of information should be provided in the next package. The form also enabled recipients to supply RIN with their own agricultural news/recommendations that could be included in the next package. From all feedback sources, the project received 2,104 feedback messages during its first five years. RIN staff participated in numerous events with agricultural producers, conferences and seminars with educators, agricultural exhibitions and fairs. The objective of this

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participation was to gather "grass-roots" information about how project materials were being used, and where people were finding useful agricultural information. The participation also led to increased involvement. Project evaluators suggested that this feedback, along with the corrections it led to in project implementation, was a crucial factor in making this project the most highly rated of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) agricultural projects in Russia.

Results

Four important lessons for agricultural communicators came from this project.

1) **Backbone.** During the project, use of the RIN Web site increased dramatically. In the beginning, there were 20,000 Web site visits per month. Five years later–in 2002–there were 1 million site visits per month–a tremendous figure when one recognizes the problems of accessing the site from many rural regions of Russia. During the 1998-2002 period, the Internet did diffuse into some rural areas, and the project began receiving emails directly from private farmers. The Internet archival system was also shown to be the cheapest system for storing vast quantities of agricultural materials that are accessible across Russia. Web statistics showed the site was accessed from various parts of Russia, Newly Independent States, and Western countries. Peak demand was 1.5 million site visits in one month, with over 1 gigabite of information downloaded. The current average is 9 MB of information downloaded per month.

2) **Specialist Network.** Visits with project members showed that personal communication both with members and target audiences is very important. It is time-consuming and requires additional preparation and work, but it is beneficial for both members and project management. Personal interactions with private farmers, educators, extensionists, researchers and administrators helped develop a feeling of "ownership" of the project, and increased their involvement in the program. Such close personal relations also helped them provide better advice about how to implement the project.

3) **Information-Dissemination System.** The initial project survey showed that 30 percent of rural residents communicate with each other at least weekly, and all of them communicate with each other on a regular basis. Survey results also showed that 40 percent of agricultural producers say they share the useful information they get with

others, and try to support their neighboring farmers. Project evaluation materials concluded that 1.9 million rural residents across Russia received project materials during the five years of the project. The main channel for receiving this information was radio. In addition to the national agricultural program broadcast done in cooperation with the Ministry's Press Video Center, rural radio stations accessed project materials either through CDs that contained actual recorded messages, or through printed scripts mailed to stations that they read on the air. Station demand for these messages increased when managers discovered there was high audience interest in the material. In addition to radio program materials, additional printed materials, including a project newsletter, were sent to rural areas.

4) **Feedback System.** An effective feedback system was necessary to ensure that messages were relevant, and that they were reaching their intended audiences. In addition to the many personal visits made to farm events and organizations, results demonstrated that the use of the feedback form in the quarterly packages was effective. A total of 30 percent of these were completed and returned. Such feedback was especially important from very rural areas, where formal visits would be very difficult. Results showed that members were willing to fill out very detailed feedback forms. However, to maintain interest and willingness to continue filling out the forms, there had to be evidence that concerns expressed or requests for information led to concrete results. In order to maintain a feedback system, managers must be ready to respond to the requests.

Conclusions

The project clearly demonstrated that a collaborative network sharing expertise about agricultural communication, combined with extensive use of radio, can collect and disseminate information that is of substantial value to agricultural producers. Now that the normal project period has come to an end, the question remains, how can the successes of this project be used to create an overall agricultural communication system for Russia. Other articles in this issue written from multiple levels offer evidence of other innovative approaches that have been taken in the creation of agricultural information and advisory services. They, too, may in some way lead to an improved understanding of how Russia's future agricultural communication system will look. For additional information visit the Russian Rural Information Network Web site at: http://www.fadr.msu.ru/rin.

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