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As the media relations function becomes increasingly important for organizational visibility, accountability, and ultimately survival, it is imperative that effective media communication strategies be employed to develop mutually benef icial relationships with the news media. Based on the conceptual framework of dialogic communication, this study is an investigation of the media relations practices and strategies of agricultural communication professionals in their role as the sources of agricultural information for the news media. Findings from the study indicate differing media relations strategies and relevant themes; however, a notable theme that materialized was the perception of having mutually beneficial relationships with the media that lack regular dialogue. An additional finding of interest was the change in media relations strategy from a passive approach to an active approach; participants suggested that their approaches to working with the media tended to be reactive in nature, but indicated that they have recently developed proactive initiatives in establishing media contact. Overall, the study identified effective media relations practices and provided insight into areas that could benefit from enhanced media relations strategies for agricultural communication academicians and practitioners.

Keywords

Media Relationship Development Strategies, news media, Strategies, enhanced media, conceptual framework

Research

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Introduction

Agricultural communication professionals have a challenging job, in that they are responsible for educating and informing the American public about an industry that is highly complex—technologically and scientifically—increasingly invisible, and progressively more controversial. These communication professionals also play a significant role in communicating agricultural information to the news media in an attempt to reach various—and increasingly diverse—publics. The importance of their role is supported by Reisner and Walter (1994), who suggested that the news media's lack of understanding of agricultural issues and their reliance on sources for agricultural information affects the way agriculture is reported to the public. In addition, Shoemaker and Reese (1991) indicated that "journalists can't include in their news reports what they don't know about" (p. 178), and since today's journalists generally do not possess in-depth knowledge about agriculture, agricultural communication professionals can have a tremendous impact on media content. Therefore, the news media are dependent on the agricultural communication professional for three things: a) accurate, newsworthy agricultural information, b) a translation of that information for a nonagricultural audience, and c) an explanation and understanding of agricultural issues.

Gans (1979) suggested that the shaping of news content starts with the source, and commonly that source is a communication professional. Turk (1985) also claimed that communication professionals, serving as the source of information for the news media, have a considerable amount of influence on the media agenda and, in turn, the public agenda. As such, the agricultural communicator serves as the link between the agricultural industry and the public by disseminating relevant agri-

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cultural information through the news media. This implies the need for a strong, positive working relationship between the sources of agricultural information and the news media in order to have a positive impact on the public's understanding and awareness of agricultural issues.

This study seeks to identify agricultural communicators' role in the dissemination of agricultural information. It is assumed that understanding the media relations perceptions, strategies, and behaviors of this group will provide insight into the process of disseminating agricultural information, as well as facilitate effective media relations behaviors of agricultural communicators.

Theoretical Framework

Existing research suggests that effective media relations can enhance the amount of media coverage devoted to agricultural information (Curtin, 1997; Grunig, 2001; Shin & Cameron, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Turk, 1985). Therefore, a focus on media relations practices may be more important for the agricultural industry today than ever before. Most definitions of media relations refer to the establishment and maintenance of the source-reporter relationship. As a supporting theory, dialogic communication can help to explain that relationship component of effective media relations.

Media relations critics commonly cite monologic communication as a major weakness in media relations activities (Thomlison, 1990). Monologic communication takes a one-way transmission approach to communication with the media. Communication that is monologic typically involves manipulation, coercion, exploitation, and control (Thomlison). In consideration of many traditional media relations efforts, it is apparent that they consist of one-way communication efforts: sending press releases, developing fact sheets, and holding press conferences. Botan (1997) agreed that the model of media relations primarily used by communication professionals is monologic and blamed this one-way communication on the inherent lack of relationship building with media publics.

In accounting for some of the criticisms of media relations efforts, researchers have identified a relational or dialogic theory of communication that emphasizes relationship building as the central responsibility of media relations activities (Taylor, Kent, & White, 2001). Dialogic communication specifically "refers to a particular type of relational interaction—one in which a relationship exists" (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 323). It is considered a dialogue that involves an effort to recognize and appreciate the value of the other in the relationship; to view the other in the relationship "as an end and not merely as a means to achieving a desired goal" (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 22). In its basic form, dialogic communication facilitates communication in which each participant is concerned for the other party in the communication process. In fact, Kent and Taylor (2002) suggested that "dialogue is not a process or a series of steps," but instead it is "a product of ongoing communication and relationships" (p. 24). Further, Anderson, Cissna, and Arnett explained (1994) that, "Dialogue is a dimension of communication quality that keeps communicators more focused on mutuality and relationship than on self-interest, more concerned with discovering than disclosing, more interest in access than in domination" (p. 2).

Kent and Taylor (2002) offered several ways that dialogue can be achieved in media relations, two of those being interpersonal and mediated efforts. Building dialogic interpersonal relationships can occur only if the organizational member who communicates with the media is comfortable in engaging in dialogue. Skills necessary for dialogue to occur through interpersonal relationships include listening; empathy; ability to conceptualize issues within local, national, and international frameworks; ability to identify common ground between parties; emphasis on long-term rather than short-term objectives; interest in individuals with opposing viewpoints; and solicitation of a variety

of internal and external opinions on policy issues. Mediated efforts toward dialogic relationships can reinforce an organization's commitment to dialogue and foster more interaction between communicating parties. Establishing mediated dialogic relationships means "placing e-mail, Web addresses, 800 telephone numbers, and organizational addresses prominently in advertisements, or organizational literature and on all correspondence" (Kent & Taylor, p. 31). In addition, Kent (2001) proposed that out of all the mediated communication tools available in the media relations toolbox, the Web comes closest to the interpersonal ideal. By using the Web, practitioners can build the mediated dialogic relationships that are so favorable to effective relationship building and media relations.

Research Focus

Based on the literature presented, the following research question provided the foundation for the present study: How do agricultural communication professionals approach the source-reporter relationship? The following questions provided specific direction for the present inquiry: a) How do communication professionals perceive the importance and value of media relations?, b) What constitutes effective media relations strategies in agricultural media relations?, and c) What strategies do agricultural communication professionals use to establish and maintain effective relationships with the media?

Methods

Approached from a qualitative research design, this study attempts to describe the media relations behaviors and experiences of agricultural communication professionals. Through in-depth interviews and online asynchronous focus groups, communication professionals from the United States agricultural industry provided insight into working with the news media.

Qualitative methods have been cited as being useful for studying phenomena for which little previous research is available and when the purpose of the research is exploratory and descriptive (Broom & Dozier, 1990; Lindlof, 1995; Marshall & Rossman, 1995; McCracken, 1988). The qualitative approach to data collection enables the researcher to examine agricultural communication professionals' experiences and behaviors regarding specific areas of media relations from their personal frames of reference, therefore allowing the researcher to gain insight into and rich description of the media relations environment of agricultural communication professionals (Johnson, 1997).

Chain referral, a purposive sampling technique, was employed to identify and select participants who met the participant criteria for both interview and focus group data collection. Initial interview participants were selected based on a) their familiarity to the researcher, b) their level of media relations experience, and c) the type of organization in which they worked. The researcher thought it was particularly important to choose participants who had extensive experience in media relations (5 or more years) in order to gather accurate, information-rich data that accurately described the culture of agricultural communication professionals. Furthermore, because the researcher was interested in exploring all facets of the agricultural industry, it was important that the participants represent institutions as well as corporate and government entities.

At the completion of each interview, participants were asked to refer agricultural communication professionals whom they viewed as adept in media relations and who could make significant contributions to the study. A list of potential participants was compiled from these referrals, reviewed for overlap, and revised. The referral list, which included 43 agricultural communication professionals, was used to recruit online focus group participants.

Two data collection methods were used to achieve the purpose of the present study: interviews

and online focus groups. Twelve semistructured interviews were conducted over the telephone and tape-recorded for transcription. The length of the interviews varied from 30 to 55 minutes. The researcher opened and guided the discussion through a semistructured process, hoping to achieve a balance between formality and informality (McCracken, 1988). Prior to the interviews, a panel of experts from academic and industry organizations reviewed the interview guide. In addition, the interview guide was pilot tested with a representative sample similar to the study's participant sample. The interview guide was revised according to expert suggestions and observations made from the pilot interview. In conducting the interviews, the researcher scheduled at least 1 day between interviews (with the exception of three interviews), allowing transcription of each interview before proceeding to the next interview (Lindlof, 1995; Morgan, 1997).

Following the interviews, three online focus groups were conducted with an additional 22 agricultural communication professionals during the months of May and June, 2005. The online focus groups were conducted utilizing asynchronous discussion group software in an attempt to create meaningful interactions between participants. By conducting online focus groups, the researcher had the ability to extract information that could not be obtained through the one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1997). The focus groups were considered a follow-up method, providing elaboration and clarification for the interview data collected.

The three online focus groups each ranged in size between 3 and 10 homogenous participants. The number and size of focus groups fell within Mann and Stewart's (2000) suggestions for online focus groups. As is common with traditional focus groups and often applied in the virtual world, the researcher over-recruited participants by 20% in anticipation of no-shows (Morgan, 1997). Prior to the online focus group discussion, participants were separated into categories by the organization they represented. Separating the participants based on the sector of agriculture in which they work was believed to create and sustain a healthy conversation as well as a comfortable and cooperative virtual environment (Morgan). Each online focus group was designed to serve as a discussion forum for the three different communities of agricultural communication professionals.

Focus groups were conducted consecutively, each lasting 14 days. According to Mann and Stewart (2000), a question schedule can be transmitted to participants in a variety of ways. The present study combined two suggested approaches by posting all questions at the outset of the study but allowing participants to access the questions over a 2-week period in which reminder e-mails were sent to participants at 3-day intervals. The researcher anticipated that this approach would allow participants enough time to contribute to the discussion at times convenient to them. Sending out reminder e-mails was intended to encourage in-depth responses to all questions posted and to keep participants interested throughout the duration of the research. Throughout the structured discussion, the moderator responded to messages, probed for more information when necessary, and posed new questions based on the discussion.

To initiate the analysis process, interview data were transcribed and focus group data were formatted so the researcher was able to analyze full transcripts of all data collected. Because the researcher was able to save and store the text from the online discussions, transcription of the focus group data was not necessary and records from the online interaction were used as transcripts. After the transcripts were compared with field notes and informal analysis techniques were completed, the data were analyzed using the inductive data analysis method outlined by Hatch (2002), which includes searching for "patterns of meaning in data so that general statements about phenomena under investigation can be made" (p. 161). Specifically, the inductive analysis methods utilized followed the sequential steps: a) read data and identify frames of analysis, b) create domains based on semantic

relationships discovered within frames of analysis, c) identify salient domains and assign them a code, d) refine salient domains and keep record of emerging relationships, e) decide if domains are supported by data, f) complete analysis within domains, g) search for themes across domains, h) outline relationships within and among domains, and i) select data excerpts to support the relationships (Hatch).

Results

Interviews were conducted with 12 agricultural communication professionals. The demographic characteristics of the interview participants were as follows: 5 participants were male and 7 were female; 4 represented university agricultural communications, 2 represented government agricultural communications, and 6 represented industry agricultural communications. The media relations responsibilities of the participants varied from 10% to 85% of the participants' job responsibilities, with the average being 44%. The number of years working with the media ranged from 4 to 36 years, with the average being 20 years in the agricultural communication field. Job titles held by participants varied from public affairs specialist, press secretary, and director of public opinion management to marketing director and public relations coordinator. From the three focus groups conducted, little demographic information was obtained from the 22 focus participants due to the confidential nature of the online focus group environment. The following results are presented using pseudonyms selected by both the interview and focus group participants.

Theme #1: Value of Media Relations

Literature suggests that people are more inclined to participate in a specific behavior if they expect a certain value to result from the behavior (Fishbein, 1967; Lazarsfeld & Stanton, 1944). Therefore, in exploring the role of agricultural communication professionals in communicating agricultural information to the news media, the present study investigated the perceived value of media relations for this group of professional communicators. As a result, many participants indicated that there is a tendency among industry professionals to avoid media attention. For example, KF corroborated this assumption by saying, "There are a lot of people in this business that tend to shy away from doing press. There is a nervousness, you know, a fear, about saying too much is going to get more negative press." Furthermore, JH referred to this evasion of media work in saying, "I think the biggest challenge for me is doing a better job selling them on what media relations can do for them." Based on these responses, understanding the perceived value of media relations may help explain this evasion of the news media.

Participants mentioned several valuable aspects of media relations; however, the financial support and third-party endorsement that result from media relations efforts were perceived as the most valuable outcomes. Although these findings do not present new information, they do show a dichotomy in the agricultural communications profession. Interestingly, the value of media relations was different for governmental and university agricultural communication professionals than it was for industry agricultural communication professionals. Governmental and university agricultural communication professionals perceived the value of media relations to be the financial support gained, while industry agricultural communication professionals perceived the value of media relations to be the third-party endorsement.

Almost all participants representing government and institution entities mentioned financial or monetary support as the true value of media relations. Many participants implied that media coverage garnered from good media relations is like a free lunch…or at least a "relatively low cost" lunch.

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As LM said, "Effective and measurably successful media relations helps to ensure that our funding lines continue." Furthermore, SS suggested,

> You can't run an organization and expect to get any kind of financial support, public support without the public knowing who you are and what you do. So without media relations efforts, without having your name in print, without having some of your key people looked upon as valuable sources for the media, you are not going to achieve public awareness…then your financial future is also dismal.

As another testimonial to this concept that media relations is the beginning of a process that results in financial support, KP asserted, "Many stories have been shared with us by Extension specialists and Experiment Station scientists who note that their efforts were funded/increased after receiving media attention." Confirming this connection, VM explained the value of media relations for her organization:

> It [media relations] keeps us in the public eye. It helps us fulfill our mission of providing objective information that benefits our citizens. Earned media is extremely valuable—you can't buy the stuff. I have faculty who credit news coverage with boosting their grants, helping them find partners for projects or commercialization opportunities.

All of these statements exemplify the finding that financial support was seen as most valuable by institution and government agricultural communication professionals. Based on this finding, one could assume that agricultural communication professionals from academic institutions and government agencies may have more motivation to work with the media simply because the dollars that fund their jobs depend on it.

For agricultural communication professionals working in industry positions, the earned attention and support that the media provide were seen as the most valuable aspects of media relations efforts. Not only was the value of media relations mentioned as reinforcement for messages that are communicated, but credibility was also recurrently associated with the third-party endorsement concept for participants. MA contends that the value of media relations is the "unique value of its credibility":

> If you write a good piece about your company's product or their position on some issue, that will be more credible when your audience reads it than any advertisement or any direct mail or anything that they could use to communicate to that audience or customer. I mean, there are other things that media relations is valuable for, but that is the unique thing that other modes of communication do not possess.

The third-party endorsement that the media provide for organizations may be more valuable to the agricultural communication professionals working in industry because business and corporations are not necessarily trusted sources of information. Literature supports the notion that the media choose government sources and university sources because they are perceived to be more trusted and credible sources for the reader or listener (Sood, Stockdale, & Rogers, 1987). Therefore, media endorsement may prove most valuable when an organization lacks the trust or credibility that government and university sources inherently possess. JN summarized the affirmation value of the media by saying,

> I think it's [media relations] a good third-party confirmation that the products and services you offer are of value to the reader, to the listener, to the ultimate consumer. Oftentimes, information that is generated from a company in and of itself alone is not seen as credible as, say, a third-party reporter including it in a story would be.

Although not revolutionary, this concept of the media providing a third-party endorsement as the motivating factor behind practicing media relations has not been widely documented in previous

studies or literature (Bland, Theaker, & Wragg, 2000; Schenkler &Herrling, 2004).

Whether the value of media relations is to secure financial support, place your organization in the public eye, combat negative perceptions or coverage, or acquire third- party affirmation, the true value of media relations efforts is immeasurable. As participants said, without media relations efforts, "survival is difficult if not impossible."

Theme #2: Source-Reporter Relationships

As mentioned in the literature, media relations efforts should be grounded in establishing and maintaining relationships between communication professionals and their various publics, which for the present study is the media. A clear divide between participants surfaced from the interview and focus group data collected. There was a philosophical point of view that separated those professionals who worked as broadcasters and reporters before assuming their current positions and those who did not. Interestingly, all participants mentioned building relationships with the news media somewhere in their responses; however, this divide revealed that some participants gave false piety to relationship-building efforts with the news media.

Participants could be distinguished based on their philosophical view of how to establish and foster a relationship with the news media. At some point throughout the discussions, all participants revealed that building strong relationships is the characterizing trait of effective media relations. However, further investigation indicated that some of the perceived relationships were not as strong as initially revealed. Participants who possessed a journalistic background shared that a true relationship with the news media means contacting them frequently to keep in touch, taking them out to lunch, getting together over a drink, or sponsoring sessions at media conferences. Those participants who had not worked in journalism throughout their careers suggested that less contact with the media is better, so as to not "bother" them.

Describing the approach to the source-reporter relationship that is truly dialogic and not widely represented in the findings, JW shared,

> For the vast majority of my relationships, it is mutually beneficial because I do think obviously the media does provide a service that we need, but I also think we provide a key service to them as a resource for information and for story ideas getting and confirming data. You occasionally have those media relationships that are a little more challenging, but I would also say that those are definitely few and far between.

Although participants mentioned this mutually beneficial relationship with the news media, few actually demonstrated a dialogic approach in their relationship strategies. One participant who mentioned the lack of dialogue currently taking place in the industry was KF:

> Well, I definitely take a different stance than people who work in my fellow industry organizations. I have actually been trying to get them to do more of what I do thinking that it would be helpful for them. I host happy hours for the press, I truly do have friendships with some of the people that cover us. I really try to create friendships with those members of the press—I know my relationship building is sharing personal information with them and a drink every now and then. I mean, how do you truly build a relationship over the phone or e-mail simply talking about working issues?

She followed by saying that every communication professional has to know what reporters like: "When I was a reporter, I liked people to feed me . . . number one." Working as a reporter, as exemplified by KF, seemed to play a significant role in the relationship-building strategies practiced by agricultural communication professionals.

Similarly, MD, whose "entire staff worked in secular media" at one point, suggested,

> We know what reporters want, understand their deadlines, and give them things we wanted from such organizations when we were reporters . . . including regular lunches and dinners. We also call them up (on Mondays, slow news days) and drop story ideas in their laps.

Conducting comparable media relations, MH "goes out to lunch with them [reporters] to find out more of what they are looking for." In addition, she calls them frequently to chat, to ask for feedback on media events, and to give them feedback about their material. Some participants still demonstrated this frequent contact and dialogue with the media despite their disinclination to actually wine and dine news media members. As DL explained,

> My staff members and I have all been members of the news media, so we always try to put ourselves in their shoes. We make media visits and participate in local, state, and national media organizations to strengthen our relationships. We are in regular contact by phone, e-mail, and personal meetings.

"To establish relationships, I find out who they are and keep feeding them story ideas [and] offering experts for things I know they are working on," KP said. She explained that it is "imperative that you know what it is like to have been a reporter." It is this experience that KP credited to her strong relationships. "It's a caring relationship . . . caring about their jobs, and caring about them as people who are often under a great deal of stress to get good, accurate stories." This philosophy of frequent interaction and personal relationship development with the news media represents that concept of dialogue that has been cited as essential in practicing dialogic communication; it is dialogue, no matter what shape and form (lunches, drinks, weekend picnics, phone calls, conferences), that is required for a true source-reporter relationship. SS said,

> The greater the dialogue between reporters and PR staffers, the more open the relationship will be and the more likely these reporters will be to call you, since they know they're going to get something of value rather than spin.

> In opposition, and equally as vocal, several participants communicated their

philosophical views of the source-reporter relationship as being the "do not bother" approach. JN articulated his approach as such:

> We don't bother them a lot; I mean, we are not constantly on the phone with them haranguing then about things. We just pick up the phone once in a while when we think we've got something that they may be interested in.

> MA agreed, stating, "I mean, you never call a reporter just to chat. They are way too busy."

"We try not to bother these people because they are busy," JN said. "We don't call them and talk to them unless we think that we have something specific that they would be interested in."

Although these participants approach the source-reporter relationship using different strategies, they still perceive their strategies to be relationship-building efforts. VM pointed out:

> I try to stay in touch with reporters, but I do not pester them. I contact them only when I have an idea or useful information. . . . They get our news releases mostly electronically. Additionally, I e-mail them and phone them; not much time for face-to-face chats on their part or mine.

There is a clear differentiation of approaches to the source-reporter relationship within the media relations strategies of participants. The data do not reveal which approach is more effective; however, this limited interaction approach to the source-reporter relationship practiced by many of the participants lacks a number of the characteristics of the dialogic approach.

Theme #3: Pitching Strategies

The third theme that emerged from the data was related to the information dissemination strategies of agricultural communication professionals, which appear to be changing from a passive media relations strategy to a more active media relations strategy. As with any transition or change, there are champions and there are laggards; some who initiate the change and some who struggle or even refuse to change (Burke, 2002; Rogers, 1995). Nonetheless, it is change that agricultural communication professionals are currently experiencing with regard to their information dissemination strategies.

SS explained this transition in information dissemination strategies:

The old way of doing business was passive. I think that this has changed a lot—but the old way was to send out a whole lot of press releases, kind of with the hopes that somebody will pick something up. I think today we've realized that your job is not really done until a story is placed; writing a press release is not the end of the job. But I think more work needs to be done in that area. I think that we need to spend more time providing media and targeted media with the information that they need in the way that they need it.

It is the targeted media strategy SS described that provides the foundation for this change. Without doubt, there are agricultural communication professionals leading this change, including DF, who explained, "We try to match the message with the medium and tailor it for a particular outlet whenever possible. If we have a story with strong visual elements, we target appropriate media: television and print photographers interested in the topic." JW sends out information based on a subject matter and timing strategy, targeting the media that are most appropriate based on the subject matter and the immediacy, while JH considers geographic reach in addition to subject matter and timing. MH described her change in strategy from passive to active this way:

I guess we do a better job today in many ways than we did back then. I think we are a lot more aggressive in identifying reporters' targets and sending out information. Back then, it was just like the shotgun approach—sending things out and hoping somebody got it. Then we were encouraged to find out who the reporters were—the exact reporter we wanted to target, get to know the reporter, find out things that the reporter had done . . . that type of thing.

LS experienced a similar passive-to-active transition in her organization's strategies:

When I first got here, we were very passive. I mean, we sent out a very big press packet to about 600 different outlets, and it had anything in it from ag news to environmental to family and consumer sciences, 4-H, you name it; anything we did, we sent out and everybody got everything. One of things that we do now is target our approach and send out information based on its relevancy to each media outlet that we work with.

Although a targeted approach to information dissemination is not an innovative concept to media relations, the majority of participants were not implementing a targeted approach in their media relations strategies. The opposite of a targeted media strategy is nontargeted strategy, referred to as the "scatter plot approach" by DF:

One of the things that I've run into and believe some other communicators get caught in, is that if you take the scatter plot approach and send everything to all media outlets, after a while they think that most of it is not relevant to them and they begin to not even read your stuff. That is why it is so important to target and focus in on what is going to be of interest to them, and you have a much higher success rate if you can hit the target.

Unexpectedly, many participants insinuated, without hesitation, that the scatter plot approach was their media strategy. As JN shared, "We send all information to everyone. I will say that we

provide it [information] to everyone, but in doing follow-up, we are more in-depth." Or as RR suggested, "We have two mailing lists here. It goes out to main trade or main trade and the agriculture media lists. . . . We don't segment our stories." For FP, if the story is "big enough for television, it usually goes to everybody; it goes to all radio, TV, and newspaper outlets that we work with." Finally, HY's media strategy epitomizes the scatter plot approach: "In deciding what media outlet to use . . . for the most part, we don't decide. We let them decide. We pitch our news to all media and subscribe them to our services."

There are numerous repercussions associated with the "scatter plot" approach, aside from the obvious inattention to the widely held standards and expectations of media representatives. In fact, DF explained one of these repercussions:

> Oh, they [reporters] can be really quick with that delete key, trust me. They used to at least have to open the envelope when it was mailed, but now they can see it is from a certain organization and say, 'Oh, not again' . . . delete. So if you keep it relevant, you have a much better chance of getting it through.

Specific reasons for their choice in information dissemination strategies were not given by agricultural communication professionals; however, a few participants implied that the targeted media strategy was "time consuming" and "challenging," which could explain BB's reasoning of why agriculture "organizations are somewhere in the middle of the cultural change" of transitioning from widely distributed information to targeted, tailored communication efforts.

Theme #4: Cultural Change

Throughout the interview and focus group discussions, participants recurrently made references and recommendations regarding the future of agricultural media relations. Most of these suggestions could be classified into three focus areas for agricultural communication professionals and the agricultural industry in general: change in media mindset, cohesive efforts, and communicator strategies. In analyzing these three areas of focus, media mindset and cohesive efforts appear to be changes to cultural norms and values, while communicator strategies is simply completing the slow transition already taking place in agricultural media relations. However, from the suggestions made for the future of agricultural media relations, the need to improve strategies for communicating with the mass media is most relevant for the focus of this research paper. These improved strategies included everything from building stronger relationships with the consumer media to making information relevant to the end user.

The suggestions and recommendations of the participants indicate that there is not a single solution for the trials and tribulations that the agricultural communication profession is currently experiencing with regard to media relations. However, they do reveal room for improvement, as well as some direction in making that improvement.

Conclusion

Although this study revealed many relevant findings to the research question under investigation, the most significant finding was the lack of authentic dialogic relationships taking place between the sources of agricultural information and the news media, although agricultural communication professionals perceive that the relationship exists. Many participants referred to establishing relationships but followed by indicating they strive for the least amount of dialogue with the reporter so as to not "bother" the reporter. There were, however, participants who fostered a strong dialogue with the reporters and viewed the relationship as a caring, mutually beneficial, trusting relationship and

clearly typified this view in their communication strategies.

In the examination of the source-reporter relationship between agricultural communication professionals and news media representatives, participants presented two different philosophical viewpoints. The first viewpoint included those participants who worked as broadcasters and reporters before assuming their current positions. Their view of the source-reporter relationship was representative of the theory of dialogic communication. Alternatively, the other participants, most of whom had not worked in the news media, claimed that they would "never bother the news media by calling them just to chat." Even though these participants also referred to having a relationship with members of the news media, their actions revealed that a focus on a true dialogic relationship was absent from their media relations strategies.

This finding implies that agricultural communication professionals do not identify with true dialogic relationships, nor do they fully understand how to establish and foster the dialogic relationships that prove to be most effective in media relations. Again, the lack of dialogic relationships between sources of agricultural information and news media representatives provides yet another plausible explanation for the lack of agricultural coverage in the news media today. In support of this assumption, Soloski (1989) found that reporters believed their closeness with a source affected the way they wrote their stories and how the source was treated in the text. Further, Gieber and Johnson (1961) noted that some reporters admitted they sometimes wrote for their sources rather than their editors or audience. Herein lies the importance of a true dialogic relationship with the news media that many participants in the present study lacked; clearly, the strength of the source-reporter relationship can impact reporters' coverage of a story.

Closely associated to the findings that portrayed the concept of dialogic communication was the dichotomy in the media relations strategies of agricultural communication professionals. There was not a clear divide among participants inherent in this finding; yet, participants noticeably differed in their information dissemination strategies. When supplying information to the news media, many participants described their approach as "targeted," meaning that they send information only to the medium considered most important in reaching the target audience. The alternative approach to information dissemination was referred to as the "scatter plot" approach, which is best characterized as a mass e-mail strategy, meaning that information is sent to every media outlet that is listed in a database with the hopes that someone will be interested in the story.

Participants noted that these differences in information dissemination strategies illustrate the move from passive media relations to more active media relations. Prior research suggests that those communicators implementing a "scatter plot" approach in their media relations strategies are alienating members of the news media by inundating them with irrelevant information, potentially causing irreparable damage to the credibility of their role as the source of agricultural information. Furthermore, literature supports that targeted media efforts are more effective than the mass distribution of information (Bland et al., 2000; Caywood, 1997; Howard & Mathews, 2000). While it is reassuring to know that some of the participants have implemented a targeted approach to their information dissemination, it is important that all agricultural communication professionals become more selective in their information dissemination strategies.

It is important to note, however, that responses revealed that participants were not necessarily ignorant to effective media relations strategies (i.e., developing dialogic relationships and targeting approaches to information dissemination). Instead, participants implied that the effort and time required of these effective strategies were either not in their capacity or were not seen as worthwhile in comparison to the extra effort. From the researcher's point of view, it would have been more en-

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couraging if participants were unfamiliar with strategies for effective media relations rather than just being apathetic to them. This finding insinuates that moving from a traditional passive practice of media relations to a more contemporary active practice of media relations may be more challenging and take more time to adopt within this culture of communicators because of preconceived attitudes.

Finally, an encouraging finding was that the majority of participants alluded to necessary changes that need to take place to successfully survive as continued sources of agricultural information for the news media. Exposed in these suggestions is an abstract plan for making changes in the agricultural media relations environment.

Implications for Research and Practice

Dialogic communication provides a substantial area for future media relations research. For example, future research on the theory of dialogic communication should assess the perceptions of the dialogic aspects of different communication tools used by communication professionals in working with the news media. In the present study, many participants believed they were establishing relationships with the news media; however, the communication tools and media relations strategies implemented by participants provided contrary evidence. The first step in moving the practice of media relations in agriculture from a monologic approach to a dialogic approach would be to uncover the knowledge and perceptions agricultural communication professionals have about dialogic communication tools to further explore the discrepancy that currently exists between perception and practice.

Another area for future research into the theory of dialogic communication is to determine the approach to the source-reporter relationship that is preferred by the members of the news media. Further investigation into the dichotomy between those professionals with a journalistic background and those without would provide verification of the observation that these two professionals approach the source-reporter relationship differently. Additionally, including an investigation into the news media's preferred approach—personal relationship or business relationship—to the source-reporter relationship may help to repudiate one of these assumed approaches offered by participants.

Based on the results of this study, there is great potential for improvement in the media relations work of agricultural communication professionals. However, it is important to consider the differences present in this culture of communicators when discussing or applying these results to future research or practice. Clearly, the assumption going into the study that this was a coherent culture with shared media relations norms is not completely accurate. Even different organizations within the same industry drastically differ; therefore, viewing this group of communicators as a single culture may not prove fruitful in future efforts. Instead, viewing this group of communicators as communication professionals communicating about different aspects of the same industry is more appropriate. Even so, all agricultural communication professionals can benefit from this research in that it provides an indication of where the profession currently resides in media relations and a clear direction for where it needs to go.

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