

Care and Weeding of International Agricultural Communications

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Abstract

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Care and Weeding of International Agricultural Communications

Allan Deutsch and Christie Anderson

Eight years ago a gleam in the eye of an Oregon State University agronomist found life when the University established the International Plant Protection Center (IPPC). The idea was visionary: create a center of excellence for all disciplines related to crop (plant) protection. However, unforeseen problems intervened, restricting the effort to a small group carrying out an international program solely focused on weed research and technology.

One of the major objectives envisioned for IPPC centered on obtaining and disseminating relevant weed-related information to recipients in the world's developing countries. IPPC was charged with a pivotal role through providing information, either from its own resources or—more often—from numerous sources the Center contacted. Service was to be the key descriptor.

At this juncture there logically should be reference to development of a carefully thought out plan for an effective information program that would be, as they say in certain circles, implemented. That type of fantasy is reserved for report writing. In reality, IPPC's information program evolved into four basic elements with only a rough idea of direction plus the aforementioned general service concept. The four are about as unique as dirt. That's probably one reason why they've been well received.

That gleaming-eyed agronomist courting visions of a worldwide information network got in the first lick: "Start a newsletter," he said, and the IPPC Infoletter was born. The newsletter was designed to be a multi-panel, self-mailer. Its first issue rolled off the press with two panels reversed so that it had to be read from inside to outside. Not an auspicious start.

Besides a newsletter, IPPC embarked on publication and distribution of technical publications, much later organized a reprint series, and lastly established a specialized library or repository of technical information related to weed technology.

Underlying the need to physically shape the information program there lurked some philosophical questions. For instance, how could the language challenge of reaching a worldwide readership be resolved? How technical should material be when directed toward a diverse audience including both internationally prominent authorities with all sorts of degrees floating before and after their names and non-degreed technical folk who like their information in two-syllable words and short sentences? How could a miniscule staff cope with the logistics of periodic mass mailings while avoiding the impersonality of the computer? Again, the resolution of these and other problems evolved piece-meal.

The matter of language—which, and at what level of sophistication—bore most directly on Infoletter, but inevitably influenced every aspect of the communications program. It would have been attractive to publish Infoletter in, say Spanish and French editions as well as English. Early on IPPC had to reconcile itself to the obvious. A small, English-speaking staff with limited financial resources simply couldn't hope to emulate FAO or some other multi-national behemoth. English would be the basic language with a occasional Spanish or French item included as feasible.

The approach seems to have been fairly effective as many people around the world who may not feel comfortable attempting to speak other than their mother tongue manage to extract the information they need from communications printed in English.

There was ample justification for launching a newsletter. Repeated oral and written communications corroborated that technical information sources tended to be scanty at best in many less developed countries, leaving research workers, educators, and others with a sense of being “cut off” or “out of touch” with current developments in weed technology (in this case). Infoletter took aim on this syndrome by attempting to establish a current communication link that would keep a chunk of the world weed research community in touch with today.

Editorial content was consciously slanted toward hitting as many items of interest as possible with brief blurbs and avoiding in-depth treatment. Whenever possible, a contact name and full address was provided so that readers could self-select items of interest to pursue for further details.

The tone of editorial content aimed for a rather indefinable mid-ground in terms of technical jargon and multi-syllable oration. That seems to have neither insulted the highly educated professionals nor overwhelmed the novices.

After the initial fiasco of misplaced panels, Infoletter's format began to assume a functional shape. The guiding credo was that effort expended on design and layout to avoid the all-too-prevalent dull newsletter would help the information to be received. (Recall that the theory of communicating rests on the sending *and* receiving of a message.) Paperstock was selected on the basis of being an attractive and distinctive color yielding good ink holdout and having sufficient body to serve as a self-mailer. The press

Deutsch and Anderson: Care and Weeding of International Agricultural Communications available to IPPC imposed limits on the size of Infoletter. Using a larger press would have increased both printing costs and lead time.

Unfolded blank sheets were mass pre-printed with a second color (masthead, return address, and indicia) then stored and used as needed for each issue. A small number of white sheets was included in the first pre-print run to be used as dummy layout forms.

IPPC staff edits, lays-out, and distributes Infoletter five times a year, while the OSU printing department handles typesetting, stripping, offset printing, and folding. Art work is either generated in-house or provided by outside sources (read: swiped).

An initial contact list of 100 names scraped together by IPPC staff in the early days has grown into a mailing list of over 4,000 recipients scattered among some 120 nations and territories. Participant lists from national and international weed-related symposia and conferences have been polled using a generalized form letter and a sample copy of Infoletter. Those responding affirmatively were added to the mailing list, as were the many unsolicited "word of mouth" requests.

Several years of operation inevitably lead to deadwood on the mailing list and the inevitable pruning and purging. IPPC has used a form letter carrying the recipient's address label on a tear-off-and-return portion. Recipients thus could acknowledge a desire to continue receiving Infoletter, could change or correct their listed addresses, or could ignore the message and quietly drop off the list.

Mailing labels for each Infoletter issue were typed individually when the newsletter began. Of course, that method was dropped like a hot potato as the number of recipients escalated. The semi-automated system adopted involves using sheets of self-adhesive labels for a master list and photocopying these onto other sheets of labels which are then used for each mailing.

Flexibility and direct control characterize the system. Labels can be removed or changed readily right up to the hour of mailing. The label itself can be typed (once) on any typewriter thus eliminating reliance on a computer driven chain printer which, at OSU, offered only upper case letters. Mixed upper and lower case letters produce a more readable label and IPPC needs all the help it can get for insuring delivery by surface mail to distant locations. The self-adhesive label, being more tenacious than a glued label, is advantageous for remaining affixed during three to six months in a mail sack subjected to every imaginable abusive climate and handling torture.

IPPC maintains its master (label) list by country and alphabetically within country. A second file contains all recipients in alphabetical order. The combined files provide a useful resource for IPPC staff and a method for keeping recipients from getting lost or being duplicated. A system for alphabetizing names—deciding on which name or element would be the basis—had to be adopted and rigorously adhered to.

IPPC absorbs all costs for Infoletter through a contract with the U.S. Agency for International Development. A free newsletter has advantages as any cost immediately places a publication beyond reach for a multitude of recipients in less developed countries, Infoletter's precise target audience. The possible negative aspect of being gratis involves requestors with marginal interest asking to be placed on the mailing list. But Infoletter is not a commercial venture faced with having to show a certain percentage of return. Early on IPPC leadership opted for leaning over backwards to include all who might wish to receive Infoletter, no matter how limited their involvement with weed control technology.

Technical publications related to weed science and supported by IPPC have been produced abroad as well as in Oregon, but primarily distributed from Oregon. That put IPPC in the bookselling business with an out-of-the-ordinary wrinkle or two. The Center established a policy for providing free copies of publications to governmental, educational, or other non-commercial requestors in developing countries. Other requestors were charged a nominal fee. The funds generated were returned to a publications account to underwrite future titles.

The obvious difficulty surfaced immediately. Who did, or did not, qualify for free copies? Again, a profit-oriented venture would not have had the latitude nor the service orientation, probably, that IPPC does. The solution for deciding on gratis copy eligibility developed through use of an order form that allows the requestor himself to make the decision between paying or not. Rarely does IPPC quibble with the decision. The honor system still has merit.

It was necessary to develop a total book handling and distribution system replete with accounts, invoices, overdue payment letters, wrapping and mailing facilities, plus a running inventory. The system has the capability to efficiently handle the hundreds of orders IPPC receives (over 1,000 in 1976), but only if operated by motivated, interested personnel. The Center strives for prompt turn around and usually manages to process and ship orders within two days of receipt. Recipients seem to appreciate that service.

A more recent facet of the IPPC communication effort surfaced when staff observed that many of the dozens of periodicals worldwide that are concerned with various aspects of weed technology relied on paid subscriptions, or had limited numerical or geographical distribution. Both facts imposed distributional limitations on many an important article. IPPC had the funds and facilities available to do something about it, and thus established a paper reprint series.

The Center reprints selected articles and distributes copies without cost to requestors (anywhere). Reprints have dealt with a variety of weed technology topics. One particularly outstanding title—with restricted circulation—was reprinted in its English, Spanish and French versions. Infoletter carries announcements of new titles in the series.

The weed science library of publications, articles, and other materials that has taken shape at IPPC serves the usual valuable function of any data collection. There is nothing extraordinary about it. However, the library provides a useful resource for supporting, and increasing the utility of, the overall IPPC communications program, of which it is an integral part.

The bottom line for almost any program concerns its effectiveness and success, or lack thereof. Assessment criteria can be illusive or vague; for IPPC, feedback has been both indirect and direct. Infoletter appears to have gained acceptance, though how many recipients would criticize a freebie? It earned an award in the last three even year AAACE C&A programs. Judge's comments and scores ranged from "excellent-100" by a professional on the staff of a major U.S. landgrant university, to "terrible-50" by a regional editor for a U.S. farm magazine that features ads for hemorrhoid cures.

The more important verdict from abroad has less definition but more unanimity. No one has asked to be removed from the mailing list on the basis of shortcomings or errors. Publications and equipment mentioned in Infoletter continue to elicit strong interest judging from the volume of response. Several short articles printed in the newsletter have been lifted and used by other international publications, in some cases without so much as disturbing a comma.

The stack of thank-you letters IPPC has accumulated adds encouragement. Many represent sincere feeling expressed in less-than-perfect English. From Brazil, a typical example: "I thank you very much by sending every edition of Infoletter. Just because I don't want to miss any issue, I would like to give you my new address." Another, from the Philippines, ended by urging, "More power to your office."

International communications programs entail unique challenges, but also generate unique rewards.