

Communicators As Architects of Change

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Abstract

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Commentary

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Our future as communicators is inextricably tied to the future of Extension and Land-Grant outreach. Although some of us are science writers or documentary videographers and such, many more of us are editors, designers, and photographers who are completely involved in reaching out and engaging Land-Grant target audiences using whatever mix of media appropriate.

There are storm clouds on the horizon, however. Extension faces stiff and growing competition for audiences—new and traditional—in what has become known as the information marketplace.

This new competitive environment is driven by technology, but does that make it an information technology problem? Not really. It's a communication problem. As a 30-year agricultural communication veteran reminded me recently in the hallway of the Internet 2 meetings, "I've been searching for ways to reach target audiences since I started. Why should this be any different?"

Recent efforts to address information competition have centered on a concept called e-Extension. As this initiative takes form, some communicators may question the importance and their involvement. To find answers let's begin with an analogy. Imagine e-Extension as a giant building prior to ground breaking. This is a structure where many different sources of expertise and learning will flourish in contiguous open and accessible spaces. Who's responsible for what is generated in those spaces? Who's responsible for making sure people find the information that best fits their needs? Who's responsible for quality control in those spaces? Who's responsible for outcomes that match needs? These are clearly questions that communicators must answer.

However, many communicators look at this analogy and assume they have nothing to do until the building is built. They appear to take the attitude: "You build it and we'll fill it."

So, who is responsible for what is built? Is it the building engineers, our IT colleagues? Will it be the analogous digital carpenters and electricians? Not really.

Architects design the building and control construction. If you want to make a change, you don't ask the IT engineers and digital carpenters to simply make the change during construction. You work with the architect. The architect is the person who sees the whole picture: the user needs, the construction needs, the budget constraints, the long-term goals and the short-term issues. Where are the architects in our profession? Should we be satisfied or resigned to sit back and let our IT colleagues build the e-Extension infrastructure? Probably not. It's a mistake to assume we will be able (or even asked) to step up and take over the stocking process of developing and adapting the content to satisfy customers needs. This is an opportunity many of us will get only once in our careers. This is an opportunity to provide leadership in an effort that could have more impact on our future professional success than anything we've experienced to date.

Admittedly there are few if any communication departments with a position titled architect on the staff listing. But among the editors, designers, filmmakers, photographers, science writers,

administrators, and others that do fill those staff listings, there are people who are filling the role of architect.

At a fundamental level we provide the overall architecture for everything coming from the Land-Grant system as outreach. We help faculty identify audience needs, we develop materials that address those needs. We manage efforts to get these materials into forms and places so people can access them. No one else in the chain has as much responsibility for the overall success of the system as the communicators—especially in e-Extension. Even faculty sources are typically more concerned with issues in their discipline than in distribution. Successful communication professionals are successful because they are the architects of the overall process required to meet user needs.

Our IT colleagues face the same issue in searching for architects versus engineers. The main difference is that many administrators simply default to the idea that e-Extension is “an IT thing.” So, many IT departments—some with less experience or inclination for more global audience-based thinking—are being set up to fail. Busy administrators focus on day-to-day fiscal survival and just don’t see the floundering. Of those who do notice, the response is to question whether we have the right IT people handling these issues. Bringing in more (or different) digital carpenters seems to be their answer.

So we come back to the initial questions. Where and how should communicators step up?

To answer the where question, start at home. The e-Extension initiative will have some success as a national effort, but real success will be found in grassroots “skunk works,” testing and adapting ways of making our individual outreach programs competitive in reaching our audiences. As you analyze audiences don’t be constrained by traditional geopolitical boundaries. Audiences are found in communities of interest. They consider our internal boundaries of little use. Competitors will not be bound by them, so we can’t afford to continue thinking in that fashion.

To answer how, I suggest establishing architect-oriented teams with your IT colleagues. Focus on using all the tools available to dramatically improve ease of access to expertise from your institution in a timely fashion (the two most critical factors for success.)

Do this proactively. Whether we call it e-Extension or just doing our job, outreach programs at our colleges and universities will be successful only if we provide access to information, educational materials, learning modules, and courses in a timely (anytime) and easily accessible (anyplace) fashion. Brainstorm completely new ways of working outside the geopolitical boundaries to provide access anytime anyplace. Test these new ways. Analyze why they do or don’t work. Adapt them and reapply. Then share these tests, analyses, and uses of technology with your colleagues around the country.

And finally, read. Innovation in the marketplace is being driven by new combinations of ideas. There are few truly new ideas. More likely, existing ideas are combined in a new way or in a new context to drive innovation. Look for new and existing ideas in books like *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell; *The Innovator’s Dilemma* by Clayton Christensen; *Blown to Bits*

by Evan and Wuster; Blur and their new book It's Alive by Davis and Myer. Read, combine, innovate, analyze, and apply. It's time to step up.

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