

Advice for Young Communicators

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Abstract

Carroll P. Streater, former editor of Farm Journal, and a recipient of the ACE Reuben Brigham Award, used to say: "When you want to find out something, go ask the customer."

Advice for Young Communicators

Claude W. Gifford

Carroll P. Streeter, former editor of *Farm Journal*, and a recipient of the ACE Reuben Brigham Award, used to say: “When you want to find out something, go ask the customer.”

Another bit of sound advice is that if you want to learn *more* about something, go talk to someone who knows more about it than you do.

So when Jim Evans asked me to spend a week counseling with the journalism students at the University of Illinois as “Communicator in Residence,” I decided to ask some of the possible future employers of those students what qualities they wanted in a new professional employee—and what advice they had for young communicators.

Asking for that information in an open-ended way could lead to some long nights and very difficult problems of organizing the responses. Therefore, I both “primed the pump” a little and aided the summation of the replies by listing eight questions for the communication professionals I queried.

The responses, summarized here, should be valuable to students and communication educators and might interest other agricultural communicators.

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The communication professionals queried were a mix of farm broadcasters, farm magazine editors, newspaper farm editors, land-grant university editors, advertising agency representatives, public relations practitioners, and free-lance writers.

The first thing I wanted was a reply—from a thoughtful, experienced, and successful person. A researcher might throw up his hands at my system of selection. I simply wrote to selected people I know in the communication groups—people who are thoughtful and successful and who would be sufficiently motivated to sit down and write a reply. I did not pre-select for what they might answer—but for those who would answer in a short period of time.

From that view, the selection system was superb. I wrote to 68 people, asked them to reply within a week, and got 51 responses in time to summarize for the University of Illinois assignment.

Not only did the professional communicators respond, they responded with enthusiasm and dedication. One person wrote that he was going into the hospital the next day and wanted to get off a reply before going under the knife. Another explained that he was caught up in a very busy time, but was dictating his reply on Sunday evening. Another noted that a death in the family and a series of meetings and speeches had kept him away from the office and home, but that he was “catching up” by sending a tape of his responses. Two called with their comments—one between segments on his broadcast—and apologized for not getting a letter written. I am sure other respondents could duplicate this dedication, which is a measure of the desire of these successful communicators to share their thoughts with young communicators.

I apologize for not writing to many other thoughtful and successful people who would have responded with equally excellent replies. But to keep the project “surroundable” in a short period of time, I stopped where I did.

The number who responded by professional communication groups is as follows:

COMMUNICATION GROUP	ABBREVIATION	NUMBER
Advertising	A	4
Farm broadcaster	FB	8
Freelance—consultant	FLC	6
Farm magazine editor	FME	8
Land-Grant University	LGU	7
Public relations—general information	PRG	14
Newspaper farm editor	NFE	4

The following analysis represents an attempt to categorize the responses into short, general statements with reasoned fidelity to what the professionals appeared to be saying in answer to the questions. The abbreviations at the top of the columns represent the seven communication groups from advertising, to newspaper farm editors. The figures under the abbreviations identify the number of responses from each group who "fit" the statement at the left. The totals merely add the number of responses.

The statements with only one response are significant observations others did not mention.

When studying the tables, observe differences between professional communicator groups, and within groups, in their emphasis upon particular points.

TABLE 1: Shortcomings in Preparing Students for Agricultural Communications

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Lack of communication and language skills	1	1	1	3	2	3	—	11
Lack of desirable personal characteristics for communication	1	1	1	4	—	2	—	9
Lack of good college communication teaching	—	2	1	—	2	1	1	7
Lack of on-the-job training and campus experience	—	2	—	1	1	1	—	5
Lack of subject matter depth in agriculture and business	1	—	—	2	1	—	1	5
Lack of understanding about communications	—	1	—	2	—	1	—	4
Lack of organizational abilities and logic	1	—	—	1	—	1	—	3
Complimentary	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
Lack of knowledge about electronic media	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Lack of audiovisual training	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1

TABLE 2: Communications Training Versus Subject Matter Training

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Trained in communication—strong preference	1	—	1	1	1	3	—	7
Trained in communication—preference	1	—	—	1	2	3	—	7
Trained in both	2	2	1	1	—	2	—	8
Trained in subject matter—preference	—	2	—	1	—	1	—	4
Trained in subject matter—strong preference	—	1	2	2	1	2	2	10

TABLE 3: Good Language Versus Good Ideas

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Handling language is more important (includes spelling, punctuation, grammar)	4	5	4	5	4	10	2	34
Quality of ideas is more important	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0
Equal weight	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1

TABLE 4: Shortcomings in Agricultural Communications Versus Ideal Level of Excellence

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Too much poor quality work	1	2	2	1	1	4	—	11
Lack of creativity and venture	1	1	1	—	2	3	—	8
Complimentary	1	2	1	—	2	1	1	8
Lack of digging and subject matter depth	1	—	1	1	1	4	—	8
Lack of bare knuckle confrontation with real problems	—	—	1	2	—	—	—	3
Lack of audience understanding	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	3
Not enough hard editing	—	—	—	2	—	1	—	3
Lack of all-out personal effort and dedication	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
Inability to work with others	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	2
Administrators don't recognize quality	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Lack of outstanding leadership	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1

**TABLE 5: Advice for Students of
Agricultural Communicators**

	A	FB	FLO	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Get good training and wide experience early	1	2	1	2	3	1	—	10
Write tightly, well; edit closely; hone your skills	1	1	1	2	—	3	—	8
Never stop learning—be driven by curiosity	—	2	2	1	—	1	—	6
Strive to understand and help your audience	—	—	—	1	—	3	1	5
Set a high personal goal and high standards	1	1	—	1	—	1	—	4
Research thoroughly and re-check your "facts"	—	1	1	1	—	1	—	4
Learn to write for the audience	—	—	1	—	—	2	—	3
Acquire the respect of those with whom you work	—	—	1	—	—	1	1	3
Have courage to talk about what should be said	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	2
Try to improve your best work	1	1	—	—	—	—	—	2
Be innovative and an idea person	—	1	—	1	—	—	—	2

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	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Work hard and do more than is expected	1	—	—	1	—	—	—	2
If there's nothing new to say, don't say it	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
Take stock of whether you like people and want to help them	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Learn to use audio-visuals	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Try to free lance	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Be fair	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Keep excited	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Be "questioning"	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Make life easier for your boss	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Admit you are wrong when you are	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Take full responsibility for what you do	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Learn the mechanical tools of the trade	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Learn to do it right	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Believe strongly	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1

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TABLE 6: Experience Needed From First Job

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Get broad experience; a chance to know the audience	2	2	3	1	—	3	1	12
Choose your first job to get the experience you want	—	—	—	1	3	4	—	8
Get any job where you have to produce	1	—	1	1	—	—	1	4
Choose the person you want to get experience with	1	1	—	—	—	1	—	3
Work hard, try to improve, have patience	—	1	1	—	—	—	—	2
Go with a smaller organi- zation where you do many things	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
Work under a deadline	1	—	—	1	—	—	—	2
Volunteer for assignments	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
Stay excited	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
If you go with college work, get advanced degree	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Set goals and measure your progress	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
Write or speak to a real live person	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Work for respect	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Learn to ask, probe, and analyze	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Do your share of the dirty work	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Take a job where you will be exposed to other employers	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1

TABLE 7: Performance of Land-Grant Universities with Farmers, Other Constituents and Outside World, and Ways to Improve

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Doing well	1	2	1	3	—	2	1	10
Poor job with outside communi- cation	—	1	—	1	2	2	—	6
Should work harder to use information outlets available to them	1	1	—	1	—	—	—	3
Doing well with farmers	—	—	—	1	1	1	—	3
Need better relations with the commercial world	—	1	—	—	—	1	—	2
Of main help to better farmers	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Guilty of propaganda	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Deal in old stuff	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
Trying to do too many things	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
Need more aggressive information people	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Need to orient more towards non-farmers	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
Falling behind in dealing with farmers	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Should give professors more practical experience	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Should get closer to the people	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
Education and degrees don't make good communicators	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Too slow and try too much	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Should try harder to motivate	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1

TABLE 8: Major Changes in Agricultural Communications in Next Ten Years

	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
More emphasis on reaching general public with the meaning of agricultural developments	—	2	2	2	—	2	1	9
More emphasis on packaging specialized information	1	—	—	2	—	3	—	6
More computerized and electronic information	1	1	1	—	—	2	—	5
More direct line communication with audience	—	—	1	—	2	1	—	4
More emphasis on farm management information	—	—	1	1	—	1	—	3
Audio-visuals will become more important	1	—	—	—	2	—	—	3
Communication staffs will become more professional	—	—	1	1	—	1	—	3
Farm magazines will become more like a <i>Business Week</i> of Agriculture	1	—	—	—	—	1	—	2
Will be more women in communications	—	—	—	1	—	1	—	2
Effectiveness of newspapers in reaching farmers will decline	—	—	—	—	2	—	—	2
Will be more vertical publications	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Someone will establish a national farm weekly	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Newspaper farm editors will become agribusiness editors	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1

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	A	FB	FLC	FME	LGU	PRG	NFE	Total
Radio farm news will become agribusiness news folded into regular news	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1
Farmers will rely more on consultants	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
More emphasis on communication with those who serve the farmer directly	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
More emphasis on reaching farmers with sophisticated information through seminars	—	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
Magazines and newsletters will become more important	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Newspapers may become “news packages” to which you can subscribe—if so, agricultural communication is in trouble	—	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
Farm publications will become more specialized, sophisticated, and expensive	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
More emphasis on radio and TV and less on print	—	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
More manufacturer-to-user selling & accompanying information	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	1
More emphasis on interpreting the effects of regulations	—	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
More general communicators will move into agricultural communication	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	1

For a free copy of “Advice for Young Communicators,” write Claude W. Gifford, Deputy Director for Publications and Visual Communication, Office of Governmental and Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C. 20250.

