

## Communicator Roles in Extension

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## Communicator Roles in Extension

### Abstract

The preamble of the Smith-Lever Act - which created and continues to guide the Cooperative Extension Service - charged the extension organization to disseminate information and encourage its application.

## Communicator Roles in Extension

K. Robert Kern

The preamble of the Smith-Lever Act — which created and continues to guide the Cooperative Extension Service — charged the extension organization to disseminate information and encourage its application. That application phrase added a special and significant responsibility. It would not be enough simply to disseminate; to lay out information. To encourage application meant engaging the audience, getting the person to interact with the information — to make a decision about an idea.

Interactions cover a wide range of modes: the personal — from one-to-one to meetings, lecture-demonstrations, field trips, etc; and the mediated — where there is no immediate human contact between information source and receiver.

### Interaction

When viewed from the standpoint of the receiver of extension information, the quality of interaction varies with the modes. Perhaps the ideal interaction would be one receiver in the personal presence of one specialist in the desired subject. The quality in interaction then should be about as good as one could expect: all of the strengths of instantaneous face-to-face discourse would be available. As a far extreme in quality of interaction, we might suggest a one-sentence column filler in a newspaper — limited interaction at best.

In addition to the **quality** of interaction, one can see a dimension of quantity. One subject specialist can hold a limited number of face-to-face, one-to-one consultations in a day, whatever the quality of the interaction. A 30-second spot announcement on television may be seen and heard by many thousands of persons, whatever the quality of the interaction.



The legislative charge to extension service, however, requires us to be concerned about the combination of quality and quantity. For our purposes here, we can relate quality and quantity by simple multiplication: a given level of quality times a given level of quantity yields a product of interaction. (We have written elsewhere on a scheme for putting numbers on quality of interaction to let us make this multiplication, and we won't develop it here.)

For our purposes, we'll use arbitrary quality figures: 1.0 for the best we know, the specialist-client consultation; 0.01 for the interaction quality of the television spot. If 100 persons view the TV spot, we argue, the contribution to the public good is equal to having provided the time of a specialist to sit in deep consultation with one person. However, if 10,000 persons attend to the TV spots, the extension effort yields 1,000 interaction points — equal in our definition to 1,000 specialist-client consultations. It might take the specialist 100 days to conduct the thousand consultations; a half-day with a communications specialist and maybe four days of production time to do the TV spot.\*

It is not our purpose in this paper to argue the quality coefficients for various modes of subject-audience interaction. Rather, it is our purpose to deal with the roles of extension workers in the several modes.

### Content and Method

All extension program efforts at interaction combine two elements: information and method. That has been true from the earliest days. We see both elements in use from the accounts of the early worker who took a chew off the farmer's plug of tobacco to foster a human relationship and castrate lambs to establish credibility as an information source. The working demonstration in the home was so much a part of home economics that the early professionals were called "home demonstration agents."

We have said that any extension effort that engages audience members in interaction with a subject involves an element of content and an element of method. If the combination of content concern plus method concern adds up to 100 in every case, we can use numbers to represent different mixes of content and method.

Many factors, of course, affect the relative amounts of concern given to the two elements. One obvious factor is the degree to which an audience member will have personal, individual, immediate communication contact with the subject specialist. When a client sticks his head in the door of the

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\* Some subject specialists, and perhaps program leaders, may be offended by such crass portrayal of a process that extension workers carry out repeatedly in the dark recesses of their lonely thoughts. We are offended by the fact that after six and a half decades we don't have scientific data to put coefficients on the quality of interactions in the different modes. In their absence, we each put on our own humanistic coefficients and seldom talk about them.



specialist's office, the specialist doesn't call "King's X" and go into a 30-minute communication strategy session; he consults with the client. And maybe in this case, content accounts for 95 percent of the specialist's concern; 5 percent of his concern is with how he presents content. This same specialist decides to get prospective clients to deal with one of his subjects, and the medium will be a 1-minute television spot. Would you just turn the fraction over, devoting about five percent of concern to content, and 95 percent to how it's said?

The two elements — content and method — are part of any extension program. The mix is infinitely variable. It differs with audience, with content, with complexity of concepts, with the personality of the person managing the activity, with resources available, and many, many other factors.

### **One Provided Both**

In the beginning, the one extension worker supplied both elements, blending what seemed right for his or her appraisal of the situation and capabilities. Soon some specialization of the method element began. Editors improved manuscripts before publication; writing specialists prepared articles for newspapers and magazines; the most successful speakers and demonstrators devoted some of their time to increasing information skills of others. As additional methods have become available, specialists in method have followed.

### **The Planning-Delivery Task**

Now the extension organizations includes specialists in subject or content and specialists in methods — along with the generalist in the field, who still combines both functions. Our interest here is mainly in the role of communications specialist in relation to the content specialist. We can consider the relationship between the roles if we set out the task to which both are committed: To develop an extension effort that will produce interaction of audience and subject — whether that effort is a five-year plan or a less complicated introduction of a new cultivar.

#### *The Gap*

Planning begins with the gap — the gap between what is and what could be. The gap may result from the existence of a problem among the clientele or from the emergence of new information that has potential value to the client.

#### *Audience-Subject Configuration*

Not all persons have equal utility for the given body of information. So planners seek an optimum configuration of audience and subject. This



configuration projects the behavioral outcomes that should occur when certain audience members apply the information.

### *Media Selection*

When an audience-content-outcome configuration has been struck, the next step is selecting the medium — or media — through which the interaction may occur. Analysis of media covers such key points as: What media can get the attention of the desired audience? What media have capacity to carry the concept load? Does the audience use the media? How does the audience use the media? Out of this analysis of media, affected by resource considerations, comes the selection of media.

### *Message Formulation*

Message formulation represents the next step. Words, pictures, and sounds are brought together. Message strategy relates the audience and the content to achieve interaction on the receiver's terms.

### *Message Delivery*

The messages are delivered. Delivery modes cover a wide range, from the intensively personal to the decided impersonal.

### *Result and Evaluation*

The final step is to read the results and evaluate them. Results can be read at several points: the behavior of the media in the delivering messages; behavior of the audience in receiving and responding; and ultimately, the significant result is audience behavior regarding the original program target. To what extent did the audience make use of the information? To what extent did the audience consider the information and, possibly, choose not to use it?

## **Communication Specialist Roles**

We've suggested that the early extension worker fulfilled both roles of content and method. But it was soon discovered that a method specialist — such as a writer — added productivity in two ways: The product was notably better, on the average; and the writer was more efficient, doing more in less time — leaving the content specialist more time to be concerned about content.

### *Craftsman*

And the extension communication *craftsman* developed. This person is the highly competent processor of information — the editor who turns out grammatical, terse, non-foggy, attractive and readable publications; the writer whose news releases — even if used as filler — are among the best writing you find in many newspapers; the audio-visual specialist whose graphic grabs the eye and mind and whose soundtrack stirs the soul; the



broadcaster who can take a specialist who is boredom personified and make something interesting when the program rides the air waves; and so on.

Give the craftsman the raw materials — a manuscript, an interview, a narration or whatever — and the craftsman will make the best that can be made of it. The craftsman may not wonder — out loud at least — why or whether a given effort should be undertaken. The client — the extension specialist — needs the skills of the craftsman; a craftsman applies the craft. When the content specialist has full mastery of subject, audience and communication methods, only the communication craftsman is needed to provide support — actually, craftsmen for each communication method, since specialization is the handmaiden of craftsmanship.

### *Communication Programmer*

Available communication media and wider audience response potentials — probably taught by advertisers or human engineers — have brought us into a multi-media environment. Extension workers found promise in pursuing subject-audience interaction through more than a single medium; they moved toward enlarging interaction coefficients through coordinated use of several media.

The extension specialist as content expert, audience analyst and methods coordinator became a vessel that few blood-and-bones subject matter PhDs could fill. Coordination of media cried out for some special expertise. Many communicators responded, and we found the role of the communications programmer. (We had earlier labelled this role with the term “contractor.” Programmer is probably a better term.)

The communications programmer may be happiest when a subject specialist brings in a definition of audience and a set of outcomes desired. Then the programmer applies media knowledge, production expertise and a special capacity to juggle several media at one time. Sometimes the programmer prefers to be left alone to compound the magic of the multi-media effort, presenting the final product in the nature of a ship launching when everything's in readiness.

Often the communications programmer is not particularly concerned about why or whether, leaving that determination to another.

### *Consulting Communicator*

Content of extension programs has become increasingly complex. The content specialist is competent in content, and where he or she is not the “Compleat Extensionist,” the softness in the blend is usually lesser concern with method. Subject matter specialists tend to get PhDs in their subject specialty, not in communication.

At the same time, communication science was developing, and some extension communicators pursued it. Some of them began to apply the broader ranges of their specialty and the role of consulting communicator



appeared. The concern of the consulting communicator embraces the human processes of communication as well as the media and production methods of communication. The needs of extension program development and delivery accommodate this role as a partnership with the subject specialist.

Attributes of the role of consulting communicator include these specialties:

- \* Specialist in human processes involved in communication.
- \* Specialist in media capability, especially mass or impersonal media.
- \* Specialist in coordinating communication production specialists.

Working knowledge of the consulting communicator embraces various behavioral disciplines:

- \* Communication theory and practice.
- \* Psychology of communication.
- \* Sociology of communication.
- \* Group and interpersonal communication.
- \* Participative communication.
- \* Effects of the mass media.
- \* Technology of communication.
- \* Principles of production for the several media of communication.

Exercise of the role of consulting communicator can be characterized as a partnership in the planning processes and leadership in applying communication processes.

Extension communicators, of course, fill roles that differ from these three. A principal role for many is that of communications trainer. We have not dealt with that role in this paper because it is a separate area of activity. The practicing communicator, as described in our three role portrayals, may function with no commitment to training. Frequently effective trainers have no responsibility for communication production with the extension program structure.

The three roles set out here are not mutually exclusive. In fact, there may be movement between roles; individuals may perform in different roles at different times. A craftsman may reach beyond a single specialty and become the coordinator or programmer of several media. Similarly the consulting communicator may, probably should, have capabilities as programmer and as craftsman in some area of production.



Perhaps the main difference among the three roles appears in the chronology of program effort we have described as "The Planning-Delivery Task." We have cast that effort in figure form, relating the participation of the subject specialist and the communicator as the task unfolds. Figure 1 presents the flow of involvement and shared responsibility. Communicator roles vary in how early the communicator enters the effort, the extent of responsibility assumed or shared, and the time of exit from the effort.



Figure 1

Kern: Communicator Roles in Extension

Tasks in Planning and Delivering	Communication Programmer			Consulting Communicator
	Craftsman			
<b>The Gap</b> Explore audience needs for new information Seek potential audiences for new information	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement
<b>Audience-Subject Configuration</b> What audiences can use what information?	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement
<b>Audience-Subject Analysis</b> Identify relevant behavioral outcomes by specific audience Relate content to the projected audience behaviors	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement
<b>Media Selection</b> Analyze media for Capacity for concepts Access to audience Capability to get and hold attention Choose media	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement
<b>Message Formulation</b> Formulate message(s) Content fitted to media for specific audience	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement
<b>Message Delivery</b> Produce message(s) Deliver--direct or via gatekeeper media	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement	Communicator Involvement
<b>Result and Evaluation</b> Gather data Message performance Media response Audience response --behavior Evaluate	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement	Specialist Involvement

 Specialist Involvement
  Communicator Involvement

### An Historical Perspective

The term "consulting communicator" was coined about two years ago. It named a role; it didn't create one. The extension communicator ranks have included consulting communicators for many years. Most of the giants from the past were consulting communicators. The role was most

often found in the extension or agricultural editor [the head of the office]. Not many of the "troops" functioned in this role by deliberate assignment.

We have not found a literature to trace historical development of communicator roles in extension. But we can report our own perception of the appearance of the consulting communicator. The first application we observed came at the University of Illinois under the inspiration of Hadley Read, the great innovator. In the late 1950s, assistant extension editors there were assigned responsibilities close to those we associate with the consulting communicator. For reasons yet undocumented, the Illinois staff soon returned to more concern with the craftsman role.\*

Several staff members at Iowa State university had moved into the consulting communicator role by the late 1950s: Candace Hurley with the home economics program; the late Al Parsons with the 4-H program; and the author with public affairs programs and special projects. Extension Editor Dutch Elder had fostered these individual "consultancies." And in 1962, he made the decisive move to establish what he called "departmental editors" to serve the several program areas in agriculture, natural resources and economics. Those principles remained in effect, although years passed before all extension program areas were accommodated in the consulting communicator mode. Full organizational commitment to the consulting communicator roles in the Iowa staff was achieved in 1976.

We observe many individuals working in the role of the consulting communicator. It is fortunate, we believe, that the role is no longer limited to the top echelons. The environment seems to permit, and in many cases to foster, fuller development of the contemporary professional communicator.

We don't expect this paper to create anything new. In 1954, when the entomologist asked us to write for the third time the annual news release advising control measures against the screwworm fly, we felt what Peggy Lee later put into a song, "Is That All There Is?" There may be similarly restless souls in some extension communications offices today. Unnecessary barriers may hold them immobile — either real barriers maintained by their high-ranking colleagues or barriers created and maintained in their own minds. We'll be satisfied if this paper stimulates removal or the surmounting of some of those barriers.

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\* Persons who attended the 1964 meeting of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors (AAACE) may recall Read speaking with considerable intensity on the need to be more concerned with craftsmanship than with program development aspects of communication.