

More Observations on "Renegade View of What We Do"

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Abstract

Planning Evaluation Overcome Bored Writing, Editing

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"No one is immune..."

I was pleased to hear Don Wells use these words, because we are all part of the same profession. And, where one stumbles, all suffer.

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As supervisors of writers and editors, we have to be careful not to be subjective. Don't pick up a pencil until after you've read through a media release or a manuscript at least one time. I'm sure that Don would agree that for every bad example he cited, there are a dozen or so in which we would be proud to have played a part. But, again the examples show that we **do** have a problem.

I believe that we are seeing symptoms of a deeper-seated ailment than the errors of spelling and grammar, and trivia cited.

The problem, from my vantage point, lies largely with individuals beyond the writer of a manuscript. Myself included. How much leadership are we providing? How much direct supervision are we imposing—particularly on students or trainees? How much direction are we giving our programs? You may be embarrassed or angry by the examples Don cited. I know I am. But sure we're not going to sit around with red faces. We're not wedded to strolling down the wrong "bridal" path for long.

You're no doubt already asking: How could this happen? I believe there are two answers:

1. We are letting others tell us what we will write about.

2. We are trying to meet quotas, and we wind up playing a numbers game.

The solution is found in PED: Using our brains and our feet in Planning, Evaluation, and Direction.

Do you have an annual plan that ties your resources to programs that include subject matter priority areas? You should, and the priorities should be based on public concerns. Do you get feedback from specialists on which you can make evaluations of your media activities? If you do, is the feedback used to sell your directors or administrative and department heads on the directions you are following?

An annual list of national and regional public concerns—priority areas—helped our Peoria research reporting staff determine what to write about. The approach has allowed us to produce fewer and I believe, improved releases. It has permitted four public information officers to be selective from research projects by about 550 scientists at 27 research locations in the North Central Region. It allows them to take more time in writing and editing, in media contact, and in developing selective media distribution patterns.

The approach takes some selling, particularly in getting it established. Some department heads will say that the priority areas don't umbrella their activities sufficiently. Your answer: We must use our limited resources to best serve the public and to improve the image of our institution.

The priorities need not be so rigid as to exclude other important developments, programs and events. You can survey department heads and extension specialists, get their feelings on the most important developments and events coming up. Then you can set your priorities in relation to public concern.

Cooperative planning of this nature is not much fun, but it will gain some involvement by and support from your specialists and department heads. At the same time, it will provide some protection against the too-familiar demands for sudden, unplanned and unjustified projects that come down from above.

Whatever approach you use should permit you to manage your resources in a realistic way. It should allow you to target your activities, to spend more time on fewer assignments, avoid trivia and eliminate errors of grammar and spelling. You can also track feedback in relation to concerns of the various groups you serve, which more than likely equate to concerns of your directors, department heads and extension specialists.

I want to emphasize the positive effect our team planning had on the information staff at Peoria. Every annual plan we develop has input and review by all eleven members of the staff, including the secretary and clerk-typist. Because they feel a part of the plan, they

support it. They are less apt to become "wedded" to the same group of source scientists who determine what they write about and how they say it. They are less apt to use the scientist's own words, which too often are full of scientific jargon. Because they are part of the team, they'll work harder at interpreting and writing for the correct audiences.

Reporting research and extension can be a lot more attractive if we set priorities and give it direction.

—Robert E. Enlow, *Regional Information Officer, USDA, SEA, AR, Peoria, Illinois*

