

Modernizing Information Programs: Patterns for Action

Ward W. Konkle

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Abstract

Let this essay begin with a bold premise: The time has come for agricultural editors to make a drastic change in the way they handle their information programs.

Modernizing Information Programs: Patterns for Action

WARD W. KONKLE

LET THIS ESSAY BEGIN with a bold premise: The time has come for agricultural editors to make a drastic change in the way they handle their information programs. Unless they wake up soon to their new responsibilities, they run the risk of having their professional status suffer unnecessary erosion. Moreover, there is an even greater danger of failing to fulfill their mission of service to agriculture at a time when it is needed most.

These are disturbing, yet challenging statements. I think they can be proved, and I shall attempt to do it. Furthermore, I shall attempt to delineate patterns of action or guidelines for agricultural editors to follow if they want to mold their information programs to the needs of the times.

The Agrarian Tradition

From the very beginning of our nation's history and for many generations thereafter, the agrarian role was a dominant one. Agrarianism became solidly entrenched partly because of the need for growth and expansion in agriculture, and partly because we were blessed with articulate spokesmen such as Jefferson, Morrill, and others. For at least the first 100 years after Jefferson, agriculture enjoyed the distinction of being surrounded with an aura of strength and good will. Even with the advent of an industrialized society, the image still continued only slightly tarnished. The popular view that agriculture represented a high calling and that it was the very foundation of our economy contributed much support to the development of favorable farm policies. Moreover, the remarkable achievements of agricultural research — both at the federal and state level — provided a wellspring of knowledge that improved efficiency, expanded larders, and

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brought new status and sophistication to the many-faceted system of agriculture.

Throughout much of this era of growth, the extension system was heavily implicated in the life and welfare of the rural community. Here was a unique social invention that brought knowledge from the research lab and the classroom to the field — and in a most effective way. Emphasis was on solving problems of production. A common target for attention was the “backward” farmer who somehow hadn’t heard about new technological achievements that would make him a more efficient husbandman of the land.

Almost from the beginning, the agricultural editor became a valuable ally of the extension worker. Both became devoted to the same cause — sharing the benefits of agricultural science with the nation’s farmers. The system worked beautifully.

From the agricultural editor’s office came streams of press releases, pamphlets, and bulletins giving farm families advice on how to harvest more crops per acre, how to get more milk per cow or more eggs from the laying flock, where to cut costs in the farming operation. The scope of information was wide; the flow went on and on.

The traditional patterns of action became, in a sense, a way of life for the agricultural editor. Other activities eventually became a way of life too. The endless ballyhoo designed to whip up interest and high attendance at field days and short courses . . . the constant struggle to send out a sizeable weekly packet so that county agents or farm editors could fill their farm pages . . . the dutiful coverage of 4-H activities and cattle judging contests . . . the pressure to keep the bulletin list updated and complete—all these and many more activities kept the agricultural editor busy and, presumably, happy in the realization that he was fulfilling his mission to agriculture.

Undoubtedly he was fulfilling it. I was immersed in that stream of activity for nearly a decade at the beginning of my ag journalism career, and I was convinced then that my duties were noble and holy ones. Even today, in a slightly different environment, I don’t doubt for a moment that these traditional patterns of action in state agricultural information programs deserved all the sweat, toil, and money that went into them.

But the rub, however, lies in the fact that these patterns of action—some of them, at least—have been perpetuated too long.

Agriculture is a dynamic enterprise. And because it is dynamic, it is constantly changing. I contend that our agricultural information programs have too often ignored these changes.

True, there are exceptions. From time to time I see commendable examples of journalistic endeavor that must surely reflect the cooperative effort of a competent, imaginative editor and a knowledgeable and understanding administrator. But the instances are too spotty to indicate a solid trend. Some editors, perhaps, may be too close to the situation to realize the significance of the changes in agriculture. Or, they may be so mesmerized by past patterns of tradition that their perspective may be cloudy.

The Transformation in Agriculture

To understand why traditional information programs won't suffice in themselves, one needs to get a capsule view of the transformations taking place in agriculture today—and then suit new patterns of action to the new situation and its attendant problems.

Today, agrarianism in the United States is being replaced by the commercialism of a highly technical agricultural business. A lot of people apparently have a great deal of sympathy for the so-called agrarian tradition—the early Jeffersonian dream. But if we're going to be honest with ourselves, we'll have to admit that farming as a distinct way of life is an idea that belongs in the nostalgic past. Sentiment or tradition no longer governs the work of a successful farmer. Instead, he embraces everything that production and marketing technology can offer. He runs a highly successful conventional business that is integrated with the rest of the economy.

In contrast, the traditional farmer—whether the sentimentalists like it or not—can no longer be recognized as a virile force in our agricultural economy. The traditional farmer either resists technological innovations or else accepts only that fraction which his whims dictate. To him, farming is a way of life. His social values are different; his sphere of interest is more or less limited.

A look at statistics shows very plainly the extent to which the traditional farmer—representing agrarianism—is being shoved out of the picture by the rational, or commercial, farmer. In 1968, only 17 per cent of the farms in the United States reported annual cash receipts of over \$20,000. But, incredibly, this small segment accounted for 69 per cent of total sales. Even more incredible is

the fact that—if we look at the \$40,000-and-up bracket—approximately half of the total U.S. farm production comes from only 6.4 per cent of our farms. Over half of all U.S. farms had gross incomes in 1968 of less than \$5,000 annually, and these 1.6 million farms accounted for less than 4 per cent of total farm income.

The Census Bureau still defines a commercial farm as one having annual gross sales of at least \$2,500. But the figure set as the dividing line between an adequate and an inadequate enterprise is much higher. In the past, a figure of \$10,000 has been used. But today this figure is considered out of date. For example, one USDA study showed that cash-grain and hog farms in Illinois—projected for expected conditions in 1970—would not begin to yield a management return until gross annual income reached \$20,000.

As a matter of fact, some economists feel that a gross income of \$40,000 may be necessary to yield earnings high enough to keep talented farm family members from moving to higher paying non-farm jobs. The soundness of this reasoning is supported by the fact that the average farmer with a gross income of \$15,000 earns a realized net income equal to the annual salary of a median grade stenographer.

Now, what is the relevance of these statistics to an agricultural information program?

In the first place, it must be recognized that the land-grant system contributed heavily to this transformation. A steady flow of research and development resulted in greater efficiency of operation—which in turn created a situation where fewer and fewer farmers could supply the nation's food and fiber needs. Because of the land-grant system's involvement, professional agriculturists—those in the research and extension arms—became oriented more and more to the needs and welfare of the rational, prosperous farmers. This turn of affairs was only natural because the professional agriculturists themselves had a paramount interest in efficiency, innovation, and modernization.

Of course when we consider that the U.S. agricultural productivity and economy today stands unparalleled in the world, then the contributions from agricultural editors that helped to achieve this status will stand as hallmarks of professional performance. In other words, I believe in giving credit where it is due. But any halos editors have earned in the past are certainly going to grow dim if they continue passively in the same direc-

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tion carrying the same banners. I can cite a number of reasons for this bold statement. In effect, these reasons may be regarded as the very problems which the agricultural information fraternity is now facing.

The Specific Problems

First, the public image of U.S. agriculture has got to the point now where the federal-state agricultural establishment is running the risk of becoming identified as publicly-supported institutions devoted to improving the balance sheets of already affluent private firms.

Second, agricultural information programs are still designed to appeal largely to farmers and sometimes even to those within our own system—research and extension workers. We have not yet learned how to communicate effectively to those who use our products—the consumers.

Third, our establishment is neglecting the welfare of that sizeable segment of traditional farmers still with us—those who either don't know how to apply the benefits of technology or who have not been properly motivated.

Guidelines for Action

The following guidelines are necessarily based on the above assumptions, and the related commentary embodies the reasoning behind these assumptions.

1. **Minimize production-oriented information.** The steady flow of production-oriented information, while it obviously benefits the agricultural economy in general and commercial farmers in particular, may indirectly foster adverse public opinion.

Whether or not it is true that the Establishment is making rich farmers richer, we have to face the fact that the public press quite often contains statements that tend to mold public opinion in that direction. The hayseed image is being replaced by one embellished with Cadillacs and clover. Members of Congress are showing increasing concern for the rising costs of farmer subsidies. Some economists now regard butter as essentially a byproduct of government support programs because of the heavy competition from margarine. Possibly there are other examples that would fall in this category.

Production-oriented information should be channeled to only those who can use it. If the information office uses the whole gamut of mass media outlets to announce the development of, say, a new variety of high-yielding sugarcane, the story is going to fall on a lot of deaf ears and at the same time may generate attitudes harmful to the image of agriculture. Straight announcements of this kind should go only to farm magazines, trade publications, and only those newspapers that have a farm page.

When all the mass media are used to publicize a production-oriented research achievement, many agricultural editors tend to view a high incidence of usage of the item as an indication of good job performance. But such an assessment might more properly be called a measure of vanity.

2. Set up a program to make agricultural science meaningful to consumers. Admittedly, this topic is so broad that it deserves more than the passing commentary I can give it here. The theme is far from new, and many ag editors have been striving valiantly for years to get results. Some of them, happily, are chalking up solid achievements. But, again, one can hardly say a trend is showing. For those who are looking for ways to get started or to expand their present program, I believe I can offer a useful idea or two.

One key to success is the feature story slanted to the needs and welfare of consumers. Let's go back to the item about the new variety of sugarcane. The average person couldn't care less about a straight announcement of such a research achievement. More likely than not, the item may precipitate visions of more surpluses, more subsidies, and higher taxes. That's more fuel for the Cadillac and clover image.

But chances are this fellow does use sugar. Using a reminder about the rising population, an imaginative writer could easily get this consumer thinking about whether his children or grandchildren will have enough sugar. Agricultural science, you see, is thinking about his welfare, and the new variety may mean the difference between scarcity and ample supplies in the future.

Or, suppose this consumer prefers artificial sweeteners to the natural product. Is he aware of all the hazards in using cyclamates? Does he know, for instance, that cyclamates whet the appetite and promote better utilization of calories? (**Editor's Note:**

This article was prepared before the recent ban on use of cyclamates.)

Regardless of what approach the feature writer is taking, the fact is that he is not only selling sugar but also whetting the public's appetite for wanting to know more about the wonders of modern science.

I think one way to gauge the probable success of an ag feature story would be to write it in such a flippant, offbeat way that the scientist on whose work it is based would reject it. I've had my share of scientists who thought some of my stories didn't have the right academic flavor. The trouble was I had to give in; the new breed of ag feature writer should never have to yield to such whimsies.

Wherever it can be used, the time-honored case study is an ideal way to approach a feature story. Really, it's nothing more than the magic of "Once upon a time." Farm magazines use it, *Reader's Digest* uses it, television commercials use it. Real people doing something that another person—the reader or viewer—can relate to.

3. Broaden the information program to include traditional farmers and the rural poor. I daresay many agricultural editors feel they are already reaching these audiences. Perhaps some of them are. But, as I said before, professional agriculturists are so well-oriented to the cause of rational commercial farmers that they tend to forget there are millions of other rural Americans who cannot be reached by the traditional methods.

Would you believe that the following conditions still exist in the United States today? Crops being planted by the signs of the moon. . . . Farmers who don't know who their county agent is or where he's located. . . . Families using polluted water because they don't understand the principles of sanitation. . . . Woodlot owners being cheated in timber deals because they don't know there are state agencies that will give them free help on such matters. . . . Needy families throwing away welfare food because it's unfamiliar. . . . Farmers deliberately choosing subsistence farming because they get more fun out of hunting and fishing?

These are not hypothetical conditions. I have encountered all of them, and I have talked with the people involved. I suspect that many professional agriculturists would be just as stubborn in trying to understand such people as the principals themselves are in resisting change.

Is it worth the effort in trying to reach these people? I think it is. Consider, for example, the resources involved: more than two million farm operators and their families, to say nothing of the millions of acres of cropland they control.

I recognize that here again the problem is so broad and so complex that I can offer only token commentary. I do know—and some agricultural editors have already arrived at the same exasperating conclusion—that the traditional methods of communicating simply won't work.

With respect to the disadvantaged group, bulletins that attempt to teach even the most elementary concepts appear to be a waste of time and money—no matter how low the pitch level. Polished, velvet-voiced radio educators will be tuned out because they are outsiders. Television is regarded as an entertainment medium; newspapers—if they are read at all—appeal mostly to those who follow the comics.

I'm not sure how this group can be reached. But if I had such an assignment, I would consider trying way-out, innovative ideas—provided, of course, that I would be backed up by an imaginative, cooperative administrator. What about comic-book-type bulletins, untrained radio and television “educators” using local accents and ungrammatical speech, professional actors as demonstration agents? The most effective nutrition talk I ever heard was given by a professional comedian at a high school assembly in Appalachia where I was a student. I've long since forgotten his jokes, but his nuggets of knowledge about nutrition are still fresh in my mind.

With respect to the so-called traditional farmers, I suspect they often feel left out or bypassed in deference to the more affluent commercial farmers. A recent state bulletin on irrigation presented some convincing evidence on the wisdom of investing upwards of \$20,000 in an automatic system. The point the bulletin didn't mention is that only about six per cent of the farmers of that state could afford to buy such a rig. This is a classic example of the kind of information that ought to be routed only to those who are capable of using it.

4. Assign more writing personnel to research or experiment station activities. The current ratio is predominantly in favor of the extension-type writer; in fact, in some states the entire experiment station work-load is saddled onto one lone information spe-

cialist. Correcting this imbalance, in my opinion, would result in a more effective total information program. In the first place, reducing the number of extension-type writers would help to eliminate some of the traditional, out-moded information activities. Second, the science-related activities of the institution would receive the attention and emphasis they deserve.

AAACE has been favoring too long the writer who tells a farmer when to plant his oats. Instead, the favored seat should be occupied by the specialist who can effectively write about the benefits of modern agricultural science. And using the fancy label of "communicator" isn't going to upgrade the oats writer, nor conciliate the station editor.

These, then, are my convictions. If I have jolted anyone, it is only because I want to see our profession of agricultural journalism raised to the highest possible standing it can achieve. Oddly, some of the same goals advocated in this article have been voiced for several years by both the editors and their administrators. It seems puzzling, therefore, that this apparent unanimity of opinion has not spawned more action. The abundance of talent within our ranks deserves to be expressed more forcefully.

These are exciting times. I think the missions that this dynamic industry of agriculture has placed before us are exciting too. We had best get on with the job and carry them out.