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LaRae M. Donnellan
Florida A&M University, larae9411@hotmail.com

Florita S. Montgomery
West Virginia University, fmontgom@wvu.edu

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Rethinking Extension Communications: Is Issues Programming the Key?

Abstract
Extension's internal and external publics are increasing their demands for greater program accountability. At the same time, researchers have documented that many Extension communicators have been unhappy with being left out of the program-development process. This article examines the evolution of the role of communicators and shows how it is relevant to the current discussions of issues programming. The authors recommend administrators and communications units adopt a public relations model to better meet Extension's objectives.

LaRae M. Donnellan
Professor
School of Journalism and Graphic Communication
Florida A&M University
Tallahassee, Florida
larae9411@hotmail.com

Florita S. Montgomery
Associate Professor and Extension Communications Specialist
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia
fmontgom@wvu.edu

Accountability. That's the challenge facing all Extension professionals. In recent years, the Cooperative Extension Service (CES) network of federal divisions, land-grant universities, and state and county agencies and associations has been challenged to improve the system's outreach and increase its accountability (Richardson, Staton, Bateman, & Hutcheson, 2000; Kellogg Commission, 1999).

Not since the 1950s and 1960s (Miller, 1995) have Extension communicators had a potentially greater opportunity to add their voices to the discussion about outreach and accountability. However, the current opportunity adds fuel to the decades-old debate simmering among communicators, subject-matter specialists, and administrators: What is the communicator's role?

Traditionally, communicators at land-grant universities have been performing what Grunig and Hunt (1984) call a "public-information" role. This has involved creating products (such as publications, videos, or news stories) that support the educational programs developed by subject-matter specialists. Although Extension communicators traditionally have described themselves as "journalists" or "public information specialists," for decades, some communicators have questioned whether their skills could better be used to help plan and evaluate CES programs as well as support them (Kern, 1978; Evans, 1976; Evans, 1980; Snowdon & Evans, 1991). The authors of this article agree that Extension would be better served if most of the communicators it hires practiced "public relations," as defined at the First World Assembly of Public Relations Associations and the First World Forum of Public Relations:

> Public relations practice is the art and science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programs of action which will serve both the organization's and the public interest (as quoted in Newsom & Haynes, 2005).

Extension administrators often call for marketing of Extension programs, but what people mean by "marketing" often varies. For some, marketing means promoting the image of the organization

through a flood of news releases and through consistent signage, logos, T-shirts, and telephone greetings. For others, marketing also means assuming an advocacy role by telling Extension's story effectively. What the concept of public relations counseling adds to this discussion is the importance of understanding your organization and its publics and of setting measurable objectives to meet critical needs.

At the same time that this debate has been going on within communications units, Extension, as a whole, has been struggling to change its approach to educational outreach: from its traditional discipline-based programming to a more inclusive issues-based programming (Dalgaard, Brazzel, Liles, Sanderson, & Taylor-Powell, 1988). In the issues paradigm, all specialists on the CES team--including communicators--are needed at the table to help develop educational programming that is targeted for and delivered to appropriate audiences.

This article examines the roles communicators have played and makes recommendations for how administrators, specialists, agents, and communicators may be able to work together to better fulfill Extension's mission and tell its story. The authors conclude that Extension should fully support issues programming teams, which would include consulting communicators, to achieve organizational goals.

From Scribes to Communicators

Land-grant communicators began as "scribes" who were hired to write down the work being done by early agricultural scientists (Kern, 1983). As audiences grew and the need for communication increased, "agricultural editors" developed specializations as editors, writers, graphic designers, and broadcasters (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000).

A major change in the role of CES communications was heralded in the 1950s, when the Kellogg Foundation funded the 7-year National Project in Agricultural Communications (NPAC). NPAC was the brainchild of the American Association of Agricultural College Editors (AAACE--later renamed Agricultural Communicators in Education and now called Association for Communication Excellence or ACE).

NPAC formalized the use of social science research to help shape communications training, communications research, and program outreach (Miller, 1995). NPAC called for training state-based interdisciplinary teams that made communicators full participants in the CES' program development process. "What NPAC was and did . . . helped make ACE, and agricultural communication in the land-grant system and abroad, what they are today" (Miller, 1995, p. 9).

Another goal of NPAC was to "professionalize" the field of land-grant communications (Miller, 1995). Many universities created communication faculty positions that often involved teaching or training with production duties. Like their colleagues in the traditional CES disciplines, communicators were encouraged to do theoretical and practical research and to use their professional expertise to help shape CES programming, at least within agriculture. Kellogg funding expired before this expanded role could be implemented formally within home economics and youth development programs.

Emergence of the Consulting Communicator

The Kellogg experience enriched the debate over communicators' roles. Kern (1978) outlined three possible roles for Extension communicators: the craftsman, the communication programmer, and the consulting communicator. Kern defines the consulting communicator as someone who applies knowledge of social science research to help plan communication strategies, analyze audiences, and select the best communication tools to achieve desired goals. These roles, Kern says, are not mutually exclusive, and communicators may perform different roles at different times

A handful of CES communications offices have had people officially serving as "consulting communicators" (Snowdon & Evans, 1991), although Kern said the term "named a role; it didn't create one" (as quoted in Nelson, 1979, p. 24). One problem was that "Many [communicators] . . . said they didn't feel competent to play a consulting communicator role--as differentiated from strictly a 'communications craft' role--even though they reported plenty of consulting anyway" (Nelson, 1979, p. 24).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, many scholars addressed the role of the consulting communicator (Browning, 1987; Cutler, 1977; Kern, 1978; Metcalf, 1981; Miller, 1983; Pates, 1987; Swanson, 1981). The University of Illinois is one state that embraced the consulting communicator concept. Snowdon and Evans (1991) noted that Illinois administrators tried "alliances with communications researchers on campus" and designating certain staff members as "communications planners" before settling on the use of "communications consultants." The new role required that all communications staff members be trained in analysis and planning, and it required that those skills be used to counsel administrators, specialists, and other clients in their communications needs.

In 1988, Illinois created a new position, "decision data specialist," which was filled by someone with research knowledge of marketing and business administration (Snowdon & Evans, 1991). Illinois continues that system today (Ken Spelke, 2003, e-mail correspondence).

Challenges to the Consulting Communicator Role

The 1990s brought new challenges to land-grant communications. The decade was marked by the growth of new technologies, changes in the makeup of communications staffs, and the reshaping of the communications function. By the end of the century, the number of faculty positions within CES communications offices had decreased significantly.

Most of these positions required scholarly efforts that some administrators and communicators thought conflicted with production demands. Thomas (1996) reported a 59% drop in the number of tenure-track positions within agricultural communications units between 1987 and 1995. Donnellan (1999) found that only 11.9% of respondents in her study of land-grant communications offices currently had faculty positions and planned to hire more faculty in the future. A major reason for the loss of faculty positions has been the separation of academic and applied communications programs (Boone, Meisenbach, & Tucker, 2000).

Donnellan (1999) noted a change in the structure of many communications offices because of the increased demands that communicators also be technology specialists. Of the 30 land-grant offices that responded to her study, 16 housed communications and information technology (IT) within the same unit, and 14 had separate communications and IT offices. Another change has been the increased pressure placed on communications offices to provide marketing and public relations support for their institutions (Thomas, 1996; Kingsley, 2002).

In 1980, Evans identified six reasons that hold true today as to why CES communicators have had trouble with the role of consulting communicator:

1. They are trained as journalists, not as communication consultants.
2. They are biased toward the medium in which they are trained.
3. They aren't trained to "analyze rigorously the coverage and capabilities of specific communications media."
4. They are concerned about "news," not sustained campaign messages.
5. They aren't aware of how much message repetition is necessary to reach certain audiences.
6. They tend to jump immediately from the problem to a solution without doing research, establishing objectives, and implementing a measurable program.

As a result of the demands to "do more with less," communicators might add other reasons to this list (Snowdon & Evans, 1991):

7. Heavy workloads (especially because of fewer staff and the need to be technology savvy).
8. Lack of money to hire communications specialists to focus on analysis and planning.
9. Fears of alienating traditional clients (i.e., subject-matter specialists and administrators) who are used to having communicators doing their bidding.
10. Negative attitudes held by some communicators who feel that they were hired to "do," not "sit in on planning meetings."
11. The continued emphasis by administrators on production rather than planning.

The momentum generated by NPAC and by the champions of the consulting communicator concept seems to have wavered in recent years because of the increased pressure to do more with less and because of a mind-set of some communicators who see themselves as journalists and not as marketers or public relations specialists.

Issues Programming: Renewed Potential

As NPAC's impact continued to recede within land-grant communications, a movement to adopt a similar outreach process began to emerge among USDA organizational development specialists. In 1986, CES recommended that its various units use a new paradigm--issues programming--rather than discipline-based programming. Issues programming depends on interdisciplinary teams to identify needs and problems; set priorities; plan, design and implement programs; and evaluate the effectiveness of those programs (Dalgaard, Brazzel, Liles, Sanderson, & Taylor-Powell, 1988).

Dalgaard and her colleagues (1988) remind CES educators that the issues programming process, though broad in scope, does move through Extension's time-honored steps of program development. Those steps, however, are taken in new ways. First, an issue must be identified by a team representing diverse disciplines, skills, and external stakeholders, rather than by a narrowly focused group representing one or two academic disciplines. Then, after the major issue is identified, a fully integrated interdisciplinary team begins the Extension program development

process: needs and problem identification, priority setting, planning, designing and implementing, and evaluating (Dalgaard, Brazzel, Liles, Sanderson, & Taylor-Powell, 1988).

While those supportive of the NPAC communications process may have experienced a glimmer of hope with the piloting of issues programming, some subject matter specialists and agents, on the other hand, were struggling with the new expectations. "Resistance," "conflict," and "frustration" were among terms used to describe specialists' and agents' reactions as they struggled to work on interdisciplinary, issues-focused teams (Taylor-Powell & Richardson 1990; Bahnl, 1991; Baker & Verma, 1993; Yang, Fetsch, Jenson, & Weigle, 1995).

This struggle will continue because funders demand accountability through issues programming driven by community needs (Dalgaard. Brazzel, Liles, Sanderson, & Taylor-Powell, 1988; Taylor-Powell & Richardson, 1990; Bennett, 1996; Richardson, Staton, Bateman, & Hutcheson, 2000; Kellogg Commission, 1999; Barth, Stryker, Arrington, & Syed, 1999). Once again, Extension and other land-grant university units are being challenged to become "engaged" with their communities (Kellogg Commission, 1999; Ukaga, Reichenbach, Blinn, Zak, & Hutchison, 2002; Kelsey, 2002).

The new call for accountability should send administrators, specialists, and agents back to the original issues programming documents (Montgomery 1992). Patton (1987) said Extension must change its organizational culture--values, norms, rituals, shared beliefs, and metaphors--and then convince its traditional constituencies and funding sources that such a program-creation shift is necessary. Sanderson (1988) said issues programming calls for greater organizational flexibility, greater individuality, continual self-renewal, and increased staff development. Dalgaard and her colleagues (1988) said for Extension to adopt issues programming, "appropriate education" will be needed throughout the system.

At the heart of the "issues" or "engagement" debate is one constant: staff development. Dalgaard and her colleagues (1988) foresaw this need. They recommended that Extension use the issues programming process to accomplish organizational change. Be a model, they said, by following the model. Implement internally the same program development process Extension would use in its communities. And provide appropriate staff development--especially for team members.

The Potential for Success

True to its NPAC roots, ACE has promoted a marketing model (Kingsley, 2000) that includes the consulting communicator's role in interdisciplinary teams--remarkably similar to those proposed through issues programming. Marketing--or as the authors prefer to call it, public relations--shares the same goal as issues programming: accountability (Table 1).

Table 1.
Comparison Between ACE Public Relations/Marketing Model and Issues-Based Programming

Approach	Use inter-disciplinary teams	Set goals/ priorities	Target markets	Do formative research	Set objectives	Develop market position	Develop plans	Evaluate results
ACE public relations / marketing model	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Issues-based program-ming	x	x	x	x	x		x	x

Extension administrators want communicators to be advocates, but they cannot be advocates unless the organization is--first and foremost--accountable. In other words, you must do the right programs well before you have a good story to tell.

Recommendations

1. If they haven't already done so, Extension administrators should institute and support interdisciplinary, issues-based planning teams that include consulting communicators. Communicators should not be brought in at the last minute to produce products that support educational programs designed by others. Programs must be issues-driven with measurable objectives, rather than pieced-together products that demonstrate output and not necessarily impact.

2. These planning teams must develop and communicate their measurable goals and objectives to all stakeholders.

3. Consulting communications--who have regular, direct access to decision makers and issues team leaders--should develop a clear, measurable communications plan that helps Extension meet its goals.

4. When recruiting new communicators, CES administrators and communications department heads need to link the communications skill sets they seek to the organization's communication goals and objectives. In other words, if you expect someone to market educational programs, require candidates to have audience-targeting, needs-assessment, program-evaluation, and other marketing skills--in addition to excellent writing skills.

5. Extension units need to craft job descriptions that reflect the different levels of expertise needed. All public relations counselors (i.e., consulting communicators) should be able to write well, but not all good writers need be consulting communicators. Communications staffs need both types of employees.

6. CES administrators and communications department heads need to link their employees' professional development opportunities to the organization's communications goals and objectives. In other words, if you expect existing staff to assess program impact, make sure that they receive regular training in program evaluation. In fact, all members of Extension planning teams need training in how to write measurable objectives and how to develop programs to achieve those objectives.

   A possible measurable objective, for example, would be "To increase use of Extension best management practices by 50 percent of our state's beef producers within the next year." This is a programmatic goal, but it entails communications goals as well. Communications products or activities (e.g., news releases, Web sites, videos, workshop notebooks, farm tours) should be crafted to help meet the programmatic objective. If they do not support it, then those products or activities should be revised or eliminated.

7. Administrators need to encourage and reward their communicators, as well as other subject matter specialists, who seek advanced public relations training that will better prepare them to be involved in issues programming and to perform higher-level communications functions.

8. Extension administrators should turn to ACE for training in marketing and public relations.

9. ACE could help Extension administrators better understand how to align communications goals and communications functions. Such help could include examples of relevant communications position descriptions and research findings on communications effectiveness.

Conclusions

When the W.K. Kellogg Foundation supported NPAC in the 1950s, the role of the communicator began to evolve from that of a technician to the more responsible role as a member of interdisciplinary planning teams guided by social science methods. Yet cutbacks in budgets and the increased need for an information technology infrastructure have led land-grant organizations to demand more product delivery and less leadership from its communications (and more often, "communications and technology") units.

The momentum and focus of NPAC should be regained. The challenge for CES and its research and teaching partners at land-grant universities is to recognize and embrace the idea that their organizational goals can best be met by having well-trained communicators serving in both leadership and support roles on issues programming teams.

At the same time, Extension communications offices and administrators need to embrace a public relations model that recognizes communications as a critical management function in support of Extension goals. Rather than shun "public relations" in favor of "journalism," communicators must begin to see public relations as a program delivery process for "relations with publics" for the mutual good of the organization and the people it serves. Training in public relations and marketing is essential for all members of interdisciplinary program planning teams. Accountability requires nothing less.

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