

## **The role of extension literature and other communication media in information transfer**

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*Summary.* The need to learn from the past, to improve extension in the future, becomes more pressing as the number of people in face-to-face extension diminishes while the diversity of opportunities for risk-taking by farmers increases. Irrespective of what method and medium is chosen for information transfer, it is essential to target the appropriate audience with the right message, and to project the benefits or 'hot buttons' of the information that will arouse the desired change. Extension literature for farmers represents a large investment. Recent studies on adult literacy in Australia lead one to question the wisdom of such investment (4). What do we know about our main audience? We argue that using such information will guide us towards a far more effective extension paradigm for the 1990s which is less reliant on literature.

### **Introduction**

The history of extending agricultural research in Australia teaches us that failure to get the message adopted by farmers is not necessarily due to any weakness in the research itself. What we may have failed to do is cater for the way people receive and then adopt that information. We assert that to date, much of the emphasis in information transfer has been on the technology itself and not enough on the transfer process. Yet experience teaches us that to convince anyone to adopt a concept, the potential recipient must be aware of it, the concept must be relevant, and the benefits obvious. So it is with extending information to farmers; by focusing mainly on the technology, the tendency is to ignore other aspects which make communication effective. We can present an idea, yet nobody listens. What we must do is say it in such a way that people feel it in their 'guts', because if they don't feel it, behaviour may not change.

Extension literature has an important role in information transfer, and many resources go towards production, perhaps disproportionately so. Literature's role in extension has been more one of educating rather than creating awareness or motivation, resulting in publications being poorly targeted, both to the audience and in the form of messages therein. This is now changing, albeit slowly, as information transfer practitioners become more astute in information transfer techniques.

If extension is not to echo its past failures, it must integrate market research and other practices into its philosophy. This paper integrates findings from the distant past, recent extension studies in North-western NSW, and communication practices from a major agribusiness group to once again demonstrate the need for change in communication strategies in extension, and more importantly to show how the resulting tactics might work for more effective information transfer.

### **Methods**

Three preliminary studies in North-western NSW were carried out to ascertain farmers' preferences for the style and medium of information transfer. Two mail surveys asked farmers to comment on plain English (1) publications for farmers; the second also asked them to choose between an extension publication and an audiocassette with similar messages, as their preferred medium for getting information. About 100 farmers responded to the surveys.

### **Results and discussion**

In the first survey, 84% of respondents endorsed the plain English approach. This rose to 95% in the second and larger survey (3), in which almost half the respondents requested follow-up information by audiocassette in preference to a publication. While these surveys are preliminary only, agribusiness' experiences support the concept that farmers would like to see change in the

extension material they get. In lieu of more astute enquiries, these studies can contribute to the design and use of extension material.

What do we mean? Our assertion is twofold; that publications may no longer be a cost-effective medium for information transfer and that effective transfer necessitates a multi-media onslaught, in a planned communication strategy. Much extension information nowadays is poorly targeted; extension relies heavily on the scattergun approach to get the message across. But we know farmers (like the rest of us) differ in demographic profiles, as Table 1 illustrates. The more we know about how groups of farmers differ, the better will we be able to target individuals within groups with messages specifically for them (5).

**Table 1. Demographic segmentation of 1200 farmers (Courtesy Agrimark 1991).**

	Scientific	Opinion Leaders	Traditionals	Non Planners
Proportion (%) of broadacre farmers	10-15	20-25	30-35	30-35
Relative size (as stock equiv)	10.6	6.6	5.7	4.5
Farm Cash Operating Surplus Average (x\$000)	64	72	54	38
Average Equity (%)	80	87	90	91
Average Age	47	50	53	57

The major difference between the groupings of 'scientific' and 'opinion leaders' was that the former perceived science as important in property management, the latter were more conservative. Both groups were innovative, but it was the opinion leaders who were more respected by their farming peers. These data are presented to illustrate the point that in extending information, it is important to first ask 'to whom is the information relevant?' (there always will be contention about how meaningful the categorisations are). A message to the first group is likely to be couched differently to a message to the second, based on what we know about individuals within the two groups, even if the essential messages are the same. The group called the 'traditionals' consisted of farmers who learn from what the opinion leaders do. Given this, and with scarce resources for extension, perhaps the time has come for extension to stop trying to meet the needs of every group.

As important as targeting, is the notion of using multiple media. We know already that extension literature is not widely read by farmers, nor has it been (3, 2). Table 2 illustrates the need to use a broad communication strategy in targeting audiences. Less than one-quarter of farmers in a target group read rural newspapers, in contrast to television being watched by about one-half. This suggests that over-reliance on a publication strategy to get the message across would be unwise, a conclusion also drawn from the study (3) in which farmers were asked to choose between publications and audiotapes as the information transfer vehicle. Variation between watching and reading was considerable; the reach of different media may be less than that commonly perceived by extension personnel.

**Table 2. Interaction of 1800 farmers with different media (Courtesy Wilson Rural Readership Survey 1988).**

	Beef herd size greater than 500 head	Area cereal grown greater than 500 ha
Read the Land	25.6%	17.3%
Read QLD Country Life	7.4%	5.9%
Watch local Sunday News	45.3%	38.1%
Watch Beyond 2000	54.4%	49.7%

In addition to targeting individuals within groups with multiple media, the information being transferred must 'sell' benefits to the recipient. There must be something in the change for the farmer. Just what that might be can differ for individual farmers. Too often we assume that all farmers want is increased productivity, or profit. Our experience is that many want neither; other things may be more important (Table 3). Knowing what appeals to individuals enables us to present our extension messages to satisfy that desire or need.

Extension is a conservative profession, as the past demonstrates. Contrasting what extension does with what other organisations (such as advertising agencies) do to change adult behaviour makes this clear. More recently, there has been a move away from extension's role of giving advice, to one of adult education. The change in emphasis is welcome and certainly timely, but the fear is that in a narrow sense, even this focus will be insufficient for effective extension. What's needed, in our view, is an eclectic approach to getting the message across, using all the skills which help information transfer to make our efforts work for us, not against us.

We argue towards a paradigm in which extension:

- delivers an essential message,
- triggers the real benefit for the farmer,
- speaks directly to the target audience (a person typical of that group),
- provides access to useful information for the keen farmer,
- translates into tangible benefits for the individual, the community and the land.

**Table 3. Potential 'hot button' benefits for correct fertiliser application on cereals.**

Experience/ Challenge	Practical	Sensory	Social	Ego/ Satisfaction
In-use	yields go up	crops greener	favourable comment	I'm a better farmer
Results-of-use	cost per tonne goes down	more grain	cheque bigger	doing for Australia
Incidental-to-use	more income per hectare	expectations raised	can afford new things	I can adapt to change

To do this most successfully, we need to be sure of the action we want to stimulate, the typical person we want to influence, the single message on which to focus the communication, and how to get that thought to the target. Reliance on any one paradigm alone will not capture these crucial elements of effective information transfer.

Effectiveness will depend always on extension agents addressing the messages to individuals. For best results, the agents will choose to use multiple media techniques to transfer aspects of the information. This will ensure it reaches the recipient in the most applicable form for that medium. Information needs to be presented so that the essential message is clear and concise. Clarity to the farmer will be achieved when the information (especially in the initial awareness stage) is portrayed in a way that highlights the major benefit of adopting the practice to appeal to the person originally targeted. Extension literature for farmers, under the approach outlined in this paper, will have a more limited role than in the past, serving as reference material for motivated farmers hungry for answers.

## **References**

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