

ESCOP Communication and Marketing Committee

NASULGC – Kellogg Room, Washington, DC
May 23, 2006

Minutes

Jerry Arkin, Chair

In Attendance:

Jerry Arkin (GA), Chair
Tom Fretz (NERA), Executive Vice-Chair
Janet Allen (CSREES)
Angela Dansby, Consultant
David Gobey (OH)
Ronald Lacewell (TX)
Ronald Pardini (NV)
William Ravlin (OH)
Jim Spurling (CSREES)
Rubie Mize (NERA), Recorder

1. Review Committee Purpose and Past Activities – Jerry Arkin

The committee is charged to provide “*guidance in the assessment of impacts resulting from SAES/ARD system; developing marketing strategies/initiatives, when appropriate; and leading ESCOP's advocacy efforts*”. The committee therefore is not expected to undertake activities such as the actual development of a strategic plan, but can only make recommendations to the ESCOP Executive Committee.

Past activities include:

- Successful and timely publication of the *Formula for Success* that was used by CARET and was highlighted at the *Ag. Science on the Hill* Exhibit in 2005.
- Endorsed the seminar series concept developed by BRT to engage political support for important topics such as Water Quality, Land Use etc.
- The committee continues to focus attention on how our impact statements can be improved and efficiently used as a marketing tool.
- The committee continues to assist in the identification of hot topics for the development of the system impact statements, and how to draw attention to these issues within the system and our stakeholders.

J. Arkin noted that by the end of the meeting we should be able to report back to the ESCOP leadership and provide a recommendation as to (1) the need to engage professional assistance to help develop a Strategic Communication and Marketing Plan for ESCOP, and (2) seek endorsement develop such plan and commitment to provide resources.

A follow-up to the letter sent to D.C. Coston (May 19, 2005) requesting an in-depth evaluation of Ag. Science on the Hill. This committee recommended that the Exhibit should be:

- Thematic to tie the exhibits together.
- Clearly and visibly demonstrate the level of contribution of federal formula, state match and grant/contract funds.
- Review of the cost and benefit to the institutions participating.
- Move away from “poster/display” orientation to other types of communication (e.g., presentations by excellent communicators on timely topics. Press briefing and the need for a press room were discussed.

It was suggested that we are trying to target too many different audiences at one time. Segmenting the audience will help identify how messages can be conveyed effectively by: CDs, websites, podcasts, etc. There are better ways to catch the attention of the staffers attending the event. Inviting experts to speak briefly on impactful issues and setting up a section for the press during the exhibit maybe more effective. A list of the local press people in Washington, DC should be compiled and these people should be invited to these events. Could this event have greater impact if linked to the National Ag. Day when there is already an existing link to the press.

The new Undersecretary for Research, Education and Economics, Dr. Gale Buchanan is very supportive of the system. ARS is cooperating with CSREES on communications issues.

It appears that the segment of the audience we need to concentrate on are: **the Administration, OSTP and OMB**. It was felt that as a system we already do a good job locally in garnering support from our state legislators. Where does the LGU leadership come into play to make sure that research generated from the LGUs is brought into the discussion, and not just ARS?

2. CSREES Communications Unit Update and Discussions – Janet Allen

- RSS feeds for news releases will be used to prompt specific readers/subscribers
- The listserv being developed now has about 700 names
- “Marketing is a matching game. Understanding who the audiences are and making them do what we want them to do.”
- What tools can we use to make our message more attractive than everything else?
- **Partners Video** – A suggestion was made to conduct a survey on how we’re using this? Are there others who might be able to use them? Some videos have been shown in PBS. How about Discovery and National Geographic Channels? Production quality is excellent, but need to concentrate on marketing and targeting the right audience who will find this useful. Continually need to be innovative to market better.
- **“Protecting Our Homeland”** video will be released in Sept. 2006.
- ARS magazine is very expensive to produce. Still looking at a virtual magazine (e-zine or web-zine). Online magazines are searchable. Is this where people will search for impact statements? Important segment of our audience is the **faculty**. We should

- not forget to design these materials with this audience in mind. There are faculty who don't know AES, CSREES etc. CSREES markets the program, not the system.
- A CSREES Marketing Advisory Board is in the process of being organized. Members will come from all COPs, and representatives from the 1890s, 1862s and 1994s. Ideally, the representative should be a communications person. This group will look at “branding”, impact statements. A suggestion was made to **add outsiders** to the membership so that we are “not just talking to ourselves”. The leadership from COPs should bring in other science communicators. We need to become part of the federal science community. The Professional Science Writer's Group may be a good place to start.
 - Important to relate our message to what the public is interested in, say “cost of fuel” and tie that into biofuels. “Connect my pain with a LGU solution”. “Do we hold the keys to a big solution?” This is where it is important to find a flagship issue that we could rally behind. Grab an issue and make it our own. Avian flu is a good example because USDA took leadership on this.
 - “Can we really make ourselves equal, to say NIH?” It might be more feasible to dovetail to NIH and DHHS on certain issues. We can't compete with their resources.
 - “We need an elevator speech that will explain briefly what our system (CSREES-LGU) is all about.
 - Janet distributed copies of the CSREES Communications brainstorming paper. They then selected the top 3 audiences, hot topics and the most cost effective tools. Success will be measured along the way. This is to lay out the groundwork for the tasks of the Advisory Board. This committee could undertake a similar exercise and identify our top 3 audience, topics and tools.
 - “We seem to have trouble conveying the message that this is what we've done with so much federal dollars.” Extension does a better job, than research. For special research, one-pagers are required to report when this project is over and how this has leveraged other funds.
 - “How do we brand, and what do we brand?” Different COPs is problematic. We are different things to different people. CSREES would brand them all: Research, Extension and Education. In our partnership, do we value each and every contribution?
 - Wherever possible, we should add by-line that says, “USDA is part of the national system promoting excellent research”.
 - Have we listed our system's strengths?
 - List of effective ag. communicators that we can put on TV, radio, media.
 - Capitalize on 3rd party academics who are experts on issues relevant to society (best resource that the system has!)
 - Develop expertise list that we can provide for each issue
 - We will need to have system buy-in that the list we develop are our “**media-friendly superstars**” who will speak for the system on specific issues. Research may not just be in one state so there has to be a formal agreement among ourselves and our partners.
 - It is also good to have state based communicators for certain topics. Each state can develop its own list. The list should include unbiased experts that people trust – alphabetical by topic area by state, and compiled in a similar format such as the “little

- green book” with a short explanation on what an Experiment Station is and why these people are credible.
- Try developing the “green book” in a couple of states as prototypes and then we can replicate this in others. Pick a few (not more than six) hot topics such as food safety, avian flu, bio-based products, BSE, environmental quality, disaster response, alternative crops and homeland security. Market this list to the local papers, for ex. The Washington Post and the Baltimore Sun, and also give copies to local legislators
 - It is also effective to have experts speak at conferences such as the upcoming N-CFAR meeting. Dovetail on similar seminars/workshops to increase our visibility, educate people about us and have our messages resonate over and over that our system is producing good science that is highly relevant to society and contributes to our homeland security.
 - The experts who will represent the system need to undergo an orientation or some kind of training. What’s expected of them? Somehow the introduction needs to be scripted so they would introduce themselves, for example as “an Ag. Experiment Station Avian Influenza expert from UGA...”, and not just “an AI expert from UGA”. The expert should also mention the other key states working on the issue.
 - Enlist the assistance of individuals coming from non-agriculture backgrounds to gain new perspectives and marketing strategies for different audiences.

3. Impact Statements

- Examples of good impact statements were distributed. Some still needs to be rewritten but the impacts were getting now are better than before. The writers are able to describe impacts in terms of what they do and why it matters. We are aiming for quality over quantity.
- Hard to sell agriculture because it’s been very successful. Other nations have attempted but failed to establish a land-grant system similar to ours. There is 1.8% increase in agricultural productivity each year (in decreasing acreage) and we are able to keep up with the demands of consumers and of increasing population, keeping our food prices very affordable. Regardless of these facts, the system must find new ways to present impacts that speak to “issues of the day” apart from agriculture and yet maintain traditional clientele.
- There needs to be an overall strategy story.
- We should also use our **surprise factor!** We are ready to address AI because there has been over 30 years of agricultural research already invested in that disease. This is the same for SARS and Mad Cow.
- Reaching audience beyond our community is the real challenge. The scope of agriculture has changed significantly, but the public perception is still the same. To the general public agricultural = farming and has little to do with science.
- Janet was encouraged to share with everyone or at least the Executive Directors what the Communications Unit is working on. The EDs highlights those they think are important and are of interest to their directors.
- A suggestion was made to pick 4 or 5 significant areas and gather impacts to show in a DVD format. Write the credit as, “This is the cumulative impact in our nation supported partly be federal formula funds.”

- ARS sends out story leads to the media regularly. Start picking two impacts every month and send them out as web-zine. If we start promoting impacts to the media, then there is incentive for scientists to write them and do a better job writing those impacts.

4. ESCOP Communication and Marketing Strategy

- There shouldn't be any problem selling to our directors the right communication plan if we come up with a highly impactful communication action to market to a broader audience and they agree that it will cost the system money to develop and implement an effective plan.
- The CSREES Marketing Advisory Board will look into the impacts. Do we want to continue receiving them? Should we continue the week-long practice of bringing in ag. communicators and have them write articles from the impacts? We need to make the database more useful.
- The system is doing a great job in garnering local support. The disconnect is in the national level. Impact statements should be changed and used as marketing pieces.
- Select themes and assign a writer to write a national story: disaster response, alternative fuel, food safety and value added products to name a few.
- It is obvious that the system needs professional help to market these impacts, and in putting together a marketing and communication strategic plan. The plan should include a continuous flow of materials that will increase the visibility of our research and the system.
- It is important to quote scientists and have their contact info available so the media can collect their own stories.
- The question we need to answer is, "Why will we continue to support this infrastructure?" Because we have years of experience and can be responsive.
- Take one topic and carry that from start to end. Homeland security is a good topic to start with.

5. Action Items

- Tom Fretz will draft a memo to the ESCOP Executive Committee enumerating the recommendations from this group:
 - a) Revisit our previous recommendations for the Ag. Exhibit – should be thematic, demonstrate level of contributions from federal, state and others, and conduct a cost-benefit analysis. Suggest "Protecting Our Homeland" as the theme for next year's Ag Exhibit.
 - b) Endorse a plan to develop a communication and marketing strategic plan. Develop a pre-proposal with the resource requirements (budget). The purpose is to obtain the leadership's support and eventually to commit financial resources to develop the strategic plan. A suggestion was made to organize the pre-proposal in three sections: Outreach, media relations and partnerships. State up-front the top 3 audiences, issues and tools or ways to get there. Capitalize on the strengths of the system: unbiased third party objectivity, perceived credibility, legacy, state representation, relevancy, intimate knowledge of local and global impacts, synergy.

- CSREES Communications Unit will proceed with organizing the Marketing Advisory Board. It was suggested that the Marketing Advisory Board have a healthy mix of system (Ag and non-Ag) participants. Members of the ESCOP Communication and Marketing Committee have also agreed to participate if requested to do so.
- Our new deputy undersecretary is very supportive of the system. This is a valuable opportunity to sell us to OSTP and be recognized as a member of the federal research body.
- Restructure the way impact statements are collected and distributed to use podcast, e-zine, and videos, with a follow-up assessment of its effectiveness. This committee supports the development of virtual magazine.
- Compile list of media people in the Washington, DC area. Janet Allen and her staff can help gather this info.
- Jim Spurling will remember to bring up the issue of holding a Partnership Workshop (Baltimore II) in the future. In the meantime, we should give Gale Buchanan time to work and see where his efforts will go. The committee recognizes the need to jumpstart the partnership and put the past behind.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

Rubie G. Mize

May 23, 2006