

VIEWPOINTS

Viewpoints and Letters to the Editor are published in *HortScience* to provide members of the American Society for Horticultural Science an opportunity to share their experiences and comments

on matters of concern to horticulturists. These are not statements of official Society policy nor do they necessarily reflect the views of a majority of the Society's members.

The Challenge of Communications¹

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If we expect to receive support for our various endeavors we must convince those from whom that support must come that it is merited. This convincing can come only through understandable communications to the various segments of our support base which I divide into 5 categories: *Ourselves* - that is, our professional colleagues; *Our administrators* - university, federal or corporate; *Government officials* - elected and appointed, state and federal, also administrators within the political system (heads of budget bureaus and program administrators); *Our constituents* - the limited public segment who supposedly directly benefit from our endeavors, such as fruit growers, vegetable producers, florists, canners, etc; and *The general public* - those not directly connected with our profession but who benefit from it, including all consumers.

How well do we communicate with these support groups and how might we improve?

Ourselves

We keep ourselves better informed than any other group. There is obvious room for improvement but we have reasonably good communication between horticultural science and education via the *ASHS Journal*, *HortScience*, other scientific or semi-scientific publications, conferences, meetings, symposia, workshops and private communications.

Unfortunately many of us think our communication responsibility ends with a published paper in the *Journal* or by presenting a 15 minute research paper at one of our annual meetings. At a recent seminar on agricultural science communications, S. H. Wittwer, Director of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station said, "*A large part of what we write and say is only for our professional colleagues and does little more than further the discipline.*"²

Our Administrators

The higher the level of administration, the poorer the communications. Too many administrators are bogged down with

petty personnel problems and imposed bureaucratic procedures to the point they do not know what is going on.

Department chairman, experiment station directors and similar administrative officers in government and corporate organizations are reasonably well informed, but the higher levels of administration are more poorly informed. Most university presidents and vice presidents no longer have their "roots" in agriculture, therefore they must be "force fed." Too often militant students and vocal social scientists command all the time and attention of the top university administrators at the expense of their education in agriculture. In times of budget pinch it is easy for a university vice-president to replace an agricultural program with some social program. But he will be less inclined to do so if he either appreciates and understands agriculture, or if he knows that the state's agricultural industries will rise up in alarm if he does reduce agricultural programs.

How can we improve communications with top level administrators in universities or other organizations?

First, through personal contact and participation in organizational affairs. Too many of us prefer to tend to our own business rather than participate in university committees or campus activities. If we expect to be heard, we must be visible and active.

Second, by informing administrators, including presidents, boards of regents and other officials of important accomplishments. These types of communications should be short, readable and not filled with unnecessary verbiage.

Third, through news releases that mean something so they will be published and read. Every bit of new research information does not warrant publication, but important and meaningful accomplishments, recommendations and recognitions will attract and command space, even in big city newspapers.

Fourth, through agricultural advisory councils composed of respected, politically-potent agricultural leaders. Every top level administrator could benefit greatly from a two-way flow of communications. The council could

provide strong support for our programs and at the same time keep our administrators advised of pressing agricultural problems.

Government Officials

Elected officials respond to pressures from constituents, not from supposed needs or requests from scientists. An example of this was the budget crisis in the state of Washington during this past year.

The governor's budget presented in January 1971 called for a \$5 million reduction in the agricultural research and extension budget. This was equivalent to a reduction in state funds of 28% for research and 43% for extension for the two year biennium. Support was marshalled from farm groups, individual farmers, chambers of commerce, banks, allied industries, and even big city newspapers. These individuals and organizations did an amazing job, in a very short time, of educating the public and the elected officials as to the real importance of agriculture in the state of Washington. Up to that time it is doubtful that many members of the legislature realized that agriculture is still Washington's number one industry and that it provides more jobs than Boeing. Two-thirds of the proposed cut was restored in the budget, even though the state was suffering very serious financial problems.

Most public officials and politicians are not against agriculture, they are just not for it. All have many pressures from social organizations, environmental groups, labor unions, etc. They are besieged from every side concerning pet projects or programs, and the squeaky wheel gets the grease. Also, politicians, per se, do not make up budgets. Budgets are drawn up by budget or finance directors. These are trained bookkeepers who don't know beans from tomatoes and could care less. Thus, any sizeable item pertaining to agriculture can be red-flagged without any tinge of conscience from their standpoint.

There are some who think it is inevitable that public support for agricultural programs will decline and die. Obviously, agriculture is declining in direct representation in the halls of law making. But we should not assume that agriculture cannot have influence in state or national government just because there are fewer agricultural members in the legislative bodies. *The major problem is that agriculture as a whole is apologetic, disorganized, and ununited.* There is no such thing as

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²National Seminar on Agricultural Science Communication. Jan. 25-28, 1971. Arlington, Va. Sponsored by A.R.S. & Office of Info., U.S. Dept. of Agr.

majority rule in this country. It is organized minorities that get things done.

I believe we can educate legislators and other government officials if we have consistent and sensible communication programs. We need to present our legislative committees with regular reviews of agricultural programs and tours of facilities. Elected state officials, including governors, should be invited to observe agricultural success programs just as they do city and business programs.

Key agricultural leaders and commodity managers must be better informed and they must be kept up-to-date. These are the people who have direct access to legislative leaders. They must be our friends if the legislative pipeline is to be open to us.

Our Constituents

They must like us, or pity us, or we would not receive the support we do. In too many cases we shortchange our constituents both in our writing and speaking techniques. We must have high standards in order to compete with the Madison Avenue approaches of industry, but our messages must be clear and understandable. Many researchers are so afraid of misstating facts that they completely merge pertinent points in a forest of statistical irrelevancy.

A recent letter to the editor of a prominent horticultural publication said, "I've been in this business 45 years, yet I can't understand people to whom I pay taxes to support research which is supposed to help my business. I

wonder if they maybe could write in a little simpler language which I could understand. Or, is this against the rules of the 'Union of Horticultural Research Workers of the World'?"³

Our publications are often unattractive and crammed with excessive text, complex tables and eye-shattering graphs. We could take some lessons from the annual reports of industrial organizations. In order to impress stockholders, most American companies have long since determined that simple tables, short text and colorful bar graphs are most effective. Modern advertising has captured the fancy of the general public, including our own constituents. A recent two-page ad on Alar⁴ appeared in practically every fruit grower's magazine in the United States. It probably was read by more fruit growers and had greater impact than any article ever written on this material by a researcher or extension specialist. In the aforementioned agricultural science communications seminar S. H. Wittwer said, "Most publications of state experiment stations and those of USDA agencies are in a sorry state. There has been little progress in fifty years."

The General Public

Individual scientists have little impact on the general public, except in their own local communities. We need high level, highly professional approaches to public relations and

³American Nurseryman, June 15, 1971.

⁴Trade formulation of succinic acid-2,2-dimethylhydrazide.

public information. We must compete with industry, labor, government agencies, radio and TV personalities and self-appointed national critics of science and technology.

The general public is constantly bombarded and brain washed with antiagricultural and often antiscientific propaganda. It is usually very difficult to get rebuttal information into newspapers or other news media against fallacious or untruthful information concerning agriculture. And, we in agriculture should never resort to similar tactics of half-truth, innuendo or scare techniques in order to get our stories heard. Somehow we must be more imaginative in our communication approaches to the general public without sacrificing the absolute need to present the facts.

Finally, all of us in horticulture must recognize the importance for better communications. We cannot continue to obtain public support by communicating primarily with ourselves. And without public support we will cease to exist as viable contributors to society. Research administrators must recognize and reward those who do a superior job of communicating. Perhaps a well-written and illustrated article in *American Vegetable Grower* ought to carry as much weight on the promotion and salary pile as a journal research article. People ought to be hired for their public relations value as well as their ability to do chemical analysis or cytogenetic studies.

Letters to the Editor

You Have Problems?

So has ASHS! In the 4 years of its history, your Finance Committee (FC) has wrestled mightily with the financial problems of the Society, with the human strengths and frailties common to us all. During that period, the financial position of ASHS has deteriorated. Why? Remember, that first FC had no background, no history, no benchmarks. Manuscripts submitted ran well ahead of projections thereby enlarging publications, while at the same time page charges were not realistic. Further, it took about 3 years to realize that the erosion of inflation had not been factored into projections.

Something had to be done, and quickly. Page charges were increased. While still not up to what it costs the Society, and above that of some other societies, page charges are still below others (\$100/page for ASAE). Dues had to be raised. How much? In one increment or several? Much deliberation produced the 5 year plan adopted. This was presented and approved at the 1971 annual business meeting at Kansas State.

However, many members were not present at that meeting, and there has been much misunderstanding of the dues increase. Looking ahead 5 years, simple arithmetic told us that just to stand still we had to raise an additional \$55,000 to cover inflation at 5% annually. Further, in recent years we have been borrowing at commercial rates (less than half the penalty for delayed payment of bills) to meet mid-year printing bills which are geared to regular publication and bear no relation to cyclic income from dues payments and subscription renewals.

We are worried about our headquarters in the remodeled barbershop in Michigan. It is a firetrap, and we are to the point where we must rent outside space to store back issues of our publications. The HQ Committee told us that for long-range economic reasons, we should start now to accumulate something toward building or buying our own HQ. The proposed Renewable Resources Center near Washington, D. C. was an interesting possibility, but only that. The course

taken was simply to hold in escrow 50% of each annual dues increase increment for some kind of HQ ownership, and to use the balance to cover inflation and annual business of the Society.

How is it working out? At the end of 1971, prepayment of 1972 dues provided a building escrow account of \$3,733. This is a start, if a small one. We borrowed \$25,000 beginning in May of last year to cover mid-year bills. This year we didn't have to borrow until mid-August, and may live with a maximum loan of \$15,000 in 1972. For next year the FC has decided to borrow from our building fund in escrow (at prevailing rates) for the mid-year crunch, and we hope to have sufficient funds to obviate an "outside" loan. Our year-end, unrestricted cash balance is not likely to improve appreciably this year, but in this, our first year of the dues increase, your FC is breathing regularly again, if softly. We are in no position to build or buy a HQ building. We have an opportunity to move HQ to a most desirable facility in Minnesota, but this is a rental only and within our budget. Members present at the 1972 business meeting approved a Board of