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Let's open agriculture's black box

At several recent national meetings of agricultural research administrators, a perennial topic has occupied a prominent share of the discussion, namely, the need to improve our communication with persons whom we wish understood better what we do and for whom we do it. It seems ironic that, as the technology for visual and oral communication advances steadily, we learn more about the makeup and appearance of the surface of the moon and Mars than we do about the accomplishments in our universities.

To capture people's attention in this modern climate of mass and repetitive communication through radio, television, newspapers, and magazines, some extraordinary event is required. Tragedy, sex, scandal, and crime occupy a large part of the news media. Agricultural research hardly qualifies under any of these categories, although some critics are not too sure we wouldn't qualify under a couple of them.

Most of us understand the problem of competing for public attention. Much effort is expended in designing and publishing attractive eye-catching bulletins and brochures. We have been telling our story on television and in films. But our "prime" TV and radio time is usually before 6 a.m. on weekdays, on Saturday afternoons, or on Sunday mornings.

I would like to suggest to my colleagues that, as long as we place our primary attention on mass-media communication, we will fail in our efforts. Our messages do not qualify for today's news priorities.

As our society becomes more urbanized, and the agricultural portion of it becomes smaller and smaller, the public, through its instruments of government, must take special care to maintain agriculture and its supporting endeavors in a healthy and vital state. But this may not be done unless the

public understands the whole complex, the role of research and education, and why these activities lead to a more satisfying life for everyone.

So, what should we do? First, let's examine the methods we have used in the past to communicate with our traditional rural audiences. We have done a pretty effective job of communicating with that clientele, and most of them, few as they are today, know the essential value of research and education to the vitality of their rural activities. A key factor in our rural communication, in addition to the rural press, radio, and television, has been *involvement* of this rural clientele in the *process* of research and education. The groups with whom we've communicated have had representatives on our research and college advisory committees. Many individuals have been and are personally involved in field research, workshops, task groups, review teams, or in other ways. The key is *involvement*.

We cannot involve the more than 200 million Americans in agricultural research and education, but few would disagree that all Americans depend on the activities of our agricultural complex.

We can—indeed, we *must*—involve representatives of the various segments of the public in policy determination, review of research and education programs, and even as co-investigators when appropriate. Becoming a part of the process will create vested interests and wider understanding of goals, implementation, and benefits of research. My suggestion is not offered as a substitute for the present spoken or visual methods of communication. It is a plea for the agricultural community to open up its "black box" to audience participation. There are risks; uncomfortable challenges will develop. But the power of an informed public is supreme. An informed public is our goal. Let's open up our black boxes and involve our public in the enterprises of research for their benefit.