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The need for expanded agricultural communication

A recurring theme which appears in this column is concerned with communication. I return to that topic periodically, because it continues to present one of the most elusive challenges with which our modern technologically based society must contend.

In the period since World War II we have seen many of what at one time were dreams and fantasies become realities. Exploring outer space, landing people on the moon, transmitting pictures millions of miles in the blinking of an eye, developing computers for innumerable complex tasks, and applying the results of research in chemistry and physics in medicine and industry have all become accepted parts of our lives within just the past 30 years. Advances in agriculture have not been as spectacular, but they have been remarkably significant. In many instances, the developments in agriculture have drawn on the same basic discoveries that have made possible the achievements in other fields.

Life for most of us is no longer a simple matter of devoting most of our energies and working hours to growing plants and raising animals for our food and clothing needs. Others do that for us, and although we don't understand how it happens, we expect our supermarkets, restaurants, and clothing stores to provide us with a great variety of foods and fabrics at relatively low cost. Over the past several decades, population changes resulting in a shift in political power have broadened the base of decision making regarding allocation of resources to agricultural research and education so that it now includes urban constituencies. It is essential that these decision makers be better informed about the activities and results of agricultural research and the effects they have on our lives.

Recently Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE) held its annual meeting in Berkeley and listened to several speakers lay out some challenges for the 1980s. Prominent among these was the need to expand our communication efforts to the urban audience. For years, the principal function of our communications specialists has

been to interpret new research findings for the *users* of the new technologies, improved animal breeds, and plant varieties. Today, we also have to reach a larger, more diverse, less technically oriented audience. Much of this audience is not interested in the intricacies of technological gadgets, biological manipulations, and engineering masterpieces. They want to know how our work affects their food and fiber supplies, how agriculture affects the environment, why such hazardous chemicals have to be used in agriculture, why agriculture seems to be the recipient of many favored laws and regulations, and why they, the public, should support, through their taxes, the benefits and services which appear to them to accrue to so few people and industries. These questions are not frivolous. They arise in part out of a lack of understanding of the present food and fiber system in the United States.

I urge our agricultural communicators to think seriously about how to broaden the understanding of what agriculture is and what it provides each person in the United States and many people abroad. Reaching the urban audience with this kind of information won't be easy and it won't be done solely through the mass media. In addition to adult audiences, we also need to direct our information efforts to elementary and high schools.

The name "agricultural communicators in education" implies exactly what I think is needed today. Because our audience includes both youths and adults, both rural and urban dwellers, both rich and poor people, and persons of a variety of ethnic backgrounds, the means of communication must be multiple and varied.

The information, too, must be appropriate to the questions which these different groups ask. The priorities of the 1980s for communication efforts must include this broadened constituency. Until urban America understands fully how important a healthy agricultural system is to the well-being of everyone, there will be diminished opportunity to communicate with our traditional rural audiences.