



Message heard and understood

Sarah Reynolds, UK

DEVELOPMENT DEPENDS UPON communication. To have practical benefit, development specialists wishing to influence change in policies, change in attitude or adoption of technologies, must communicate clearly and effectively so that the message is heard and understood by all those who could potentially benefit from their activities.

Furthermore, competition for development funds is fierce. Development agencies, research institutes, and others dependent on external funding, need to present a high profile. They need to demonstrate that their projects and programmes have been effective. They need to demonstrate that their proposals for future work justify support. They need to reach people of influence. The mass media - print, radio and the Internet - offers rapid, widespread knowledge transfer to different target groups adding further value to interpersonal communication.

What makes a good communicator?

Communication is only effective if it is done well. The Internet can be fascinating or frustratingly uninformative. Newspaper articles can grip attention from the first sentence or be so tedious that although the eyes may have scanned to the bottom of the first column, the brain has refused to take in the meaning of a single sentence. Radio can keep you hooked to every word or but dimly aware of distant, undistinguished sound. Good communicators:

- Put their audience's interests first
- Respect their audience
- Are knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their subject
- Use their own and others' experience to illustrate what they mean
- Admit to failures as well as successes
- Talk in straightforward, jargon-free language.

Good communicators are understood

No-one could presume to claim that good communication skills alone can influence change but, without good communication, the chances of change are, at best, slim.

Which mass media?

It matters not how good the communicator is if the communication channel fails to flow to the intended audience. Radio programmes in Bangladesh, for example, that are intended for women may rarely be heard because men, who buy the batteries for the radio, and therefore

control its use, are not interested in listening. Street theatre is widespread and enjoyed by the poorest in society but is usually watched by men only. Many plays re-enact the fight for Independence, and the history and culture of the nation, although some carry 'development' information. However, to play in rural villages requires the agreement of the village chairman which, especially in the fundamentalist villages is rarely given since street theatre is considered both morally and politically subversive. Designing a communication strategy requires an understanding of the barriers. The message must be heard as well as understood..

The intimacy of the spoken word

There is no more powerful means of communication than the spoken word. Radio is one-to-one communication by spoken word directly into the mind of the listener. Good radio has unparalleled reach and influence; it can introduce new ideas, change attitudes and motivate action. But it is a fleeting experience and should be complemented by communication through channels that can offer more detail and an opportunity to seek further information.

A hotel lobby in Dar es Salaam

Waiting for his car and driver, the DDG of an international agency picked up a much-thumbed newspaper. In the centre pages he read with satisfaction - and surprise - an article about his own agency's work. Newspapers reach the educated and the elite.

Meeting the needs of development agencies, WRENmedia has been operating the AGFAX radio and press service for six years and also making it available on-line. (See box overleaf). Its success is due to the value attributed to it by radio producers, newspaper editors and its research and development agency subscribers.

Any language as long as it's English?

Many radio stations tell us that they broadcast in English over the national network but revoice reports for their regional stations in local languages. WRENmedia also supplies radio and press material in French, Spanish and Arabic when required - in fact any major language requested by a client.

Two-way communication = feedback

Feedback is requested - and regularly received - from all radio stations served. They give us an indication of what their listeners - as well as the programme makers - think of

the material. Audience research is usually done to test the effectiveness of a range of communication channels for disseminating specific project information.

WRENmedia's AGFAX service has been designed to meet the public awareness needs of development agencies and research institutes, while at the same time meeting the needs of radio programme makers in developing countries - and their listeners. *AGFAX* provides:

- A monthly mailing of taped radio interviews to leading radio stations in anglophone Africa and Asia. Each interview is fully transcribed (to enable translation to local languages) and is supplied with an introduction for the studio presenter's use. The number of stations served is currently 40.
- A bi-monthly mailing of press articles, based on recorded interviews, to leading newspapers and development journals in Africa and Asia and to international development journals.

Radio interviews are recorded by *WRENmedia* journalists, the edited length of each interview being approximately 5 minutes - a length which suits programme makers who can then incorporate the interviews into their magazine programmes. Longer programmes are difficult to schedule, sound 'imported' and are therefore less welcome. No charge is made to the radio stations for the material nor is any charge made by the radio stations for broadcasting it. This contrasts with the experience of many development agencies which are expected to pay for 'advertising' if they seek coverage of their activities from radio stations.

Feedback is regularly received from radio stations and provides details of the programmes in which the interviews have been broadcast. These are usually magazine programmes with a development focus. *AGFAX* necessarily reflects the interests of its subscribers which range from natural resource management, agriculture and health to general development issues.

New Agriculturist on-line Written and designed to meet the needs of development professionals, agriculturists and an inquiring general user, *New Agriculturist* has enjoyed

consistently increasing readership – now from some 80 countries – since its inception in 1998. Published bi-monthly, written in house, designed for quick downloading, it has become a well-respected source of authoritative reporting.

Journalists and their reputation

Many people are fearful that journalists may distort or omit important aspects of the subject under discussion. Many have had the uncomfortable experience of being interviewed by a journalist so ill-informed it is almost impossible to know where to start or what to say. Or they may have had difficulty getting their point accepted by a journalist determined to pursue his/her own biased opinion. To allay these (unnecessary) fears, nothing is released to the media until it has been approved by the client.

WRENmedia is a team of six development journalists, based in the UK but travelling extensively, principally in Africa and Asia. The company writes and publishes the on-line magazine, *New Agriculturist* (see box.) As an independent production company for the BBC World Service, *WRENmedia* is currently producing a series of programmes for *One Planet*, having previously been responsible for the weekly programme, *The Farming World*. The company also undertakes consultancy work, training of radio broadcasters both overseas and in the UK, and media training for those wishing to upgrade their own communication skills. Website hosting and design, and CD production are the most recent additions to the company's portfolio.

WRENmedia

Fressingfield, Eye, Suffolk IP21 5SA, UK

Tel: +44 (0)1379 586787 Fax: +44 (0) 586755

Email: Post@wrenmedia.co.uk

www.wrenmedia.co.uk www.new-agric.co.uk

SARAH REYNOLDS, *WRENmedia*, Suffolk, UK
