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Reaching People *with information...*

AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION SERVICE • INSTITUTE OF AGRICULTURE • UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA



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EXHIBITS--DO THEY HELP US COMMUNICATE EFFICIENTLY? - Gerald R. McKay -

The many exhibits displayed at the recent Minnesota State Fair are but a few of those built in Minnesota each year by workers in extension and other educational organizations.

As the cost of communicating by various means increases, methods are being scrutinized more closely, both in terms of cost and relative effectiveness. The total cost of these exhibits in time and money, is probably surprisingly large. In this article, we shall consider relative efficiency and effectiveness of communicating by means of exhibits.

First, a word about terms. An exhibit includes several types of visual communications. A window display, a 4-H Club booth, a museum diarama, and a tabletop display are all exhibits. They carry messages just as other means of communication do. They fit into a communication model such as the SMCR (Source, Message, Channel, Receiver) developed by Dr. David Berlo of Michigan State University.

The value of an exhibit may be high or low, depending upon the skills, attitudes, knowledge, and social-cultural context of the source and the receiver and the way the message is treated in a particular channel. As a rule, an exhibit is used because its message can be channelled through one or more of the five senses more effectively than by other means of communication. Keep in mind, nevertheless, that although sometimes only an exhibit will reach certain groups, most of the time other means of communication could be used. Relative efficiency as compared to other means of communication and the effectiveness with which an exhibit can handle the message are deciding factors.

Studies of the audience who looked at extension educational exhibits at recent Minnesota and Illinois State Fairs indicate that significantly large numbers of people do go through exhibit areas and do stop to look at the individual exhibits. In the Illinois study, 10,480 visitors went through a special exhibit tent during 6 days to see exhibits sponsored by the College of Agriculture of the University of Illinois. These people were interested enough in the exhibits to keep them from spending their time elsewhere. In the Minnesota study, one-fourth of all the visitors at the state fair over a 10-day period were attracted to the 4-H Club building, which contained exhibits and other features. These studies indicate that people will stop if they think something worthwhile can be seen.

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE AUDIENCE

However, before a decision is made to build an exhibit, certain basic factors should be considered. This requires some knowledge of the audience for which the message is intended.

1. What are the specific needs of the audience and how did they arise?
2. What goals and results might be reasonable to expect from the exhibit after it is seen by this audience?
3. What interference or particular problems will there be in presenting the message through the exhibit medium?
4. Is there any past experience to indicate that the intended audience can be reached through an exhibit in the available location and what the audience's response might be?

To answer these questions, both studies attempted to identify the audience that came through the exhibit areas. In Illinois, approximately 54 percent of the audience consisted of farmers, whereas in Minnesota, about 27 percent lived on farms. Of those not living on farms, in both instances the larger percentage were from large metropolitan areas near the fair.

The amount of time that people will spend looking at an exhibit is not great. In the Illinois study, men and women spent about 6 minutes in the exhibit tent. Although the exhibit area was smaller than that in the Minnesota 4-H Building, the time here was also quite short. Approximately half of the people spent less than 20 minutes in the entire building. This means that to see the 85 Minnesota 4-H exhibits, besides the demonstrations, a message must be relatively short and to the point if it is to be received.

Exhibits were viewed by people of all ages and both sexes. In Illinois, approximately 69 percent were men and 31 percent women. All ages were attracted. The Minnesota study (below) indicated a few more women than men viewers. It is clear that all ages and both sexes can be drawn to an exhibit.

Distribution by sex and age into three residential groups

<u>District</u>	<u>18 and over</u>		<u>7-17</u>	
	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>	<u>Female</u>	<u>Male</u>
Minneapolis and Suburbs				
St. Paul and Suburbs	52%	45%	44%	50%
<u>Farm</u>				
Minnesota and out of state	34%	24%	44%	45%
<u>Other</u>				
Minnesota and out of state	<u>14%</u>	<u>31%</u>	<u>12%</u>	<u>5%</u>
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

This suggests that messages can be transmitted to almost any group by an exhibit located where the group passes, if the viewers are in a receptive mood, and if the message is one that they can comprehend quickly.

Consider briefly the relative cost of getting a message to the receiver. An exhibit may cost anywhere from a few cents to many dollars. Its economy depends on several factors--how many times the exhibit can be used before it is outdated or physically worn out; the cost of transporting, maintaining, and changing it as technology changes, etc.

The number of people that can be reached with an exhibit will help determine cost per person. This figure is essential to determine its efficiency. U. S. Department of Agriculture research suggests that the cost of reaching a viewer through an exhibit can be as little as the cost of reaching a reader through printed publications. Nevertheless, many exhibits do not pay their way and end up as expensive fiascos for the sponsor.

DETERMINING EFFECTIVENESS

Research by Eastman Kodak Company and other organizations interested in visual presentations has indicated several factors that might determine whether people will stop at exhibits. These include size, number and positioning of elements, brightness and color contrast, and relative emphasis of the elements.

A simple rule is to keep the number of elements in an exhibit to a bare minimum. Although too few elements can defeat the communications intent, unnecessary additional elements dilute the message. In determining the number of elements needed, consider complexity of the message, levels of understanding of the audience and of the receiver.

After determining the number of elements, the question of size must be answered. Visibility as it relates to size of the overall exhibit is important. These factors help determine visibility:

1. Probable distance of most viewers.
2. Average length of time that visitors can be expected to stop.
3. The kind of material that will be used.
4. The probable lighting conditions.
5. General visual acuity of the viewers and the opportunity they will have to look.

Distance between viewer and exhibit has been studied by Eastman Kodak Company and state highway departments. Results suggest these minimum heights for lettering:

<u>Distance to farthest viewer</u>	<u>Minimum height</u>
100 feet	4 inches
50 feet	2 inches
25 feet	1 inch
12 feet	$\frac{1}{2}$ inch

The average length of time people take to view an exhibit is another key factor. For example, persons driving past a highway billboard in an automobile at 60 miles an hour will probably not read over 9 words, according to research by the Minnesota Outdoor Advertising Association. On the other hand, an exhibit set up near a cafeteria line where people may have to wait 5 or 10 minutes could have several hundred words and all would be read. Most exhibits, of course, fall somewhere between these two extremes.

Irving A. Taylor, professor of psychology, Northeast Missouri State Teachers College, found that the number of words correctly identified and understood depended, among other things, upon the number of words in the message. The more words in the message, the lower the percentage of words correctly seen. Under the conditions of this experiment; subjects were able to perceive one-half more words when 7 were shown than when 10 were shown at the same time exposure. Simply stated, if the time is going to be short, the fewer the words, the more likely the message will be received and understood.

The social-cultural background of source and receiver, pointed out earlier, also affects the way the message will be interpreted. An exhibit built for an audience made up entirely of college graduates could have considerably more depth and be on a much higher technical level than one intended to attract the general public or a group of grade school students.

Lighting conditions are significant also. At the Minnesota State Fair, several factors that might make people stop were studied. These included motion, flashing light, variety of colors, and overall illumination. The only factor that showed any significant superiority in stopping people was overall good light. Apparently the more light on the exhibit, the more it will attract people and the more it will be read.

Location of an exhibit in a building, according to studies at the Minnesota State Fair in 1961 and 1963, was of only slight significance in determining the number of people who stopped or length of time they stayed. However, since people read from left to right, the layout should start at the left and proceed to the right. This is true not only for each individual exhibit but for the total layout of exhibits in a particular building or location.

Appeals that are used to get people to stop vary. Some will attract more people than others. Research done by H. W. Gilbertson of the Federal Extension Service in which he studied 100 outdoor billboard posters of national advertisers indicated these percentages used the appeals listed:

<u>Appeals used most frequently</u>	<u>Outdoor advertising</u> (percent)
Superior quality of service or product.	36
Low cost or savings.	16
Health and safety.	11
Convenience	10
Appetizing flavor of product	20
Reputation or reliability of firm	17
Mass approval or testimony	8
Love of family	8
Beautification	3
Durability	2

This suggests that people are most likely to look at an exhibit if reference is made to quality, low cost, health and safety, convenience, appetizing flavor, reliability, and so on. Among the other appeals not listed in this table, were efficiency, fear, self preservation, profit, utility, economy of time, modernity, style, vitality, beauty, cleanliness, comfort, service, and curiosity.

People want to lead, excel, construct, imitate, and be patriotic. They also want pleasure, entertainment, recognition, friends, recreation, sympathy, prosperity, and security. Relating this to the field of agricultural information, nearly all of the attempts we make to interest or encourage adoption of new or improved farm and home practices could involve one or more of the motivating appeals mentioned.

Psychologists say that argument appeals to emotions and imagination. Most of us respond more readily to suggestion than to argument, especially if the reasoning involved in understanding the arguments requires quite a bit of effort. An idea presented by suggestion is likely to meet with more direct response and acceptance than one presented by argument. This often results in the weighing of evidence with a consequent delay caused by a desire for additional facts.

Studies further show that accuracy or correctness of material helps determine the effectiveness of an exhibit. People will think it is accurate if it is identified with a recognized institution such as a university. Statements based on well accepted facts are more likely to be believed than those in the realm of conjecture.

Color contrast in an exhibit is another factor which determines its effectiveness. The ultimate in contrast, of course, is white and black. But a Minnesota State Fair study indicated that there is a higher degree of attraction when other colors are also used.

A color scheme of two or more colors that go together well and are appropriate to the subject should be selected. Dark rich colors are generally appropriate for industry; light feminine colors for most homemaking subjects; yellows, greens and browns for most agricultural subjects. Some colors, such as yellow, blue, and green are warm, aggressive, and stimulating. Soft colors are good for backgrounds and large areas, but bright intense colors are better for the smaller masses. Certain colors clash and should not be used together. Red and green of equal intensity, for example, are not good. Green and white, black and yellow, and blue and white, are good combinations in most cases.

Style of lettering is another factor which contributes to readability and increases effectiveness. The same style used throughout causes monotony and will not invite people to read the message. Variety created by a combination of upper and lower case letters and different sizes or colors will increase readability and enhance the chances of a message being communicated.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATORS

Whether you are communicating information in agriculture, homemaking, youth work, or a community activity, chances are that sooner or later you will find yourself planning an exhibit. It may be a store window display promoting a community action program, a 4-H booth at the county fair, a table display in your office or a report at your next national professional meeting. Whatever the occasion and whatever your motivation, it is easy to become lost in a maze of blueprint charts and how-to-do-it information. The wise exhibitor will wait to discuss the "how" in building his exhibit until he has first settled the far more basic questions of "why" he is exhibiting, what he wants to say, and whether or not this is the best way to say it.

Exhibits are usually initially expensive and almost always time consuming. There are some good reasons, however, why you may decide to build one. It is an attention getter. It will reach people who may not read or don't listen to broadcasts or show up at meetings. It can have dramatic impact through color, pictures, scope, and appeals to which people like to respond. It can be a time saver for the audience you want to reach. It may be a way of helping to learn and remember by doing. The development of self-teaching devices has proven that people can learn by pushing buttons, opening boxes, and pulling levers.

There are reasons, nevertheless, why an exhibit may not be the best way to communicate a particular message to a particular group. The cost per person may be high. The time involved in its construction may not be sufficient and skills needed to build a creditable exhibit may not be available. The audience may not be large enough to make it worthwhile.

If it turns out that your plan is unrelated to anything except the fact that you have been asked to fill up a certain space on a given day with a minimum of notice, if your staff is undermanned and overworked and you can't count on volunteers, or if your budget is down to its last \$22, perhaps you'd better start thinking about other means of communication.

But if what you want to say can be expressed visually and dramatically with a minimum of words, if you have or can find a place for the exhibit which is a logical thoroughfare for the people you most want to reach, if you have or can get the help of someone with skilled hands and a good imagination, and if you are willing to spend some time and money, then go ahead with plans for an exhibit.

Research shows that an exhibit will compete on a cost per person basis favorably with other kinds of communication media and in many cases an exhibit that is effectively built, and displayed will communicate more effectively than the other commonly used communications media.

Publications and Direct Mail

NEW PUBLICATIONS

Let's Have Eggs. Ext. Bull. 314. Verna Mikesh and Robert Berg. Information on eggs--from their basic structure to delicious recipes made with them. 16 pages. Available mid-October.

DHIA Records. Ext. F. 225. Ralph W. Wayne, Clifford L. Wilcox, Bill Mudge, and Russ Erickson. Describes DHIA and owner-sampler testing programs, tells why it pays to test. 8 pages 4 x 9. Don't order until you receive notification copies.

Spoilage of Stored Grain. Ext. F. 226. C. M. Christensen and H. H. Kaufmann. A revision of the miscellaneous multilith publication "Questions and Answers Concerning Spoilage of Stored Grains by Storage Fungi" that you received earlier this summer. 4 pages 8½ x 11. Don't order until you receive notification copies.

Fertility Status of Minnesota Soils. Misc. Rpt. 56. John Grava. A summary of soil tests conducted at the University's Soil Testing Laboratory, prepared on the basis of soil association. Provides a general picture of the levels of different plant nutrient elements in the state as a whole. 6 pages. Don't order until you receive notification copies.

Diseases of Peony. Plant Pathology Fact Sheet No. 10. Herbert G. Johnson and James D. Froyd. Discusses the common diseases of peony and suggests control measures. Available late September.

Adult Programming for City and Country. October-December 1964. Quarterly list of topics for "Highlights in Homemaking" and the "University Farm Hour" on KUOM radio and "Town and Country" on KTCA-TV. 8-page railroad folder. Available early October.

Cone Scale Movements of Jack Pine. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 142.

F. Philip Neumann, T. Schantz-Hansen, and L. W. Rees.

A Forest Aerial Photo Scale for Minnesota Conditions. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 143. M. P. Meyer.

Natural Polyploidy in Juvenile White and Black Spruce. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 144. Lawson L. Winton

External Needle Morphology of Diploid and Polyploid Juvenile White and Black Spruce. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 145. Lawson L. Winton.

Cytotechniques for Spruce Chromosomes. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 146. Lawson L. Winton.

Long Range Effect on Aspen of Defoliation by the Forest Tent Caterpillar. Minnesota Forestry Notes No. 147. G. B. Churchill, D. P. Duncan, H. H. John, and A. C. Hodson.

REVISED PUBLICATIONS

Publication List of the Agricultural Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station. This contains many changes so please discard your old red and white copies when you receive the new green and russet ones.

Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes is still in press, same as it was last month at this time. But it should reach you any day. We'll be meeting in mid-October to work out ideas for the 1965 Tourist Travel Notes series, and we'd like to consider your ideas for articles. Send your suggestions to Harlan Stoehr at the Department of Information and Agricultural Journalism, or to Larry Simonson at North Central School and Station, Grand Rapids.

Minnesota Farm and Home Science is about ready to okay--you'll receive it soon. Content includes articles on simplified starters for suckling pigs, an experimental farm wiring system, canine heartworm in Minnesota, removing food stains from laminated fabrics, nitrogen fertilization of turf grasses, a report of 40-year-old farmstead windbreaks, and other articles.
--Harlan Stoehr & Shelly Elliott