

Telling the Extension Story but Telling It Well:  
The Value of Strategic Communications to Extension Leadership

A White Paper

Prepared by  
The Southern Region Program Leaders Network  
Communications Committee  
2017

Writing Team:  
Elizabeth Gregory North, Mississippi State University Extension Service  
Frankie Gould, LSU AgCenter  
Robin Adams, WriteRight Communications  
Bob Reynolds, University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service (retired)

“ . . . we are living in a communications revolution comparable to the invention of printing . . . In an age of increasing talk, it’s wiser talk we need most.”

McCloskey, D. (1993). The neglected economics of talk. *Planning for Higher Education*, 22, pp. 11-16.

Last spring, United Airlines experienced employee errors and customer service issues that became full-blown communications crises, causing the airline’s stock to drop in value, causing customers to cancel United flights to rebook with other airlines, and causing the United brand to become the laughingstock of traditional and new media. After two bumbling public statements and an insensitive internal memo that was leaked to the media, the CEO finally, four days after the bloodied and injured passenger was dragged from the plane (and the video of the incident was watched over and over by millions around the world), got the apology right—but only after the damage to the brand was done.

Business management and public relations analysts have cited many reasons why this debacle occurred, including United’s corporate culture, the financial challenges facing all airlines, the industry practice of overbooking flights. But the causative factor that was easiest to fix and most likely to have stopped the crisis before it became an international incident was this: the public relations and communications professionals at United Airlines report to the director of human resources, not the CEO.

With a trusted communications professional at the table, the crisis could have been handled quickly and professionally, the brand could have been protected, and customer relationships could have been maintained.

### **The Communications Profession**

What defines communications as a professional field? Communications professionals have the vital responsibility of maintaining relationships, internally and externally; building strong brands; advising University leaders; and achieving overall organizational goals for the University and its constituent departments through the planning, design, development, and production of messages, campaigns, and tools. In the words of *The IABC Handbook of Organizational Communication* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2006), “it is the responsibility of the corporate communicator to manage communication that:

- ◆ Supports organizational goals and objectives.
- ◆ Ensures a healthy flow of information in and among all levels of employees and management.
- ◆ Is consistent throughout all of the organization’s activities.
- ◆ Keeps the organization honest.
- ◆ Avoids or mitigates potential crises.” (p. 20)

In his book, *Corporate Communications* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), Joep Cornelissen sums up the professional field as “focus[ing] on the organization as a whole and the important task of how an organization is presented to all of its key stakeholders, both internal and external” (p. 20-21).

Lest there be any doubt about the importance of the communications role, Cees van Riel, in his book, *Essentials of Corporate Communication* (London: Routledge, 2007), links effective communication to overall organizational success:

communication is . . . at the heart of organizational performance. The success of an organization's efforts to acquire resources and to influence the context in which it carries out its activities depends heavily on how well and how professionally a company communicates with its resource holders. (p. 2)

In an increasingly competitive academic marketplace, land-grant universities and their Extension Services and Experiment Stations must build and retain a highly competent, highly professional communications staff. The quality of our communications professionals determines how our brand is constructed externally and what it means in the minds of legislators, key leaders, partners, clients, parents, and prospective students.

Joep Cornelissen describes a profession that is still comparatively young and rapidly evolving. He points out that, from the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and until the 1960s, communications was viewed in the United States and Europe largely as a vocation, for which specialized training was not necessary. Instead, successful marketing, advertising, and public relations practice was thought to depend on personality characteristics such as common sense, good taste, character, integrity, judgment, logic, creativity, and imagination. (p. 19)

In the 1970s, however, communications began to be understood as a management function. Theorists of this era proposed that communications practitioners:

need to approach their work not so much as 'technicians,' who are merely concerned with producing communications materials and disseminating information, but as more rounded 'managers' who use research and planning as the bedrock for their communications programs and are able to think strategically about the use of communications for organizational problems. (p. 19)

In the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Cornelissen sees the management perspective as the dominant understanding of the communications role, but the "vocational" or specialized communications competencies are still vitally important. However, recent surveys of communications professionals indicate that, despite this understanding of the management role, they are "still lagging behind in their professional development" to enable them to carry out the management-oriented functions. (p. 20) Cornelissen sums up:

The need for an understanding of corporate communications as a management function is thus timely, requiring first of all a greater understanding of the strategies and activities that it involves as well as the competencies and skills that it requires from practitioners. (p. 20)

## **The Problem**

**Tactical rather than strategic management.** Too often, communications professionals are limited to a tactical role, functioning as a kind of internal service bureau, being asked to execute tasks rather than add value through planning, consultation, and creative development to target audiences more effectively and produce better outcomes as a result.

Further, communicators are often the last to know when organizational changes, problems, or crises occur, forcing them into a reactive or problem-solving mode. If communications professionals had functioned as strategic advisors to leadership, the problems might have been averted altogether through a strategic communications management approach.

**Lack of promotion opportunities.** Highly talented communications professionals are serving the University in a variety of positions across campus. However, in order for them to advance in their careers, they too often have to move to different positions elsewhere in the University because promotion opportunities are simply not available.

Obviously, this creates a hardship for the original department because of the loss of a talented professional, and the individual moving to the new department experiences a bump in the road of his or her career, having to essentially start over in a new situation.

**Inconsistency in hiring, skills, and performance.** Job functions and communications needs and activities are comparable across positions and colleges or departments; however, job titles, position descriptions, and required qualifications are often inconsistent. The result is that people who have little preparation or inappropriate skills can be hired in communications positions and then perform poorly, lowering the professional standard for everyone else and lowering the quality of work received by the department and the University as a whole.

In addition, departments sometimes hire individuals in non-communications positions and then require them to perform communications tasks. This is problematic because it downplays the skillset actually required by a communications professional and puts key tasks in the hands of an unqualified person, again lowering the quality of work representing the department and the University to its external audiences.

### **The Strategic Value of Communications**

The Strategic Communication Center at the University of Southern California has conducted several GAP (Generally Accepted Practice) studies. As cited by James Grunig in the International Association of Business Communicators' magazine, *Communication World* (May—June 2007), the GAP IV study, drawing on 2005 data, found that, in 64 percent of the firms responding, the communications function reported directly to the "C-Suite." These companies were more likely to base planning and actions on evaluation metrics that included crisis avoidance/mitigation and influence on corporate culture, corporate reputation and employee attitudes, and stakeholder awareness and opinions—meaning that they were able to make decisions and to act more strategically.

Ensuring that qualified professionals are hired in communications roles will ensure that the communications function delivers greater strategic value, creative impact, and accountability to the organization. Communications leaders reporting to the CEO and included in the core leadership team ensures that communications support and services are aligned with the strategic goals of the organization, and that the brand is strengthened and protected.

As Robert M. Moore of Lipman Hearne points out, the stakes are high for University communicators: "we're asking prospective students to invest four years of their lives with

us . . . parents to entrust their kids to us . . . alumni to keep us in their hearts, minds, and estate plans . . . and donors to recognize their own passion in our programs.” In Extension, we are asking parents to entrust their even younger children to us in 4-H, farmers and business people to stake their livelihoods on the accuracy of our education, volunteers to recognize in us a way to achieve their dreams of service, and community leaders and legislators to see us as partners in achieving their goals.

It’s a big ask. And you can’t deliver that kind of value without professional, strategic communicators on your leadership team.

## APPENDIX

SRPLN Presentation—Memphis, TN, August 23-27, 2010

### **Strategic Communications: A Key to Surviving in a Changing Economy**

Dr. Ray McKinnie, North Carolina A& T  
Robin Adams, North Carolina A & T  
Frankie Gould, LSU AgCenter  
Dr. Paul Coreil, LSU AgCenter

#### Introduction

Please keep enjoying your meal. This afternoon, we will have the opportunity to hear from four people as they talk about the value of strategic communications and the role it can play in these changing times for Cooperative Extension.

Much of what we have heard for the past couple of days has laid the ground work for this conversation. Success stories, impacts, selling Cooperative Extension, speaking with one voice – all of these relate to developing and using an effective communications unit.

#### **Dr. M. Ray McKinnie, Associate Dean and Administrator, Cooperative Extension Program at North Carolina A&T State University.**

My name is M. Ray McKinnie, and I'm the administrator of the Cooperative Extension Program at North Carolina A&T State University.

Like most of you, I've spent all of my professional life in Cooperative Extension. I started as a county agent and worked my way quickly to becoming a specialist working on the state level. As an animal science specialist, I learned to appreciate the value of a good communications specialist. Now, I will admit this is something I had to learn.

With a fresh master's and then Ph.D. in hand, I knew I was the expert and that I could teach the field staff or farmers what they needed to know. After a few hits and misses, or should I say a lot of misses, I learned that working closely and early with a good communications specialist made my work easier and garnered better results for the clients. Adding my technical expertise with their technical expertise was an excellent match.

I learned then, that there was value in communications. I also had the pleasure of working in an organization that has always invested in a communications staff. Not just those communicators who were good technicians, but those communications leaders who brought their leadership and strategic planning skills to the table. In fact, one of A&T's early communications leaders went on to a vice presidency of one of the nation's largest Fortune 500 companies, Sara Lee.

What I didn't fully understand until I became an Extension administrator was just how valuable a communications perspective could be. Again, I didn't come to this decision immediately. I learned to listen.

And I mean listen. What I didn't understand at first was what a communicator could bring to the table and why they seemed to be the one asking the oddest questions and never seemed satisfied with just a quick response.

A lot of you have seen A&T's impact document, *Solutions for North Carolina*. I admit that at first I didn't fully understand the impact that telling a story could have with legislators. I knew that the legislators would be moved with numbers, and I wanted to give them the numbers. Administrators are bottom-line people, and I was making sure they understood the bottom line. To me, storytelling was soft and a little fluffy. It was nice, but was it necessary? But our communications people, again working very closely with one of my astute specialists, kept pushing storytelling. They saw a chance to push me in a direction, but it took me a while to embrace the direction.

But after they explained, for the hundredth time, what they were trying to achieve, I went in that direction. I'm glad I did. I see just how powerful a communications tool storytelling can be, and I see how both the story and the numbers help clearly illustrate the value and importance of Cooperative Extension.

Additionally, I've made sure that the communications leaders are part of my management meetings. They are part of the discussions about human resources and finances and programming. And they offer valuable comments and suggestions to the group. In addition, they have told me how helpful these discussions are to them in planning their work calendars. And because our communications staff also serve agricultural research and work closely with the dean of the school of agriculture, they help bring those diverse perspectives to our meetings.

It could sound as if I have it all. Let me assure you, I'm working hard at understanding and sometimes it takes me a minute, well maybe a little longer, to buy into the communications strategist's role. There are times that I still see communications staff as having a support role. We as the administrators and specialists develop the concept and idea and then bring in those communicators along with other support staff, to make the plan a reality. But I'm learning that having their different viewpoint in the room, seeing that drafting crisis communications plans and working the plans, or seeing a communications role in everything we do, has a positive effect.

Since my undergraduate days, I haven't had a class in communications or public speaking, but every day my communications staff team members are helping me craft and refine the Cooperative Extension story. These kinds of lean times make an administrator consider the value and impact of every employee, every sector of the organization. Who's bringing value to the table? Who's making a positive impact on the organization and its bottom line? Who is a good value to have around?

Today, I'm thinking like some in the automobile industry. When times get tough, that's the time you need to assure your clients that you are what they need. Now is the time our clients need to understand that we are still viable, reliable, and credible. This is the time we in Cooperative Extension need those experts on board to help us not only to *tell* our story, but to craft our story. We need skilled communicators, and I'm working to make sure they

continue to play a strategic role in the Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T State University. I suggest you do the same.

### **Robin Adams**

When I was growing up, if we brought anybody home to meet the family, we all knew that we had to prep our friends for a long line of questions. But one question in particular my grandmother would always ask newcomers was, “who’s your people?” Then she’d add, “baby” at the end of that sentence and then leave you with a half-smile as she stared you in the eyes, expecting a prompt response. All good Southerners know that adding “baby” at the end of the sentence was not a term of endearment.

The culprits sitting there would have to go through a family litany. And in most cases, they would name somebody my grandmother knew or knew of. If they were so lucky as to find a common kin or acquaintance, it gave them some credibility. This then was a person my grandmother approved of. But if their kin were shady characters or if she couldn’t identify anybody in the family or nearby neighbors or church members, they might as well leave now. Their visit would not be a pleasant one. For, if she didn’t know of them and their kind, then there was no need for the relationship to go any further.

She believed that you could tell a lot about a person by their parents. Apples didn’t fall far from the tree.

If we only thought and acted this way in Cooperative Extension.

Because of the relationship between communications professionals and Cooperative Extension administrators, communicators have tended to spend more time with the children and less time knowing the parent.

By this I mean, communicators have in most cases done an excellent job of selling the Cooperative Extension children—programs in 4-H, water quality, financial literacy, or Master Gardener. The stronger relationship has been between the communicator and the specialists or the mid-level managers. In fact, research shows that the Cooperative Extension children have brand credibility. Most people know about 4-H or Master Gardener. What’s missing is that very few people know Cooperative Extension. In essence, they don’t know 4-H’s people.

This is critical situation, period. But this disconnect between Cooperative Extension and its children is made the more so because of the economic times that most of us, or should I just say, all of us are facing. As a result, we are being asked to show the value and impact of Cooperative Extension, when little has been done to sell, market, or brand Cooperative Extension—the parent. We are scrambling to now make the connection between parent and child.

If Cooperative Extension is to continue as a vital entity, not only do we have to change the way we do business, but we have to change the relationship and structure of how communicators function, operate, and are perceived in their offices.

Let’s take a quick look at how much Extension communications in particular—and communications in general—has changed.



Author Joep Cornelissen in his book, *Corporate Communications*, points out that communications as a profession is comparatively young and rapidly evolving. Communication, he said, has been largely seen as a vocation, for which specialized training was not necessary. Instead, he added, successful marketing, advertising and public relations practice was through to depend on personality characteristics such as common sense, good taste, character, integrity, judgment, logic, creativity, and imagination.

In essence, a good communicator was born and professed little technical skill. There was little science to the work. Communications was hard to measure. In some cases, the better looking you were, the greater your ability as a communicator.

In the 70s, however, communications began to be understood as a management function. Theorists of this era proposed that communications practitioners: “need to approach their work not so much as ‘technicians,’ who are merely concerned with producing communication materials and disseminating information, but as more rounded ‘managers’ who use research and planning as the bedrock for their communications programs and are able to think strategically about the use of communications for organizations problems.”

While this was theory, the reality is this shift never became reality in most offices. The communications work, in most offices, was still given to the person who could write a good sentence, who always caught the typo in the letter, or who was the most adept at using the computer. In essence, the communicator became the person who had personality, spelled well, and could develop complete sentences. Because communications wasn’t seen as a science, job titles, position descriptions, and required qualifications were inconsistent. This resulted in a profession where people with little preparation or inappropriate skills were put in positions and then performed poorly, lowering the professional standards for everyone else and lowering the quality of work received by a department. Key tasks were put in the hands of unqualified people.

Administration wasn’t sure what to make of the profession, and departments were left to languish on their own. Flourishing when the leadership demanded such. Barely operating above the line at all other times.

That was then.

As an organization matures and as the profession ages, things have to change. To be an effective communicator today requires a different skill set. Administrators and communicators alike must see the profession as a critical management function and be prepared to step up and deliver the greatest value possible.

Look at what happened with the Gulf oil spill. After a few, or should I say many misstatements, BP has mounted what many are seeing as an effective communications campaign to repair their image. They learned which people to put out front. They honed in on the image the company needed to portray. And they learned to never underestimate the value of media—traditional and newcomers to the game—Facebook and Twitter.

The verdict is still out, but the company seems to have turned a corner.

Bad times plus strategic communications equals better times ahead.

This is the kind of position in which Cooperative Extension now finds itself. If we are to reunite the family, there are some things we can change. There is work to be done. There are two things I suggest we need to work on.

First, administrators, be willing to give your communications leaders a seat at the table. There is value in being there when the decisions are being made and discussed, versus being told about the decision after it was made. Take General Motors, for example. When they were considering filing for Chapter 11, a senior communications professional was in the room as the decision about when to announce the bankruptcy was being made. As a result, a media release was written before the decision took place and a plan for social media communications was immediately put in place. In fact, the number of people responsible for social media was doubled in an effort to not only get the GM story out, but to listen to and respond to people as they talked in cyberspace about what was happening, its impact, and long-lasting results. GM didn't react, but was instead proactive. Being able to have some control over the story puts the organization in a position of strength.

For Cooperative Extension, this could mean the difference between having county commissioners and state legislators continue funding, versus having all funding cut or slashed. As Jim Richards from Cornerstone said yesterday, we have to learn to tell the Cooperative Extension story and we have to tell it with one voice. When Lorna is part of the planning team for Tennessee's centennial celebration, she brings a different voice to the table. When Frankie is leading a task force on the Gulf oil spill, she's thinking strategically about how to get the message out as the message is being formed. And when I or any of my colleagues sit at the table and help plan how and in what format to develop Cooperative Extension impact documents, we bring the expertise of excellent storytellers and the broad perspective of a marketer to the table.

But as communicators we have to be ready to sit at the table. We have to make sure we are thinking globally, strategically, multidisciplinary, ethically, analytically, and critically. I can't and shouldn't come to the table if I'm not ready.

Paul Sanchez says that, in the future, a leading communicator must be an adroit strategist, creative technician, skilled facilitator, a friend of technology, and an exponent of life-long learning. In essence, he says that leading communicators must be "... men and women of the Renaissance, pulling it all together, but in the high-tech environment of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

What a mouthful. There is work that must be done on all fronts. Administrators need to move, but, as communicators, we also have a ways to go. The success of Cooperative Extension demands that all of us are ready and in the correct seat on the bus. New people and new decision makers are getting in place. Are we ready to tell the Cooperative Extension story?

Cooperative Extension leadership is making some dents in the development of national marketing strategies that can benefit all of us. Frankie will talk about this in a few seconds. Our houses in our states have to be in order so we can move forward when the time comes.

But before the company comes, the parents need to make sure they are in control of the house.

## Frankie Gould

What are communicators doing regionally and nationally to help market Extension, address current issues, exhibit Extension's public value and share resources that can build strategic and integrated teams at your institution?

1. **ECOP Marketing and Communications Task force** (a team of extension directors and communicators) partnered with Copernicus Marketing of Boston 3 years ago to conduct surveys internal and external to Extension to garner the perception and awareness of Cooperative Extension national-wide and within States. Those findings were presented to the national Extension Directors and communicators in 2009. The next step was to conduct public focus forums (10 were conducted at 4 locations—Florida- Orlando and Miami, Texas and Oregon) to help with developing the Extension message and brand.

- i. Mix of older and younger clients
  1. Group 1 – clients 40 years +
  2. Group 2 – clients < 40 years
- ii. Mix of newer (< 3 yrs.) and experienced clients (3+ years).

A good cross-section of Extension programs were represented across client groups.

The focus group results make a very compelling case about making Extension's offerings more accessible, understandable, and relevant to the public. Those who know us have a very narrow understanding of what we are about. They have deep knowledge of the program they are directly involved in but know ZIP about everything else.

A formal report on these results will be available at the end of September with a strategic branding and marketing plan and a tool kit to help states with uniform messaging and branding for Extension as the parent organization.

This will help build one large brand "footprint" instead of hundreds of smaller "footprints" by state or program.

Also, a Moodle course being developed under the direction of Elizabeth Gregory-North of Texas A&M on being a brand ambassador and will be available by the first of the year.

2. As Dr. Brown said on Tuesday, **eXtension** is one of the most valuable resources we can use to share resources and information.

You need to use eXtension as a collaborative space to network and share resources regionally and nationally. Several communications and marketing communities are available for you follow and join.

These are in an area of eXtension for Professional Development Communities of Practice.

ECOP marketing and communications task force

Research and Extension activity on Issue Management for Land Grants.

Join and follow the CoP to broaden your knowledge in these areas.

An eXtension community has been formed entitled, "Impact & Accountability." At this point, there are 29 members. This one will allow members to develop and offer training on impact and accountability. They also allow working groups to come together for collaboration on

development of content and process.

3. There is interest in reviving the **national impact database and the national impact writing team process**. The information that was in this database was extremely useful but not marketed very well. But through efforts that are now in place using eXtension and the ECOP marketing task force, we can make this initiative viable again. Restoring this resource will support Extension funding and branding efforts. We are looking to house this aggregation of impact information through eXtension.

4. **Issues Management for Land-Grant Universities** through the communications NCERA project. This project is focused on:

- Creating a culture of strategic issues management within our institutions.
- Creating a link to current research to develop best communications practices to address critical issues.
- Providing a tool kit and training on how to prepare for issue management in your states.

What are some critical issues affecting states? Do you have an integrated team including communicators to address these critical issues?

- Nutrient Loading in Florida's waterways has environmental groups calling for banning the sale of nitrogen fertilizer for home use from May to September.
- Ohio is facing animal welfare issues related to confinement of poultry and dairy used for food production.
- California bans the sale of poultry products including eggs that were raised in cages. This is HSUS-driven and could impact every state that exports eggs or other poultry products into California.
- One of the biggest issues facing us is the continued raiding of our budgets. How do we remain effective, relevant, and productive with such weakened resources?

We must share more resources like issues management tools and impact reporting resources, and we mustn't be afraid to cross state lines to use multi-institutional participation, especially for grants. Sharing resources among the region should be a standard practice.

For next steps:

The Best Practices for Issues Management for LGUs white paper will be available soon and distributed to the PLN. The research and literature review has been conducted and presented to SAAS and ACE this year.

The deans are really stepping up in a BIG way to provide the needed foundational funds to build the national impact database and provide the seed money for a national issues management research symposium in June. We will be asking ECOP, ESCOP, and other Extension and Research director groups to fund the annual maintenance, marketing, and material development associated with promoting what we gather throughout the system. We need the support of all PLN groups to encourage funding, support, and input for their programs. The database will be only as valuable as the rich data you all put into it. We are talking to Extension about housing the database.

We are making a recommendation at this meeting for PLN to document and report the success of their issues management efforts to help us share and review lessons learned through a collaborative space already available on eXtension.

To survive in this changing economy, you need responsive outreach: integrated teams that can respond to the issues, risks, and crises that are and will be facing your states—and at a moment's notice, because that may be all you have.

**Dr. Paul Coreil, LSU AgCenter Vice Chancellor and Extension Director**

Address the value of Communications being on the integrated team to accomplish the goals for Extension to succeed.

- How can communicators help with the responsive outreach? Give your leadership and personal perspective of how communications is part of the AgCenter Leadership team.
- Everyone in this room will need to be able to write impact reports, be accountable: join the eXtension CoP, use eXtension as a resource.
- Be prepared and plan for emerging issues (budgets, nutrient loading, animal welfare, family stress), be prepared and plan for a crisis, build the brand of Extension and not just individual programs.
- Create an integrated team to address responsive outreach (IT, Communications, Family and Consumer Sciences, Agriculture and Natural Resources, 4-H, Administration, Middle Managers)

Finish by talking to the audience—

- Do you (talking to the audience) have a response plan?
- Can you respond to an emerging issue, crisis and continue continuity of business?
- If you have a plan, use it. They work.
- If you don't, you better get one or you will not be able to respond to the budget reductions, floods in Tennessee, hurricanes in the Gulf, or an oil spill.

This is the take-away message:

1. Use the national initiatives and resources to prepare and expand your institutions' administration, communicators, and integrated teams.
2. It's a charge to each director to make sure he or she is ready and prepared, so, when it comes time for the region to take action, everybody is ready. Right now, only a few have what it takes. We need to make sure everybody has their house in order.
3. Make sure you have the right people on the bus—if you can't hire or rehire—retool for a new set of skills.
4. Even during a budget crisis, you still need to communicate and get your message to the public.
5. Report your successes stories to the PLN.

6. There are communications teams that can provide training in these areas. Contact Robin or Frankie.

**If you don't communicate, the public will forget you!**