

Agricultural Communications: Perspectives from the Experts

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Abstract

This qualitative research study evaluates the perspectives of agricultural communications (ACOM) according to ACOM experts (N = 25) from across the United States. Respondents represented policy makers, industry leaders, educators, and researchers and averaged about 15 years of experience. However, respondents were unable to identify a consistent definition of ACOM. Skills and characteristics needed by agricultural communicators ranged from general agriculture and policy understanding to technical communications and science knowledge. Audience identification, agricultural and policy knowledge, and targeted message development and delivery were all important skills needed by ACOMRs. Agricultural communicator characteristics focused on being flexible, responsible, gaining trust, and thinking critically. Challenges, sometimes noted as barriers, ranged from knowledge area changes to division and defense and from a non-unified voice to rapid expansion of technology. The discussion of higher education institutions training generalists versus specialists is an important topic based on findings of this study. Recommendations for future ACOM focus and education are discussed.

Key Words

Agricultural Communications, Influencing Factors, Future Directions, History

Literature Review

The profession of agricultural communications (ACOM) has transitioned from public information dissemination to a highly competitive industry, requiring professionals to understand business, journalism, and farming practices (Burnett & Tucker, 2001). Although ACOM was informally practiced with the arrival of the settlers, who relied on Native American tribes to teach farming methods (Burnett & Tucker, 2001), it was the need to disseminate information to the public about agricultural practices that eventually established ACOM as a profession (Telg & Irani, 2012). The late 1700s saw the first agricultural publications, including *The Farmer's Almanac* and the first published results of agricultural experimental work, for the purpose of sharing agricultural information (Telg & Irani, 2012). Today, as the general public is becoming further removed from the farm, communication becomes ever critical to the promotion of agriculture (Bailey-Evans, 1994). Today, as the general public is becoming further removed from the farm, communication becomes ever critical to the promotion of agriculture (Bailey-Evans, 1994).

Presently, the field of ACOM has evolved into a wide range of communications including news and broadcast reporting; feature writing; public relations; strategic communications; photojournalism; crisis communications; marketing and branding; and electronic communications (Irani & Doerfert, 2013; Tucker, Whaley, & Cano, 2003). Agricultural communicators now integrate digital technologies to disseminate messages to a variety of media outlets. Previous research describes strong writing skills as the most valuable communications skills (Crawford,

Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). As technology has rapidly changed, so has the field of ACOM. The need for instantaneous information has created an increasing demand for agricultural communicators (ACOMRs). Rogers (2003) stated there is a need to adopt new innovations as soon as possible, especially when the innovation impacts a societal problem or an area of high priority. Consequently, innovations in communication technology have impacted both secondary and postsecondary curricula (Edgar et al., 2012).

The profession of agricultural communications/agricultural journalism has seen a major growth in the last century. Similarly, academic programs in this field have seen tremendous growth and development. Today they offer a dynamic range of course offerings while experiencing increasing enrollment. New programs seem to sprout roots on a regular basis and existing programs are seeing major growth spurts in relation to student numbers and curricular offerings as the need for communicating agricultural issues to an increasingly agricultural illiterate audience becomes more and more important. (Cartmell & Evans, 2013, p. 52)

Faculty are facing the challenges of raising a “young discipline” (Doerfert & Irani, 2013) and meeting industry demands, which require students to enter the workforce with the ability to be versatile and incorporate elements of communications successfully (Morgan, 2013). This springboards from a lack of public understanding of agriculture. ACOMRs are working with an audience at least three generations removed from the farm (American Farm Bureau Federation, 2015). Moreover, it is estimated 98 percent of the U.S. population is without first-hand knowledge of food production and food systems (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Ag 101, 2014). Consumer’s lack of knowledge about agriculture leads to a lack of distrust of the food industry (Center for Food Integrity, 2014). Therefore, ACOMRs are working to not only educate the public but also build a relationship of trust and shared values with consumers.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this qualitative study was to capture the essence of ACOM from the viewpoint of policy makers, industry leaders, educators, and researchers. Additionally, the study sought to provide a future forecast for ACOM. The following research objectives guided the study:

1. Determine a definition of ACOM.
2. Describe skills and characteristics required of an ACOMR in today’s industry.
3. Identify current challenges within ACOM and opportunities for the future.

Methodology

This qualitative study used in-person and telephone interviews with ACOM experts in the United States to determine the history of ACOM and make suggestions to improve the profession in the next century. Video (in-person) interviews ($n = 13$), filmed using high quality video equipment, were conducted with respondents and an additional 12 interviews were conducted by phone because of scheduling conflicts. Respondents ($N = 25$) included policy makers ($n = 4$), agricultural industry leaders ($n = 16$), educators ($n = 3$), and researchers ($n = 2$). All interviews were voice recorded to allow transcription of each interview.

To identify policy makers, industry leaders, educators, and researchers who influenced ACOM, the researchers conducted an extensive search for experts in the United States. Experts were identified based on national presence, longevity and level of involvement in the industry. These experts ranged in ages 24–82 and the average years of experience was 14.88 years, with six months as the minimum and 55 years as the maximum. Because there are no rules for sample size

in qualitative research, a baseline of 25 experts was established (Erlandson, 1993). Researchers found a sample size of 25 did sufficiently yield data saturation.

Before conducting interviews, participants were contacted by a researcher to verify availability and involvement. The University of Arkansas Internal Review Board (IRB) approved all data collection materials for this study. Interviews were conducted from June 2 to August 12, 2015, and lasted an average of 45 minutes (Creswell, 2009). Prior to interviews, participants received a brief summary of interview topics. Additionally, an interview guide was created by the researchers and used to establish a comfortable setting for participants and encourage open-ended conversation. During interviews, the interviewer led participants through a series of semi-structured questions regarding ACOM present initiatives, needs, and opportunities for the future. Interviews were neo-positive in nature as the interviewer aimed to ask good questions, minimize bias, and generate quality data as well as conversation (Merriam, 2009).

After the questioning route was completed, the interviewer conducted member checking to ensure recorded data agreed with the participant's intended perception (Creswell, 1999, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each interview concluded with a brief, verbal survey to gain a deeper understanding of each participant's demographics. Following each interview session, video/audio recordings were saved to a computer and assigned a number based on interview order. Once sessions were completed, transcribed data were arranged according to their information source (Creswell, 2009) and interview question. Triangulation was implemented using various modes to record data including notes, audio recordings, and in most instances video recording to increase transcription accuracy (Merriam, 2009).

Transcripts were created by Rev, a transcription service provider. Transcriptions were hand-coded using color schemes and key segments were placed under categorical themes (Creswell, 2009). Open codes from each interview were clustered and consolidated through axial coding (Creswell, 2009; Tesch, 1990). Findings were reported through narratives supported by respondent quotations and included a general summary written to capture lessons learned in thick description (Creswell, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Peer debriefing between at least two researchers was used to reinforce the data's accuracy and reach inter-coder agreement (Creswell, 2009; Gibbs, 2007). Transferability was increased through rich, thick description so individuals in a similar context may draw commonalities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Dependability was maintained through a detailed audit trail and use of an interview protocol/script (Merriam, 2009).

Participants were coded to maintain confidentiality. However, policy makers are noted using a "P" and then the interview number, industry leaders with an "I," educators with an "E," and researchers with an "R."

Findings

Definition of ACOM

The first objective of the study was to determine a definition of ACOM. Many respondents found it difficult to provide a comprehensive definition of ACOM. While some respondents stated they could not provide a correct description, other respondents commented ACOM represents the vast and complex agricultural industry through the use of multiple communication outlets. "I would clearly define agricultural communications as the ability to share the message of agriculture through many different facets within communications" (I2). Promoting awareness, discussing the purpose of agriculture, informing an audience, and creating cohesiveness were all used to express the nature of the ACOM role. Respondents expressed how the field of ACOM is always changing as a result of changes in communication outlets, a shift in audience, and agricultural practices—which also creates a challenge in defining the profession. "There's no simple definition, but it includes communicating about a broad range of topics with a broad range of tools" (P2).

Respondents noted although there are professionals in ACOM, anyone could be an ACOMR – even those who are misinformed. “Everyone thinks they’re an ag communicator because they post on social media about food” (E1). One respondent (P4) expressed the growing disconnect between consumers and agriculture is an opportunity for ACOM. “It’s exciting because there’s tons of opportunity, but that huge, growing disconnect means that the communications role is as important now as it has ever been” (P4). Respondents commented on the difficulty of the position as it combines the complex field of agriculture and the broad area of communications.

It is one of the hardest jobs in agriculture, because it’s someone who knows a lot about agriculture, a lot about communications tools and outlets, and delivers a message that’s always tailored to your audience – someone who understands who the audience is. (P2)

Future Needs of ACOM and ACOMR

The majority of respondents ($n = 15$) remarked the need for ACOMRs is growing now and will continue to grow in the future. “People need communicators now more than ever” (I10). Respondents expressed the need for ACOMRs as the industry is constantly undergoing change and consumers desire more information about their food. “The future in ag communications is strong” (I2). Respondents attributed consumer demand for increased information as an “enormous need” (R2) to connect with the consumer.

It’s the perfect storm where we decreasingly have a knowledge about agriculture, and agriculture is increasingly complicated. It’s the communications person who steps into the gap to help bridge that gap but to do that they’ve got to have a strong foundation and have to know what they’re talking about. The good communicators distinguish themselves because they’re going to put in the work to do that. (P4)

Although respondents expressed a strong future for ACOM, they also expressed a need for change within the profession. “Ag communications needs to change dramatically to be successful in getting the word out” (R2). One respondent (P2) expressed the need for ACOM positions. According to this respondent, the future of the ACOMR goes beyond industry-designated positions and carries over into public service. “Ag communicators will fill many leadership positions because the majority of the job is communicating with others” (P2).

Skills of ACOMR

The second objective of the research study was to describe skills and characteristics required of an ACOMR in today’s industry.

Audience identification.

Nearly every respondent ($n = 24$) stated understanding the audience as a critical skill in ACOM. Throughout interviews, the concept of “understanding the audience” or “knowing the audience” was consistently mentioned. To effectively develop and deliver messages, respondents expressed ACOMRs must “understand who the audience is, how they operate, and the best ways to reach them” (I3). Specific audiences noted included general public/consumers ($n = 18$), farmers ($n = 18$), policy makers ($n = 11$), producers ($n = 6$), and ranchers ($n = 5$). Respondents discussed the shift from agricultural audiences to non-agricultural audiences, or the general public.

Without a doubt the past ag communicators communicated what the farmer needed to know on a timely basis. The ag communicator of tomorrow communicates to the consumer what the farmer’s doing that benefits the consumer. Ag communications in the future has very little, if anything, to do with communicating to the farmer. (I8)

One respondent (I9) explained the consumer audience will ultimately shape how decisions are made regarding agriculture and public opinion, and how it is frightening to have a misinformed generation who will become policy makers (I9). Moreover, respondents stated it is crucial for ACOMRs to meet consumers' wants and needs to gain trust. Regarding consumers' wants and needs, the majority of respondents discussed the consumers' demand to know about their food ($n = 19$), followed by the desire to consume messages conveyed as stories ($n = 9$). Identifying audience needs was often linked to knowing the audience. "It all goes back to knowing your audience" (P3). Many respondents stated the general public places more trust in blogs and social media than science, and prefer receiving communications about knowledge over factual information. "Knowledge is becoming something that is more and more readily available. If we can't provide that, then people don't have an ability to trust" (I2).

The consumer audience was regarded by respondents as being disconnected from agriculture and further removed from the farm—a continuous trend for the future. "In Chicago, [people] are five generations removed from the farm. I have to help them understand why we do what we do to put food on their table" (I16). One respondent (I2) noted the use of the word 'food' over 'agriculture' was more attractive to consumers and has resulted in successful messages in the respondent's organization. "If we're not communicating on their [audience] terms, then we're losing" (P4).

Knowledge skillset.

The majority of respondents ($n = 23$) named knowing or understanding agriculture as an important skill. Respondents expressed the importance of understanding agriculture on a broad scale, as well as the technical details and terminology. Additionally, almost every respondent ($n = 23$) stated a thorough knowledge or understanding of the communications field was required of an ACOMR. Nearly half of the respondents ($n = 12$) specifically mentioned writing as a skill critical for ACOMRs in the present and the future. Other communications skills mentioned by respondents included knowing how to use multiple media outlets, keeping up with technology changes, conducting research, and message or story development. Having knowledge or understanding of policy was often mentioned by respondents "because [policy makers] are making the laws that affect the two percent of the population growing food for the country" (I16). One policy maker (P1) commented on the need for the ACOMR to translate the complexity of agricultural policy issues to the public.

Message development and delivery.

Respondents discussed specific components of messages from development to delivery. When discussing components of the message, respondents expressed the need for a balance of education and entertainment. Respondents consistently expressed how messages must contain accurate information and facts to maintain credibility. Additionally, many respondents recommended the approach of storytelling to bridge the public disconnect with agriculture by creating a personable message, relating to feelings instead of focusing on facts, and incorporating human interest with education. Respondents described the importance of presenting messages as short, concise, and clear, allowing the message to be consumable and understandable for the audience. One respondent labeled this as "two sentence messages" (I2).

As we think about what our consumers want, they're not going to sit down and read this article about why organic food is healthier for them or why GMOs are important to producing food for the world. They want to know what these two sentences are going to tell them. (I2)

Respondents noted strategies and tactics must guide message dissemination, and the success of the message is determined by the evaluation of message delivery. One respondent (I2) expressed the strategy must include how it fits into the overall picture of agriculture. Respondents discussed additional strategy components including timeliness, relevance to audience, and use of specific language. The message must “cut through the clutter” (I4, I14, E3) of misinformation and be tailored to a specific audience segment to successfully reach the audience, promote awareness, and change behavior. “There will always be a need for high quality information, but the strategies behind that will be how to best deliver it to the target audience” (I14). A skill respondents ($n = 19$) noted was the ability to utilize a growing number of communication outlets. However, respondents ($n = 14$) stressed the importance of knowing the best communication outlets to reach the desired audience when disseminating a message. These respondents stated researching the target audience, understanding how information is consumed, and determining which media outlets are most efficient and effective are critical to message delivery. A respondent (E3) described the message development and delivery process as “a source, communication medium, and a receiving audience.”

Characteristics of an ACOMR.

Along with a knowledge base of agriculture and an understanding in communications and policy while targeting a specific audience, most respondents ($n = 20$) stated an ACOMR must be flexible or adaptable. A quickly changing communications industry and onset of technology advancements led respondents to prioritize flexibility as a skill. Flexibility and willingness to take on new responsibilities “while looking at a wide variety of media types” was crucial in new hires, according to one industry professional (I14). Flexibility also was desired of faculty when adapting curriculum to the current industry’s issues and needs. Respondents expressed these characteristics were important to the success of a future ACOMR.

I don’t know if I can tell you where I see the future’s going to go in terms of communications, but I can tell you that I’m willing to be flexible, adapt, and implement what I can to make sure that I’m a part of it. (I8)

Adapting to the constantly shifting fields of agriculture and communications was often regarded as a non-negotiable skill by respondents. One respondent (E2) with 53 years of experience in the ACOM discipline stated adaptability and willingness to change were required “in order to survive.” Adaptability was directly linked to remaining relevant. Relevancy was described by one respondent (I10) as “keeping up with consumer trends and pressures of the world.” Two respondents (R1, I2) used the example of consumer movement from agriculture and to interest in food to describe remaining relevant with the audience’s concerns and preferences. Timeliness of message delivery to a target audience was also attributed to relevancy.

The ability to think critically, strategically, and forward was often mentioned by respondents. When discussing future skills, respondents often expressed using critical thinking skills to develop a message strategy while anticipating the future shifts and trends in communications as crucial. Credibility and accuracy were mentioned by respondents ($n = 13$) as a needed skill to gain public trust and establish a positive reputation. One respondent (P2) stated the seriousness of prioritizing credibility and accuracy because “if you lose these, then you’ve lost your respect and platform forever.”

When asked what future skills would be required for ACOMRs to succeed in industry, respondents often said it was too difficult to anticipate the future because of the quickly shifting communications field. Rapid advancements in technology were often mentioned as something ACOMRs must adapt to be successful in the future. When asked about future technology, one

respondent answered, “Learn it or die” (R1). Respondents expressed current required skills would still be crucial in the future, particularly when relating to consumer trends in a consumer-driven world. “As the future comes and we really have to embrace change that we might not want to, that forward-thinking and flexibility is going to be crucial for the success of ag communicators and the agricultural industry in general” (I2).

Challenges

The final object of the research study was to identify current challenges within ACOM and opportunities for the future.

Changes in areas of knowledge.

When asked to describe challenges within ACOM, all respondents ($N = 25$) attributed the demand of knowledge in the rapidly changing environments of agriculture, communications, and audience as a challenge that currently exists and will continue in the future. The rapid advancement of communication technologies has led to the current challenge of keeping up. “There is no way those of us in earlier ag journalism could have anticipated the Internet” (E2). Respondents stated the broad sectors and sub sectors as well as the complex nature of agriculture add to the difficulty of having a thorough knowledge and understanding of the industry. In addition to those changes, respondents discussed the challenge of navigating the many channels available to reach an audience. “Everything is changing, so we have to be well-rounded as communicators to reach many people in many different ways” (I10). Respondents attributed communications channels and audience demand for short pieces of information as posing a challenge to ACOMRs who are tasked with communicating technical and complex agricultural issues. Agricultural issues mentioned by respondents include environmental impact; government and policy; agricultural technology; biotechnology; and new avenues in food production. One respondent (I6) discussed how the speeds of change in policy, science, industry practices, and public demands are all extremely different, creating a nearly impossible environment for an ACOMR to succeed.

Generalist vs specialist.

Although respondents named agricultural knowledge ($n = 23$) and communications knowledge ($n = 23$) as demands of being an effective ACOMR, respondents also offered insight on the challenge of being a generalist or a specialist as related to the profession of ACOMR. “The broad area makes it impossible for anyone to be so well-versed in the entire scope of agriculture and be able to communicate about it all” (P3). The pressure of being a specialist in everything was considered an unrealistic expectation. Not only did respondents feel pressured to know about agriculture, but they also felt the pressure of mastering multiple media outlets and audiences. “Now you have to be a jack of all trades and a master of all trades at the same time” (I9). Although one educator (E3) stated an ACOMR should have a broad knowledge of the complex field of agriculture to communicate effective and understand messages, meanwhile the need is to have professional specialists in specific media. Another educator (E1) said the job of teaching ACOM has become more complex and “overwhelming in the program and the profession. You create more than a story, you create a video, tweet, Facebook post, article, etc.” Because there are so many platforms, it is impossible to be everywhere effectively (I3).

Division and defense.

When discussing challenges within ACOM, respondents also discussed how ACOM struggles to be proactive in its messages. According to respondents, current messages tend to be

defensive and play on negative accusations. “Agricultural communications needs to be much more proactive in sharing our information. It’s hard to do that when you’re always on the defense” (I9). Statements from respondents included playing catch-up, always behind, lack of preparation, and not proactively reaching out to the audience with a message. One policy maker (P4) commented on the defensive stance of ACOM and need for control of messages.

I think we’re going to have to stay on the leading edge...otherwise, we’re constantly beating back stuff after the fact. I’m not an agricultural communications expert, but I would rather be managing the message rather than manage a response to the message. It’s twice as much work. (P4)

The severity of defensiveness was linked by one respondent (I6) to the confusion of the purpose of an ACOMR – even within the field.

At a tipping point, we’re preaching to the choir in ag comm. A lot of people think we should train only to communicate with farmers. Then there are others who think we train to basically tell people who don’t know anything about farmers to essentially leave farmers alone. It’s almost like you’re training communicators not to communicate. (I6)

One respondent (I2) stated a defensive attitude was the greatest hurdle for ACOMR. “The attitude of self-righteousness needs to come down a notch. As someone who comes from the agricultural realm, it’s really frustrating and we will burn people out...if we continue to fight. Don’t be on the defense, let’s work together” (I2). Respondents believed the division and conflict within the industry hindered bridging the division between the agricultural industry and general consumers. “We are competitive against each other, and often times we end up taking shots at each other” (I4). Many times the messages against specific sectors of agriculture were driven by other agricultural sectors. Respondents noted how the general public sees food and agriculture as separate industries. ACOMRs need to “come together as a community” (I2) to gain credibility as an industry, instead of attacking sectors, such as organics or livestock production. The focus needs to shift back to the audience, because “people aren’t talking about ag from the inside out—we do a lot of talking to each other, but not to the outside” (I3).

Audience confusion, disconnect, and misinformation.

The majority of respondents ($n = 19$) discussed the challenge of connecting with a confused and misinformed general public, who are generations removed from agricultural practices. Respondents noted how anyone can be a communicator if they have a social media account and smart phone. The general consumer, respondents stated, is more likely to trust opinions expressed through social media and blogs than trust science. One respondent (R2) explained when speaking about food production practices at public events, she had more credibility as a grandmother than as a scientist. Two respondents (I1, I2) commented about the influence “mommy blogs” have on consumer perceptions and beliefs. Fear marketing, described as using fear to influence public perceptions, was often mentioned as a strong influence used in attacks on agriculture. People now believe “technology is dangerous to their health and planet, and unrealistic demands are placed on farmers from government agencies that aren’t based in science, [n]or [are they] practical” (I8). The challenges of combatting misinformation, fear marketing, uneducated opinion leaders, and proliferation of competitive messages were also regarded as threats to the future of the profession.

Respondents stressed the need to recognize that consumers value feelings over facts. Creating this personalized message helps generate trust between consumers and ACOMRs. By choosing to stay in a comfort zone and not responding to the shift in consumers' preferences, respondents warned, the consumer disconnect will continue in the future.

Opportunities

Unified voice.

Respondents offered that a unified voice across the agricultural industry was a must. One respondent (I9) recommended starting with a positive message of agricultural stewardship concerning animals, land, food, fiber, and sustainability to create unity, provide a proactive message, and foster personal connections through stories. "We need to get out there and tell our story. I know everybody says that, but we need to do it effectively" (I9). Respondents said the progress of agricultural technologies and policies and establishment of public trust begins with unity, and unity begins with collaboration. The first step, one respondent (I4) said, is getting everyone in agriculture on the same page. Respondents discussed the overall goal of addressing worldwide hunger will not be achieved until internal combat becomes collaboration. "We need to exchange information instead of fighting against each other—because that's not going to solve world hunger" (I7).

Message development and response to audience.

Respondents regularly stated the general consumer responds to opinions, feelings, emotion, and knowledge. One respondent (I2) addressed the difference between communicating facts and communicating knowledge, and others recommended combining entertainment and education in a message. According to respondents, people have an increasing desire to know more about their food. This trend will continue. They suggested offering the public a direct connection to their food through creative and personalized messages resulting in increased relationships, trust, and knowledge.

People want to feel important. People want to be relatable, to feel like they have a stake in things. I think the more we can continue to do that and make them a part of what we're doing, then that may potentially be what determines the effectiveness of ag communicators in the future. (I10)

Conclusion

This study sought to capture the essence of ACOM by gaining insights from professionals by interviewing policy makers, industry leaders, educators, and researchers. Participants ($N = 25$) ranged in age from 24 to 82 years with a median age of 48. Additionally, participants were from a variety of agricultural fields and included industry leaders ($n = 16$), policy makers ($n = 4$), ACOM educators ($n = 3$), and researchers ($n = 2$).

There is no clear cut definition of ACOM/ACOMR. While a common definition of ACOM used in higher education "is the exchange of information about the agricultural and natural resources industries through effective and efficient media, such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, and the web, to research appropriate audiences" (Telg & Irani, 2012, p.4) respondents were unable to clearly articulate a definition of the profession or the discipline. The ambiguous definition of ACOM/ACOMR could be a result of the dramatic shifts in communication outlets, audiences, technology, and agricultural practices over the last century. However, when discussing skills and hurdles, respondents were able to discuss what an ACOMR *should be*. Factors associated with a successful ACOMR included knowledge about audience, agriculture, communication principles, and policy. Additionally, respondents noted technology has enabled the public to be perceived as ACOMRs with the instantaneous use of social media and smart phones.

Over the previous 100 years, communication technology has rapidly changed the landscape of ACOM (Boone et al., 2003). Respondents were adamant the future of ACOM lies with the ability of ACOMRs to adapt to rapidly evolving technology. “One of the most crucial choices in the entire innovation-development process is the decision to begin diffusing an innovation to potential adopters” (Rogers, 2003, p.155). In regards to technology, one respondent stated “learn it or die” (R1). Therefore, ACOMRs must be proactive in embracing and adopting new technology.

Although technology has changed the profession of ACOM, the basic principles of communication have and will continue to be important for successful future ACOMRs. A total of 24 respondents (92%) stated the importance of understanding the audience. Knowledge of audience proved to be key for selecting communication channels, developing messages, and gaining the public’s trust. Similar to previous research studies, respondents stated the need for ACOMRs with strong writing skills (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011; Morgan, 2012; Sprecker & Rudd, 1997). ACOMRs should also focus on message development and delivery to effectively connect with audiences.

Study respondents discussed challenges and hurdles faced within ACOM. Specifically, ACOMRs are faced with the challenge of becoming a generalist or a specialist within the profession. Pressure to be well versed in their knowledge of agriculture as well as be an expert in a variety of communication channels finds ACOMRs feeling overwhelmed. Additionally, current audiences demand creating multiple communication pieces (i.e., web, video, social media, print media) for one story. Because there are so many platforms, many ACOMRs stated it was nearly impossible to be effective in all communication channels. Thus, ACOMRs are faced with the dilemma of having both a knowledge of and high skillset in a wide variety of communications efforts.

Another hurdle in ACOM is the issue of fighting internally within the realm of agriculture. Attacks are common about agricultural issues such as organic versus conventional production. To be effective within the profession, ACOMRs need to collaborate to develop a united message about food production and systems.

ACOMRs have the opportunity to effectively educate and communicate to the public if there is willingness to create a unified voice during the message development process. Respondents clearly stated the need to take action by actively listening to consumers. This course of action will help ACOMRs communicate messages based on the wants and needs of the intended audience. The art of storytelling must be emphasized in the training of future ACOMRs. This involves creating personable stories that resonate on an emotional level with consumers. Conveying shared values provides more motivation than facts alone. This conclusion aligns with findings of the 2014 Consumer Trust Research by the Center for Food Integrity (2014), which states, “After confidence (shared values) ha[ve] been established, people are more willing to consider technical information, or competence, in their decision making process” (p. 3).

Recommendations

This study offers insight from 25 current agricultural experts from within industry, policy makers, educators, and researchers. With a combined 372 years of experience in ACOM (median of 14.88), these findings are grounded in experience and should be taken seriously. The growing disconnect between consumers and agriculture presents unlimited opportunity for expansion of ACOM. As respondent (P4) stated, “It’s exciting because there’s tons of opportunity, but that huge, growing disconnect means that the communications role is as important now as it has ever been”. Based on this research, ACOMRs should consider efforts to create a unified voice for ACOM. Conscientious efforts should be made to actively listen to the demands of consumers. “If we’re not communicating on their [audience] terms, then we’re losing” (P4). Therefore, ACOMRs should stop combatting the shift in the audience’s perceptions and adapt their message accordingly.

The art of storytelling must be emphasized. Consumers want personalized information

about their food. Messages should be personable. This is evidenced by the story told by R2 as she explained when speaking about food production practices at public events, she had more credibility as a grandmother than as a scientist. ACOMRs must find ways to relate the message to their audience and garner the public's trust.

Educational institutions play a fundamental role in training ACOMRs. Therefore, educators need to focus on training ACOMRs to be specialists rather than generalists. To think an individual would be a content generalist in agriculture and policy as well as be an expert in all communication channels including writing, social media, layout and design, visual communications, and web design is unrealistic. While having a baseline knowledge of agriculture is important (Morgan, 2012), it is also important to focus on the development of specific communication skills. Encouraging specialization (i.e., print media, electronic communications, and videography) into ACOM programs is necessary to create effective future ACOMRs.

Technology strongly impacts the field of ACOM. Because technology changes rapidly, it is imperative for ACOMRs to keep up with emerging trends in technology. Therefore, professional associations, such as the Association for Communication Excellence in Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Life and Human Skills should consider developing training specifically related to emerging technology. Trainings could occur at the organization's annual conference. This would encourage members to grow and adopt new technology to improve communication efforts.

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