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What is the “agricultural rut” and how did we get here?

by John James, APEN President

I want to round out a discussion about extension being in an “agricultural rut” as it was I who introduced the topic during the APEN open space forum in Toowoomba last year. I was encouraged, but not surprised, that the topic attracted so much interest from extensionists keen to explore new futures for extension. Like others, I’m keen to see the extension profession’s traditional alliance with agricultural science does not blind us to other opportunities.

I should say at the outset that I’m not “anti-agriculture”. Like many members of APEN, much of my working life has been spent in agriculture and the professional and personal rewards I’ve reaped have been very satisfying. There is, of course, an enduring need for agricultural and land management science and some platform for communicating new technologies to those who would use it. One of the world’s most

pressing challenges will be – or is – matching the capacity of our arable land with the food and fibre needs of a burgeoning global population. Extension, from this perspective, is already assured a rich and busy future.

The term “agricultural rut” may understandably carry negative connotations and some extensionists may be offended at the suggestion that agricultural pursuits somehow lead to some sort of professional dead-end. Nothing could be further from the truth. We all know local “gurus” of extension who are passionate about pushing the boundaries of extension and tenaciously pursue professional excellence. They have innate or cultivated skills in communication, make excellent mentors, and take great care that extension – as a vocation and also enriching life work – is nurtured amongst novice practitioners. Usually, these “gurus” have a broad ranging understanding of agriculture –

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Qld Parks & Wildlife Service officer Karen Smith uses the “erotic” mnemonic in interpretive engagement with the community.

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Where to contact your local APEN representative. Also story guidelines for the next edition of ExtensionNet.

From the (new) editor

Hi all. I was briefly introduced in the last edition of ExtensionNet so I won’t talk too much more about myself here ... it’s one of my least favourite subjects!

I look forward to the challenge of editing ExtensionNet in the future and see it as one of the primary benefits of being a member of APEN. The stories from around the regions about members doing what they do best are illuminating and inspiring.

I thank and congratulate the former editor, Mark Paine, who has maintained the quality of this newsletter at an extraordinarily professional level in the past. I’d like to keep up that professionalism and introduce some new features in subsequent editions. Above all, if there’s news in extension, you’ll read it here. Please let me know what you think about the newsletter and pass on ideas about how we can keep it relevant and readable.

Darren Schmidt

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... the social, political and economic circumstances that gave rise to a population of experienced extensionists have now changed markedly ...

What is the “agricultural rut”? And how did we get here? (cont’d from page 1)

the scientific principles, the practical realities, the facts and figures – and of the people that practise it. This deep and rounded education means many experienced extensionists frequently leave significant ripples in a rural community when they move or retire.

These venerable professionals are, I think, wonderful examples of what novice extensionists can aspire to. However, I do argue that the social, political and economic circumstances that gave rise to a population of such experienced extensionists have now changed markedly.

Socially, agricultural world is different to even 20 years ago. Social backbones in rural communities such as tennis clubs, church groups and rural youth organisations have declined in importance. It was once relatively easy for an extension officer to socialise with a great many clients simply by joining the local service club or by being otherwise socially active.

Politically, it now seems less acceptable to channel resources to a narrow segment of the food value chain – agricultural production – at the “expense” of other segments such as marketing or business development. Increasingly, extension officers are no longer likely to be afforded the luxury of being of a purely agricultural bent. Of course, for many extensionists this is not new ground at all and they revel in wearing the different hats required of their job.

Economically, extension has never had a tougher time of proving its contribution to the region’s financial output. By its nature difficult to evaluate in monetary terms, extension faces increasing competition – especially in the public sphere – from research, business-oriented activities and even corporate image spin-doctoring. For bean counters, local testimonials, ethical advice and productive support do not fit easily into the credit and debits columns.

So, to re-iterate, extension has traditionally sat side-by-side with agriculture in a chair that was socially cohesive, economically justifiable, and with a political identity that was resolute and almost a given. Clearly, those days are past and, as modern professionals, we must take careful note of these changes and carefully plot our journey through them. Better still, let’s seize the inevitable opportunities generated by changing circumstances and turn them to our own advantage.

We need only to look to other agencies to pick up clues. Most of us have at some point worked or communicated with national parks and wildlife officers, mines and water infrastructure departments or environmental protection agencies. We’ve all been exposed to highly targeted public information campaigns, we ring up companies and organisations to book tickets, reserve restaurant tables, or hire equipment.

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ABOUT THIS ISSUE ...

Long time readers will notice two things about this issue:

- 1 there is little “hard and fast” extension field work reported, and
- 2 the authors are all from Queensland.

The second point is easy to explain: the new editor is a Queenslander and as a way of “easing into the job” it was a lot easier to use local contacts to write the articles. Future editions will be less parochial!

The first point reflects the fact that there simply wasn’t room for agricultural extension stories in this edition because it is full of information about how other agencies deal with “extension”. This is *not* an indicator of how the newsletter is destined to evolve; future editions will, of course, carry stories about the sort of work we’re all familiar with: agricultural extension.

During the 2001 Open Space APEN forum in Toowoomba there was considerable interest in the “agricultural rut” (see story by John James, page 1). Consequently, this edition is themed toward showing how non-

agricultural organisations act as change agents, and you’ll see that some of practices and philosophies are familiar.

Other “hot” topics at the forum included marketing, a national extension framework, professional development, and extension theory and these themes will be more fully explored in future editions.

Darren Schmidt



Reducing the road toll with messages

by Kerrie Tregenza

Queensland Transport

Changing behaviour and attitudes is one of the greatest challenges for communicators. Queensland Transport attempts to meet this challenge through road safety public education campaigns on issues as diverse as safety for older pedestrians to drink driving.

Tony Kursius, Executive Director, Land Transport and Safety, said decisions about what messages are delivered are driven by research.

"The bottom line is the road toll — by examining our road crash database we can see what driving behaviours are contributing to crashes, where they occur and who to target," Tony said.

Once this has been established communication strategies can be developed for specific audiences.

"The means of communicating with the target audience will depend on the budget, their geographic location and other factors such as age, education and work status."

Queensland Transport's most recent campaign aims to show that "every K over is a killer".

"This campaign was developed after extensive testing and research to find the best way to drive home the message about the dangers of speeding. Ultimately we want to position speeding as socially unacceptable behaviour, therefore we went so far as to involve speeders in creative think tanks to develop the campaign," Tony said.

Specific objectives of the campaign were:

- to make the community believe there is no such thing as safe speeding and that they will be held accountable if they speed;

- to educate motorists of the consequences — social, financial, penalty-based — of speeding; and

- to educate motorists of the increased risk that results from increased speed.

Through focus group testing, features of successful anti-speeding commercials were identified.

The research showed that effective anti-speeding ads should have a strong story line, show a cause and effect link and a range of social consequences on family and friends as well as the driver.

"Participants thought that ads should have a strong emotional impact, but feature everyday situations people can relate to such as running late.

"Showing drivers speeding at 10-15 km/h over the speed limit was also a key factor. It goes without saying that the faster you go, the longer it takes to stop. The focus on 10-15km/h was a strategic decision. If the consequences exist for people speeding in lower speed zones, it is obvious they are more severe in high speed zones."

The marketing mix for the campaign includes television and radio advertising, billboards and on-going publicity.

"Speeding is a very complex social issue. To successfully achieve a reduction in motorists' speeds, campaigns must seek to change attitudes and behaviours. No single advertisement can achieve attitudinal and behavioural shifts for all audiences," Tony said.

A series of five television commercials were developed, each with a

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DIFFUSION OF INNOVATIONS

Proceedings for sale

Did you miss out on proceedings from the Open Space APEN 2001 Conference in Toowoomba? Don't despair! The Secretariat has copies of Proceedings and Conference folder for sale: Cost for both (including GST and postage in Australia): Members \$49.50, non-members \$65.50. Refereed proceedings only cost members \$27.50, non-members \$38.50. Conference folder only costs members \$22.00, non-members \$27.50.

NZ Members \$51.80 NZ non-members \$68.30 (other overseas please contact Rosemary for the cost of postage).

Contact Rosemary Currie at the APEN Secretariat, PO Box 1239, Wodonga, Vic, 3689 or Fax 02 6056 1967 or e-mail to rcurrie@albury.net.au. Phone 02 6024 5349 for inquiries.

Latest JOE online

The February 2002 edition of **Journal of Extension** is online. Commentary on extension and political acumen, and feature articles on extension in controversial studies, evaluating water resource outreach programs, groundwater education for farmers, how the adoption of transgenic crops affects cultural practices, herbicide drift and conflict management, measuring and benchmarking customer satisfaction, and much more. Address is www.joe.org. The next issue of ExtensionNet will highlight some other extension-themed websites. If APEN members have some handy sites bookmarked, please contact the Editor (details back page).

APEN who?

Ever mentioned "APEN" to a colleague to be met with a blank stare and have to spell it out for them? Worse, have you ever had to explain extension to someone who's never heard the term in its agricultural context? Please consider completing the faxback form posted with this edition. It's your chance to convey your thoughts and opinions to the APEN National Executive.

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Karen Smith (middle) with her two sub-editors

Reaching the masses: interpretation & eroticism

How national parks and wildlife officers use messages to “fire hearts”

by Karen Smith

John Muir said “Dry words and dry facts will never fire hearts.” For those of you thinking that for practical, important stuff like changing farming practices or adopting new technology this has little relevance, pause to think. What makes more difference to the way we think, believe and act — just knowing something or being inspired by it affecting our emotions, intellect or way of life?

Well targeted, concise, relevant, thematic and (dare we say) enjoyable communication which gets to the heart of the matter and the heart of the hearer may be just what extension programs need. It may be that extension officers from various fields can draw on the experiences and techniques of other fields of communication — like interpretation — to find new, different or inspiring ways of getting messages across.

The Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) — an arm of the Environmental Protection Agency of Queensland, Australia — has both extension and interpretation programs operating side-by-side as two largely distinct providers of public contact and education services. The two programs share common broad goals, but have differences in the audience they target and emphasise different techniques to reach these audiences. Interpretive programs relate to an understanding of the natural world and are targeted (for the most part) towards national park visitors or a wildlife issue and often “clustered” around a particular park, visitor centre or activity program. In contrast, extension efforts rely more heavily on taking their services to target audiences using structured workshops with set (usually adult) learning outcomes. Programs are usually targeted off-park and aimed at modifying attitudes and behaviour of natural resource managers in relation to conservation of nature on their lands.

“Extension differs from interpretation in that groups targeted by extension activities usually have an economic interest in environmental initiatives.”

THE MAIN POINTS

- Appeal to the heart, not just the ear
- “Interpretive” programs can work side by side with extension programs
- Extension can be EROTIC (it’s a mnemonic ... no letters, please!)

Many examples exist of interpretation and extension staff of QPWS working together, and indeed before the relatively recent (1998) establishment of the Nature Conservation Extension Program within QPWS, many interpretation staff were involved in what people would really term “extension”.

The QPWS Draft Interpretation Manual describes extension as “any communication with user groups, special interest groups and commercial industries involved in or affected by the Service’s environmental management. Extension differs from interpretation in that groups targeted by extension activities usually have an economic interest in environmental initiatives.”

While many extension activities require distinct “extension” techniques, extension professionals could readily adapt some interpretive techniques in some circumstances. One obvious way to incorporate interpretive principles is when developing displays, publications or signs, but it need not be limited to non-personal forms of communication.

Contemporary American interpreter Sam Ham states that effective interpretation is **EROTIC**. That is, interpretation should be **Enjoyable, Relevant, Organised, Thematic, Informative and Challenging**.

Extension could be erotic too! Let’s look at each in turn to see what this idea means.

Enjoyable: Today more than ever, if people are not stimulated by what they see or hear, they will be less likely to listen to what you have to tell them. Make your materials and programs more enjoyable by using catchy headings and titles, colourful descriptions and anecdotes. Use emotive, thought provoking language and creative words to convey information, thoughts and views. Be personal and inject some novelty, humour, surprise and variety. Encourage the use of senses — feel, smell, see and hear. Tell