

Farmer to Farmer Program
Trip Report

Mary Ellen Bell
Managua, Nicaragua
September 4 – September 19, 2003

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Universidad Nacional Agraria is the national public agricultural university of Nicaragua. I was invited to spend two weeks with faculty and administrative staff to assist in development of a communications/marketing plan that would enhance the institution's "corporate image."

UNA has put significant resources into "image development" and plans for developing new printed materials and redesigning its website were well underway when I arrived. However, administrative leaders, faculty and the public relations staff had not considered the importance of developing a comprehensive communications strategy (including development of messages, identification of important audiences, and best ways to communicate with those audiences) and as a result its communications appear disconnected, of uneven quality and with unclear purpose. UNA appeared not to have put any emphasis on communicating results of university research to agricultural producers and agricultural businesses. While I was there, I tried to introduce the concepts of strategic communication through one-on-one discussions and through a communications planning workshop. I believe that the public relations staff began to see that their work can contribute to the educational goals of UNA, as well as its publicity and political goals, by communicating the value of the university's work to farmers, agribusinesses, government and citizens.

I will stay in touch with people at UNA by email to continue to help the office of public relations develop its communication strategy. I am also working with a faculty person who is part of a national effort to develop a communications strategy for the national ministry of education. My time at UNA was not sufficient for development of a full plan, and future assistance might include a follow-up and refinement of the university's overall communications and marketing strategies.

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BACKGROUND

Purpose:

Contribute to the strengthening of the "corporate image" of the Universidad Nacional Agraria of Nicaragua.

Objectives:

- Assist staff in the Office of Public Relations (oficina de divulgacion y relaciones publicas) increase skills in design and content of various brochures, posters, bulletins, and other printed materials and organize and present information through the university's website.

- Assist other faculty and staff with specific communications and information projects.
- Assist the Office of Public Relations with the development of a comprehensive, strategic communications plan.

ACTIVITIES/RESULTS

- What institution/organization/groups were you primarily providing assistance to?

I provided assistance to the Universidad Nacional Agraria of Nicaragua. While in the county, I also met informally with people who work with the Wisconsin-Nicaragua Partners organization.

- Please provide contact information for institutions, agencies and people with whom you met or worked, including contact information (e-mail and fax) for people you think should receive a copy of your trip report.

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*Those who should receive the report

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- **What service/assistance did you provide?**

I worked with the Public Relations staff to critique publications and websites and begin development of an overall comprehensive communications strategy for UNA. A report on this work is attached. (Attachment 1)

I met with administrative and faculty at the university to discuss specific communications, publications, website and information projects. Complete reports on these consultations are attached. (Attachments 2, 3, 4)

I taught a workshop on communications strategy for 12 administrators and faculty members (5 women, 7 men). A copy of the presentation for the workshop in powerpoint (attachment 5) and a report on the outcome of the planning (attachment 6) are attached.

- **What were your observations, and what do you feel you accomplished?**

UNA seems to have significant resources to put into “image development” and is proceeding with plans for developing new printed materials and redesigning its website. However, administrative leaders, faculty and the public relations staff have not considered the importance of developing a communications strategy (including development of messages, identification of important audiences, and best ways to communicate with those audiences) and as a result its communications appear disconnected, of uneven quality and unclear purpose. UNA appeared not to have put any emphasis on communicating results of university research to agricultural producers and agricultural businesses. While I was there, I tried to introduce the concepts of strategic communication through one-on-one discussions and through my workshop. I believe that the public relations staff began to see that their work can contribute to the educational goals of UNA, as well as its publicity and political goals, by communicating the value of the university’s work to farmers, agribusinesses, government and citizens.

I will stay in touch with people at UNA by email to continue to help the office of public relations develop its communication strategy. I am also staying in touch with a faculty person who is part of a national effort to develop a communications strategy for the national ministry of education. My time at UNA was not sufficient for development of a full marketing plan, and future assistance might include a follow-up and refinement of the university’s overall communications and marketing strategies.

COMMENTS

While I believe that the final outcome of my assignment was positive, a number of obstacles and challenges existed. My assignment was put together in a very short period of time, and I believe that staff at UNA was simply not ready for me when I arrived. As a result, there were no substantive “jobs” for me for the first several days. Appointments for consultations had not been set up, and I was simply “taken along” when public relations staff had duties on campus or elsewhere in Managua. My transportation from my lodging to the university arrived 2 to 3 hours later than expected for the first few mornings. Because I have previous experience in traveling and working abroad, I didn’t expect everything to run as it might on a precise schedule, but after three days, I became concerned, and reported my concerns to Ronald Blandon.

As a result, by the end of the first week, things began to change – appointments were set up, and I was able to arrange to present an interactive workshop on communications strategies attended by about a dozen faculty and staff members. I was somewhat disappointed that I was unable to provide more assistance to UNA during my visit, but I hope that UNA can benefit from what I was able to do.

This is my second experience as a Farmer to Farmer volunteer. I believe this program is a force for international understanding and an excellent forum for the exchange of ideas, technology, culture and friendship. I return from experiences like this feeling very fortunate and believing that we in the North will always gain more than we can give when we participate in this kind of exchange.

Respectfully submitted,

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Audience-Focused Website

Meeting with Maria Lydia Bermudex, Divulgacion y Relaciones Publicas, Sept. 9, 2003

Recommendation: Create an audience-focused organization strategy for the website of the Universidad Nacional Agraria.

This website strategy gives the user the opportunity to easily find and select information that is most important to him or her. For example, a student using the website, will find most of the information most pertinent to her needs by clicking on the section labeled “For Students.” The existing website content index will remain; a second route through the site will be added and the content will be cross-referenced. This chart shows how topics will be selected by audience group.

Estudiantes	Alumnos/Facudades	Administration	*Noticias/periodicos	Gobierno
Plano Estudiar Vida Estudiante Admisión Biblioteca Proyectos Calendario Academica	Proyectos Investigar *Sindicato facultades F&S Bioliotechas Servicios	*Sindicato admin. *Direcciones	Articulos cientificos Revistas Boletinas Articulos de projections Photos (docentes, admin., estudiantes en clases, etc.)	Info. General *Proyectos importantes (resultos)

*this item does not yet exist.

This chart is not complete. Staff in the Office of Public Relations will continue to add or delete content and important audiences and content subjects.

Using photos on most of the web pages will add interest and life to the site. For example, on the “history” page, photos from the historical collection; on The University”, photos of students and the campus; and on Plan Estudio, photos of students in class, walking on campus, in the cafeteria, studying or using computers.

Notes: Move date line to a less obvious place on the main page.

Add changing information about upcoming events, news about research and extension projects, university events, etc., to the front page of the site. People need a reason to visit a site regularly and will return more often if the content changes frequently.

Attachment 2

Plan de Desayolla de Experiencias Pedegodica

Organizational outline for a booklet about teaching techniques and experiences

Meeting with Yvette Sanchez Mendiarez, Dir. Direccione de Docencia, y Melba Batres, Prof. de Espanol, Sept. 8, 2003

Recommendation: Use a simple organizational template, including a brief description of techniques, personal anecdotes about how teachers have used the methods, and tips for other teachers to learn from. Disseminate this book widely in other universities in Central America to enhance UNA's reputation as an excellent teaching university and advance its goal of developing and strengthening its corporate image.

Direccione de Docencia is charged with curriculum development and assistance for teachers at UNA. One of its important activities is an 11-week orientation course for teachers. This course focuses on learning and applying effective teaching methods. Teachers who complete this course submit a report describing their personal experiences with using various techniques in their classes. The director would like to develop a book summarizing this rich collection of experiential data for the benefit of all UNA instructors.

Audience: The teaching faculty at UNA is the primary audience. However, secondary audiences could include teachers at other universities in Central America. If this information were broadly published for the benefit of other university as well as UNA, the benefit for UNA would be an enhancement of its reputation as a teaching institution dedicated to effecting teaching and learning - a pedagogical leader.

Discussion: A proposed outline is as follows:

Introduction. The purpose of the book. Who will benefit from studying it. What readers will learn. How teachers can use the information to improve their own classroom performance as well as the learning and recall of the students.

Techniques. Several (6) themes based on specific methods of teaching and learning. Each section will include a brief description of the technique and three stories selected from the reports to illustrate how teachers have used this technique and what they learned from their experiences. For example, one technique of theme could be "socio-drama". What is sociodrama? For what kinds of lessons is this technique effective? How does it enhance learning and recall? What can other teachers learn from these experiences (tips)?

Conclusion. Overall, these reports are a rich collection that could be useful research data in the field of pedagogy. This conclusion can summarize some universal theories about effective learning and teaching can be derived from the daily experiences of UNA faculty.

I also discussed the format and design of the book with Sr. Batres. Since is appears the design and printing budget is small (or non-existent), I suggested she use a simple design suitable for photocopying and a "comb binding" similar to the format of the other manuals used for the orientation

course. I also recommended using as many photos as possible, showing students and teachers actively applying the teaching techniques discussed in the text.

Attachment 3

Enhanced visibility and use of information resources

Meeting with Ruth Velia Gomez, Centro Nacional de Informacion y Documentacion Agropecuaria (CENIDA) Sept. 10, 2003

Recommendation: Increase informal promotion of CENIDA resources directly with targeted audiences.

CENIDA has two primary functions: It is the administrative center for the libraries at UNA. It serves as the major information resource for producers, researchers, and agricultural organizations and intuitions. The library is small, but it contains what is probably the most comprehensive set of information resources on agricultural topics in Nicaragua. These resources include books and articles as well as professional journals. A database exists as an index to these materials and is available on the UNA website.

Goal: Sra. Velia Gomez's communication goal is to expand awareness and use of the information resources.

Audience: Primary users of CENIDA resources include internal and external audiences. The internal audiences are students, teachers, researchers and administrators who work at the university. External audiences are extension workers (In Nicaragua, "extensionistas" are employed by agricultural businesses. They are not affiliated with UNA or any other educational institution, as is Extension in the U.S.) farmers and people who are members of other agricultural organizations and government agencies. Sra. Gomez says that the internal audiences are most important to her department. We also discussed the importance on external audiences for the purpose of enhancing the image of the university as a valuable resource to all the people of Nicaragua.

Communication Methods: CENIDA currently has a brochure that outlines its primary services and resources and explains how to access them. The staff plans to upgrade this brochure with the help of staff in the Office of Devulgacion. They also hope to develop an attractive poster for additional and semi-permanent visibility. CENIDA has a presence on the UNA website, with listing of services available. Two searchable databases can be accessed from the website for help in locating books and other materials.

CENIDA is a member of an extensive network of information professionals called Red Nacional de Informacion y Documentacion Agraria de Nicaragua (RENIDA). The group of 27 institutional members meets every two months. Its goal is to increase cooperation and access to information resources among all the institutions.

Discussion: We discussed several possible actions for increasing the visibility and use of CERIDA resources. It appears to me that the internal audiences (students, faculty, administrators are already aware of these resources and use them in their work. However, external users - producers, extension professionals, and representatives of agricultural businesses and organizations - seem to be less evident as users. And it is not clear that influential audiences, such as government officials and agencies, are aware of the value of these resources. Passive promotions (printed materials and the website) may not be effective in reaching these groups. I think a more proactive approach would be

more effective, and recommend that UNA develop an active, personal outreach program. The advantage of this approach is that producers and agricultural professionals are more likely to trust information that comes from a known source. Possible activities to increase external use of materials include:

1. CENIDA can continue to use the information network (RENIDA) to promote its libraries and other resources externally.
2. CENIDA can work directly with UNA faculty who frequently visit producers, extensionsistas and other agribusiness professionals around the country and ask them to distribute the CENIDA brochure and poster, and talk directly, one-on-one, about the value of the resources and how people outside of Managua can access them.
3. UNA administrative leaders can promote the resources within their professional networks.

Conversation about information needs

Meeting with Roberto Blandino Obanda, Director de Extension y Servicios, Direccion de Investigacion, Extension y Postgrado (DIEP), Sept. 10, 2003

Recommendation: The Office of Devulgation should try to enlist Sr. Blandino as a partner and advisor. He seems to have a broad understanding of marketing concepts and methods and a strong interest in promoting UNA among external audiences.

Direccion de Investigacion, Extension y Postgrado (DIEP) is a three-part administrative unit that oversees research, extension, and continuing (or postgraduate) education within UNA. This meeting with Sr. Blandino focused specifically on the extension or outreach function, a function that the director says has not yet been well defined. The director said extension should support cultural activities (music, dance, and sports), programs for agriculture, and practical education (nutrition, food safety) for everyone.

Goal: Sr. Blandino's communication goal is to get UNA to communicate with all the individuals and businesses along the entire food production chain. Specifically he expresses a lot of enthusiasm for a radio station featuring information from UNA and broadcasting from the University's two satellite campuses in Juigalpa (Chontales) and Camoapa (Boaco).

Audience: Sr. Blandino believes the university focuses its communication on producers, but should be communicating with everyone all along the chain of food production. This would include businesses that supply equipment, seed, fertilizers, chemicals, etc.; producers; businesses that store and transport produce; processors; markets, and consumers. He contends that UNA needs a way to determine what kind of information is needed by each of these groups, and then supply it. Sr. Blandino is familiar with marketing concepts and spoke of the need to segment these audiences by geographical zones within the country, pointing out that the needs in the Pacific, Central and Atlantic zones are quite different.

Discussion: I asked Sr. Blandino what the office of Devulgacion could do to address the communication needs he outlined. He replied that he believes UNA needs a way to sort and prioritize information about research, events, and meetings so that, internally, people can quickly access the information they need most. He also is extremely concerned about the quality and content of UNA's website, a project that is still under construction, and expressed a great interest in using the website as a primary method of internal communication. * Externally, Sr. Blandino expressed a need for more information for a greater variety of audiences, but as we discussed this, he recognized that much of the needed information has not yet been developed by faculty and researchers.

I also asked Sr. Blandino how UNA might work to communicate the validity of its mission and vision statements (especially the concept of "relevance"). He pointed out that there is no existing way to measure relevance but agreed that anecdotes might be used to provide testimonial "proofs" of the value of UNA work to producers and agricultural businesses.

* It is not clear to me how much access students and most faculty have to the Internet and the UNA website. My impression is that most professors do not have Internet access in their offices. Students use a computer lab in CENIDA.

Attachment 5
 Insert Strategic Communications.pps

Attachment 6
 Workshop notes.

The workshop was conducted using an interactive process for identifying important audiences, a clear institutional message and most effective methods for delivering that message. I decided to focus on these three steps of a communications strategy because they are most fundamental and the time allotted for the workshop (2 hours) was insufficient for teaching the entire process.

AUDIENCE: After the introduction of the process, group members listed some 12 important audience groups (these included students, parents, government, faculty, administration, farmers, agri-business, other universities, news media, institutions, trade unions, donors, NGOs, etc.) Using a simple nominal group process (the post-it note method) the group then picked three most critical audiences for a focus for the workshop. These groups were 1) students, 2) professors, and 3) producers (farmers). They then discussed the most important message for each of these groups.

Results appear in this chart:

MESSAGES – WHAT THEY NEED TO KNOW		
STUDENTS	PROFESSORS	PRODUCERS
Access to resoures/information	Needs of students	economics
Schedules and calendars\	Systems and policies at UNA	Training workshops
Courses/major	Organizational structure of UNA	Research results
Organizational structure of UNA	Research and projects	projects
What it costs to attend		
Teachers qualifications		
work		

MESSAGE: In discussing these information needs, I stressed finding the information that the audience NEEDS and finds of most VALUE. For example, participants did not consider the idea that the university should try to communicate with students about the value of getting an education at UNA until we discussed the fundamental reason why they enroll – “they want to get a good job in agriculture.” After they understood that, it was easier for them to think about the kinds of information that are most valuable to the two other audiences. For Professors – the information has to do with their work life – questions about university policy, effective teaching, etc., For Producers, its research and training that could make their businesses more profitable.

We then talked about the best way to communicate with eac of these groups

METHODS:

METHODS – HOW THEY NEED TO FIND OUT
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STUDENTS	PROFESSORS	PRODUCERS
Face to face communication	Prefer written communication	Mass media
Posters		Training workshops
		Face to face

Despite a lot of enthusiasm for web based and email communication, participants recognized that access is still a serious problem. Most professors do not have computers, even fewer have internet access. Students can get access, but it is limited and expensive.