

Communicating technology

MAKING A LIVESTOCK GUIDE FOR FARMERS

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In October 1987, we started the production a "Sanitation Guide" under the responsibility of the regional Ministry of Agriculture (MIDINRA). The guide was designed for livestock farmers of a typical livestock region of Nicaragua. The final draft was printed in April 1988 with a print run of 3000 copies. During these six months of preparation, all problems that you can think of to happen between a technical and a communication team came true. Both teams were jealous, suspicious and eager to keep their contribution intact, but at the same time it was clear to us that this guide would have positive results for our target group: small farmers, just literate and not in the habit of reading.

Weighing all words

The technical team (vets and zootechnicians) had only little ideas and knowledge about the art of communication. We found it difficult to accept that all their texts could be changed into simple expressions, without changing their meaning. However, we were quite conscious about the fact that the guide was meant for small farmers without reading experience. These farmers should be able to acquire basic knowledge on animal health to prevent diseases and to reduce the high consumption of drugs. Therefore, each and every word was carefully studied. We discussed the context, the difficulty of each word and the complexity of the sentences. If we did not come to an agreement amongst our team, we tested the text with farmers. This working method took a lot of time and not everyone understood why we had to exercise our writing skills so elaborately. Technicians bothering about the way they write was really something unheard of.

Text criteria

We developed text criteria matching the educational level of our target group including:

- the letter (typography) to be used should be the same as used in literacy courses for adults.
- to improve legibility we only use commas and full stops. The accent (in Spanish frequently used) was used as normal.
- Instead of underlining we used the bold script.
- Capital letters were used in titles and at the beginning of a sentence.
- The titles explained the content.
- The sentences had to have an average size of 12 - 15 words.
- Every new sentence started on a new

Before he started to work for the Nicaraguan Ministry of Agriculture, David Payan had studied zootechnics in Russia and lectured at the University Centro Americana. Full of ideas and with bookloads of scientific knowledge at hand, however, he decided that he wanted to work with farmers. In this article David describes the difficult but satisfying process of technicians learning to write for farmers.



line. Sentences of more than 20 words had to be cut into pieces.

- We insisted on using regionally common words even this seemed strange at first.
- New or technical words were introduced without using synonyms.
- Nouns were repeated frequently e.g. "An animal with ticks has itch and sometimes its hair falls out. Sometimes it has an infection in the ears. The animal is restless and eats little."
- The language used is preferably narrative instead of imperative.

In the beginning, constant repetition of the noun meant for us just waste of space. It took time to step into the shoes of someone who hasn't gone to school from early childhood onwards.

Simple but effective

Once a text was tested and improved, we checked it again. Strange or difficult words that we really needed to use were placed in a glossary at the beginning of the guide. After elaborating and testing the first chapters, we were able to edit the texts quicker and better. The worst moment was always when a text was cut into pieces. For exam-

ple, a text of 8 to 10 sentences was reduced to just a few lines with words so simple that it almost seemed like a lack of respect towards us. Sometimes we doubted whether we wanted to see our names printed on the cover because this primary school book did not suit our technical status!

Despite these minor details we really felt happy when, at the end of a test in a cooperative farm, Don Gumerindo (63 years) said that he wanted to join a literacy course because he wanted to read this "book about cows" by himself.

Production

Production facilities were limited. The text was set with an electric typewriter, which gave a good black letter, but did not permit use of different letter types. We were helped by a professional drawer to improve the drawings. While testing the guide, we found out that our own "childlike" drawings were sometimes more appreciated than the professional "caricatures". We also found out that some of our life-cycle drawings were not understood at all. The covers of the guide were printed off set on 180 gram coloured paper. The other 76 pages were printed double sided on a duplicator.

Follow-up

Although the war situation didn't provide much opportunities to realise study groups and other activities, the guide was distributed throughout the region. The guide was also frequently used by the regional radio station. This radio station, aiming at the rural population, did not have information on the most common livestock diseases, prevention measures and recommendations before. We finally felt proud and satisfied about having realised this guide in the context of empowerment and popular communication. The evaluation of the production process made it very clear that not only the sanitation guide itself was a concrete result of our efforts. We had learned that our role was not just to write books, but to translate information, to facilitate exchange of knowledge between farmers, the ministry and the rural community as a whole. Compiling the book together with the end-users, the farmers, was much more satisfying than compiling a book within four walls of a library.

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