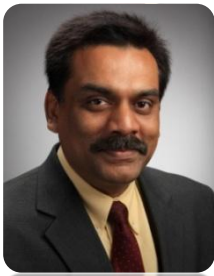




## FOCUS: INTERNATIONAL

### Communication Challenges in Asia's Agri Input Industry



Asian markets are among the planet's fastest growing. But a big challenge for most agri input companies is effectively communicating to and through these markets and to farmers in particular. The divide between the rural world and the urban world is vast. Years may have contributed to physically and/or electronically bridging the two worlds, but the hiatus continues to be unreconciled. The query goes farther than mere differences in cultures. Communication in agri inputs faces several challenges right from the message to the media.

Contrary to urban communication, where audiences have little time for messages, farmers have less hectic schedules, less complexity of the mind. The strategy thus shifts from communication *stratagems* to communication *lore*. Kick-starts and blitz are replaced by tradition of success and accomplishment by sweat. One could summarize the message emphasis for the agri input sector in 3 mantras:

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- Instructive not prescriptive
- Demonstrative not descriptive
- Simplified not jargonized

Low literacy levels are a primary challenge to overcome in communicating with the Indian agricultural audience. This puts the burden of communication on symbolism and visual imagery. Oftentimes in India, personal information sources (word of mouth) take precedence to media.

Reach of media is only a part of the issue. When communicating agri input information with farmers, it is worthwhile to ask if the media is similar in nature and temperament to the farmers' lives. Majority of the farmers do not necessarily access information from modern technology sources. They would much rather rely upon information from other farmers and input dealers instead of television. If TV-built legends are needed to make communication histories in agri inputs, simplicity, warmth, testimony and a culture-connect are essential. Word of mouth has a great influence on decision making. This must be triggered by communication. Part of the goal is just this.

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With the resurgence of radio, some argue that radio is a better-suited medium compared to television when communicating with farmers. Radio is inherently "spoken word" and tradition of spoken word runs long in rural cultures. The "spoken word" communication strategies rely upon education and counsel, instruction and illustration, promotion and advocacy. These are of great essence in promoting agri inputs. It is necessary to point out the difference between the two important instruments in agri input promotion; "spoken word" and "word of mouth". Though they seem the same, in their zeal to promote workable buzzwords, communicators have used the term "word of mouth" as merely a medium. The term does not address what the word of mouth is. The message is missing. Thus "spoken word" is message; "word of mouth" is medium.

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Recent research in Asia shows that agencies like agriculture extension workers, government bodies, agencies, etc. traditionally believed to be very influential, are today accessed as sources for information on new practices by less than 10% farmers and the local cooperative societies as low as 4%. While this does not point at outright rejection of these media, it surely leaves much to be desired because millions of dollars are pumped into these by both state and central governments.

Credibility, which is central to agri inputs business, can only be built with communication devices which are long-term and ongoing rather than one-off campaigns. Communicators need to recognize which are these ongoing practices?

Conventional full-service global advertising agencies, with their eyes on ad-spending, have done little to further the cause of communicating to the farmers. It is time perhaps to engage specialists in communication that have wider experience and better insight into the rural farmer's psyche. Creativity outfits could serve the purpose. The communication task has to be pursued holistically.

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*Kishore Rao*

Agri input industry practices today continue to follow the classical nineties extension models and put large expenditures of money behind this theory in introducing new products or promoting them. *“Seeing is believing”*, dissemination from *“innovator to late adopter”* continues to be the basis of most communication and extension. However, we see that these classical theories don't really fit the farmer's world post the media explosion. So what are the models of relevance? Context is now actively researching this critical area to develop models that effectively help meet the communication challenges of the agri input industry.

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**The Context Network** provides business management and strategy consulting services to the world's leading agriculture, biotechnology and food companies and government agencies and institutions. Major areas of expertise include strategy, merger and acquisition support, valuation of new technologies, formation of alliances, and market research. The West Des Moines-based firm is composed of a core of professional consultants that is complemented by a network of more than 200 industry and subject-area experts.