The Irresistible Electronic Message of the 1990s: A Case Study

Richard A. Lindeborg

Abstract—Modern tools for sending the written word across distances have given communicators new ways to reach audiences within organizations and across organizational boundaries. These new channels require communicators to rethink the sources of information available for their messages, the ways they create messages, and the networks through which they distribute their messages. The U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service went through these steps when it created a unit to distribute information on public opinion to its managers in more than 900 field offices nationwide.

INTRODUCTION

The Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, has a small unit within its public affairs office in Washington, DC, which is charged with keeping that Agency’s nationwide network of managers and public affairs specialists informed of trends in public opinion. The specific interests of this unit are current and emerging issues in natural resource management and workforce management. This case study describes the systematic way in which the Market Research Section developed its sources of information, created its messages, distributed them, and built an audience for this previously under-utilized information. The methods described here can serve as a guide in situations requiring dissemination of any type of information to a new audience or for improving the dissemination of information to existing audiences.

The staff of the Market Research Section developed:
1) sources of information,
2) messages that could penetrate the organization, and
3) techniques for distribution of these messages.

When the staff began writing and distributing these messages in 1990, the employees of the Forest Service already shared a nationwide computer network allowing any user to send electronic mail to any of more than 30,000 other users. Although formal communication still followed traditional channels from office to office and level to level within the agency, hundreds of less formal electronic mail networks allowed messages to travel instantaneously across regional and organizational boundaries. The existence of this system made the information distribution scheme presented here possible, practical, and highly effective.

COMMUNICATING IN THE 1990s

Modern communicators face many daunting truths about the members of any potential audience, including the following.

- Audience members care far less about the message than do those who are developing it (although they may care just as much about the topic in general).
- They are too busy to pay attention to one-tenth of the messages aimed at them.
- They are bombarded by so many high-budget messages that a low-budget message must be compelling to catch their attention.
- They often use only the messages that come to their attention because they lack the resources to search for alternatives.
- They rely on their own traditional sources of information and are slow to adopt new sources.

People whose mission is to communicate face a challenging process:

- locating information which the members of the audience need;
- packaging it into a message;
- getting the message to the audience;
- getting the attention of members of the audience;
- driving competing messages from their brains; and
- getting them to rely on the communicator for other information.

Communicators who master this process become known as creators and disseminators of irresistible messages.

Locating Information

Until information exists, there is no need to communicate it. This may seem obvious, but communicators are often asked to produce messages before their clients have developed a clearly defined picture of the information to be communicated. Once you know what it is your audience needs to know, your task as a communicator is to find that information, package it in an understandable form, and deliver it. There is far more information in the world than anyone, or even everyone, could possibly use. The difficulty for communicators is finding the information your audience needs and separating it from the
information they do not need. You can go to a variety of sources for the information your audience needs:

1) **Experts:** Experts can give you instant access to a wealth of information, help distill it into messages, and review the results for accuracy. However, unless an expert has a vested interest in producing and disseminating the messages your audience needs, you will wear out your welcome fairly quickly and be invited to do your own leg work.

2) **General and Specialized Publications:** Writers for newspapers, journals, and magazines and the authors of commercially published books and reference works are in the business of mining sources of information and extracting messages from them. You can summarize messages from a variety of sources to meet the needs of your own audience.

3) **Academic, Corporate, or Government Reports:** Academic and corporate researchers and government agencies frequently issue reports that contain new information or compile existing information. Such reports are usually longer and more complex than general publications, so you have to work harder to extract from them the messages your audience needs.

4) **Rules:** Laws, regulations, procedure manuals, codes of conduct, and other rules are often the only source of information you need. Many times the goal of communicating is simply to make the audience aware of the rules. If you want the audience to understand or agree with the rules, you face a bigger challenge.

5) **Data Bases:** Data can be described as undigested information. As a communicator, you can extract messages from electronic or printed data, but this requires more skill and effort than extracting messages from any other pre-existing source.

6) **Research:** If the information your audience needs does not exist, someone will have to create it by doing original research. This requires more knowledge than most communicators have and is usually best left to research experts who will work with the client.

Gathering information that is readily available in the form in which you need it for your messages is the cheapest way to get the raw material for your messages. Unfortunately, pre-digested information usually falls short of meeting the specific needs of any specialized audience. Getting more specific information usually requires major expenditures of time, energy, and money. There is seldom a way around the trade-off between specificity and cost.

**Creating Messages**

Once you have selected the information you wish to use as a basis for your message, you are faced with the task of turning that information into a message that you hope will prove irresistible. Create and deliver meaningful messages on a regular basis, and you will addict your audience to your messages. The techniques described in this article for creating messages were developed to capitalize on the strengths of electronic distribution, but they can also be used with non-electronic distribution. These techniques are based on eight simple concepts.

1) **Keep Your Messages Short:** The most irresistible message fits on a single computer screen or on one side of a single piece of paper. Longer messages are much more resistible. Readership suffers if the type gets too small or the margins too skimpy, so there is no point in cheating to make the one-screen or one-page limit.

2) **Send Them One at a Time:** The newsletter is the typical vehicle for combining several messages into one document. Combining messages lowers distribution cost, but it also lessens the impact of each individual message. Irresistible messages stand alone.

3) **Send Messages in a Steady Stream of Useful Messages:** It pays to get the members of your audience in the habit of reading your messages. If they know they can count on your messages to contain useful information for a small investment of time, they will be inclined to give each new message their attention when they receive it.

4) **Repeat the Main Point in Each Message Three Times:** It is an old formula to “Tell them what you’re going to tell them, tell them, and tell them what you told them.” Only a few people read entire messages. The rest read beginnings, random key points, or endings, but not all three. If you state the message three times, most people will read it at least once. In the electronic world, they’d better get it right away, or they press the delete key and it’s gone.

5) **Get Information Out Quickly:** In the electronic world, information crosses the nation at close to the speed of light. The irresistible message is the one that gets there first. Nothing will make your audience disappear faster than sending them too much information they’ve known for a long time. Being less than 24 hours behind the news media is forgivable. Being ahead of them is great.

6) **Offer In-depth Back-up Materials:** The briefest of summaries is plenty for most people, but some people need or want more. Making original source material available to individual members of your audience meets their needs and increases your credibility with the rest of your audience.

7) **Refer to Your Earlier Messages on Each Topic:** The Constitutional amendments in the Bill of Rights have been around for 200 years, but most Americans couldn’t tell you much about them. Yet communicators often think putting out one of today’s messages a single time is enough to reach the audience. Referring to your earlier messages when you put out a new message on a topic is one way to create new interest in the original message.

8) **Index Your Messages for Later Retrieval:** If you are sending out messages on a regular basis, you will soon need an index to keep from losing track of them. You can send an index to a new audience member, so that he or she can make use of your old messages. You can also use the index to help you answer questions from members of your audience. A few people will even use the index to answer their own questions. An unindexed message soon becomes an unretrievable message, and an unretrievable message will have to be reinvented next time it is needed.

Each of these techniques adds to the ability of a message to get through to the audience, either the first time it is distributed or on subsequent tries. Used together, they contribute substantially to the irresistibility of your message.
Delivery of Messages

In the world of the 1990s, a message has a better chance of being irresistible if it is distributed through a modern channel, rather than through a traditional channel. Traditional one-on-one ways of delivering a message include mailing it, passing it out in a public place, and getting users to request it. These methods work with varying precision and effectiveness, depending on how well you select your potential audience members and how much you can spend to reach them. These methods also have their weaknesses, not the least of which is that people have developed fairly good defenses to avoid receiving messages in these ways. In terms of innovation, the wastebasket is older than junk mail.

We now have a variety of electronic methods for getting messages to an audience, including voice mail, electronic mail, and facsimile. The major drawbacks of these methods are the cost of equipment, the cost of developing distribution lists, and the fact that you may have to use all of these methods (including different vendors within each method) to reach half of your audience—and still have to rely on traditional nonelectronic methods to reach the rest. The strengths of electronic distribution systems include their speed and the fact that people are only beginning to develop ways to avoid receiving electronic messages. Most people still screen their own voice mail and electronic mail, and even a fax usually reaches the addressee. On balance, if you have access to an electronic distribution system, you should use it as much as possible. People find it hard to resist a message that arrives electronically.

OPERATION OF THE MARKET RESEARCH SECTION

The sources of information, as well as the techniques for creating and distributing messages are specific to the goals and circumstances of the Market Research Section. However, both the sources of information and the techniques can be adapted and used by any communicator with a need to produce and distribute messages.

Sources of Information

The Market Research Section makes use of a wide range of sources in developing its messages. Several groups of research scientists within the Forest Service devote their time to studying attitudes and behavior. The staff of the Market Research Section, on occasion, consults with these scientists in gathering material for messages. Outside experts are also an occasional source of information.

In summarizing the efforts of Dow-Corning to counter public opinion after negative media accounts, the staff consulted directly with public relations staff members at a related company. The Market Research Section draws valuable information on public opinion from such publications as American Demographics magazine, the Gallup Poll Monthly, and The American Enterprise magazine, as well as from more general circulation magazines such as Outside, Backpacker, and Time. Books—for example, Backlash by Susan Faludi and Workforce 2000 by the Hudson Institute—are also good sources of information for summaries. Articles on public opinion in USA Today are usually too short to provide enough information, but the organizations sponsoring studies mentioned in USA Today are usually willing to mail you a complete report. Jet magazine provides good leads for surveys of African Americans.

The staff of the Market Research Section has based summaries on a wide variety of reports, including a symposium proceedings by Texas A&M University, a National Park Service Study, a commercial study by the timber industry, and proprietary polls conducted by various news agencies and corporations. The staff has also used the Roper Organization’s database of public opinion polls, available though DIALOG Information Services, and the Insight CD-ROM database of ARS Publications as the source of information for numerous summaries on public opinion polls taken on a national and regional basis over the past 10 years.

The Market Research Section has not yet developed any messages from its own original research, but it is progressing toward that goal. Staff members have worked with Times-Mirror magazines and the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment in their independent efforts to design questionnaires on topics of interest to Forest Service managers and public affairs specialists. The Forest Service has also begun the process of seeking approval to conduct its own survey of public opinion on natural resource issues to fill in the gaps left by existing surveys. The sources used by the Market Research Section thus far have produced more than enough information to allow the production of one or two market research summaries per week.

Creation of Messages

The staff of the Market Research Section designed a format for making information available in a way that could capture the attention of readers and cut through their “information overload.” The format is easy to read in both electronic and hard copy forms, short enough for busy people to read right away rather than setting it aside to read later, and arranged in a way that makes it easy for the reader to find the major points.

Electronic Considerations: For maximum flexibility in electronic distribution, we elect not to use typesetting software or graphics in the electronic summaries. The Forest Service electronic mail system does not provide for typeset documents. Instead, the end user has to file any typeset document electronically and print it using the appropriate typesetting software. In many offices, only a few employees know how to use such software or have access to it, so they would have had to serve as an intermediary for end users wishing to print the summaries. The barriers are similar for documents containing graphics, so we had to forego the benefits of including graphics in our summaries.

Format: The format (Fig. 1) chosen by the Market Research Section includes 12-pitch type, single spacing with double-spacing between paragraphs, and one-inch margins on all sides of 8.5 x 11-inch paper. A heading and the date appear at the top of the page, followed by identification of the authors, an abstract, and a series of short paragraphs with lead-in headings. The source material is cited in a
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Richard Lindeborg
Public Affairs Specialist
Internal Revenue Service

Making a diverse audience of busy people aware of your messages requires a concerted effort. Keep your messages short; send them one at a time; emphasize the main point by repeating it three times; get information out quickly; offer in-depth back-up materials; refer to your earlier messages on the topic; and index your messages for later retrieval.

KEEP IT SHORT--Make each message short enough a busy person will read right away, rather than setting it aside or throwing it away without reading it. One side of one page is best--and don’t cheat by making the type too small or the margins too skimpy.

SAY ONLY ONE THING--Send out each message separately. When you group your messages, every message after the first stands less chance of being read. Tie every aspect of the message tightly to the central idea you wish to communicate.

MAKE YOUR POINT THREE TIMES--State the point in a catchy title. Re-state it in an abstract or summary. State it again in paragraph form. Add a graphic to state it a fourth time.

SEND IT OUT FAST--Build a tradition of timeliness. People realize the value of messages that are fresh.

DELIVER THE GOODS--Tell people how to get the source material, offer it yourself, or prepare an executive summary and offer that. Not many people request the longer version of the message, but those who do are opinion leaders and can spread the word.

KEEP YOUR MESSAGES ALIVE--Sending out a message once doesn’t do the job. Within a year after you send out a message, as many as a third of those who received it have moved on and been replaced by people who never saw it. Give your messages lasting influence by referencing older messages on a topic when you send out a new message on that topic. Extend the life of your messages even more by combining related messages to summarize broader issues.

COMPILE INDEXES--Index your messages as many ways as possible, print and electronic, and make the indexes available. Only a few people will use these indexes, but they will leverage the power of your messages. You will be able to use your own indexes to keep track of your products and make them available to people who suddenly develop a need for your old messages.


Fig. 1. The format used for the summaries sent out electronically by the Market Research Section of the Forest Service Public Affairs Office.

footnote at the bottom of the first page. Most summaries are one or two pages long, and none has been more than three.

Source Material: On request, the Market Research Section provides audience members with single copies of published source documents for their own use as provided in copyright
law. Wider distribution of source material would not have been practical. We had no money for obtaining permissions to reprint copyrighted material, to pay for reprinting hard copies of such material, or to keyboard (or scan and edit) source documents for electronic distribution.

**Re-Using Messages:** From the beginning, the staff of the Market Research Section realized that sending out a message one time does not make it a part of the organizational culture. Messages are kept alive by citing them in later summaries on the same general topic and by compiling and periodically offering both electronic and hard copy indexes. The staff uses the indexes to answer requests from new readers for old material or to assemble special packets of material for managers, supervisors, or others with a specific need. Users are not encouraged to keep electronic files of past summaries, but instead to use the index to request material from the electronic files at the national office.

**Electronic Distribution**

The electronic distribution scheme involves sending the messages directly to public affairs specialists and staff directors in the national office, and to public affairs directors at each of the regional offices and research stations of the Forest Service. These public affairs directors forward the messages to smaller units in their geographic area. There are more than 900 local offices of the Forest Service. Within these local units, managers or public affairs personnel decide how to distribute the information. In some units, all summaries are sent to all managers. In other units, more selective decisions are made.

Employees who contact the Market Research Section in the national office to ask to be added to the electronic mailing list are referred to the nearest public affairs officer in their hierarchy to get on a local mailing list. This is done to help develop local distribution of the summaries. A few individuals who have not been able to get on a local mailing list are sent electronic copies directly from Washington. The market research section keeps track of the electronic postmarks of all requests for information. This permits tracking the penetration of the messages within the organization and allows staff members to work with the public affairs offices in any unit that does not seem to be distributing the materials.

**EVALUATION**

The messages sent out by the Market Research Section quickly attracted a loyal following at all levels of the organization, as indicated by comments received from audience members, requests for original source materials, and requests for periodic lists of summaries.

**Sources of Information**

The use of a wide variety of sources of information, including national news organizations, national polling organizations, universities, and government agencies, seemed to create a high level of confidence in the audience. Although individual audience members sometimes questioned the validity of individual messages, none ever accused the Market Research Section of having a systematic bias.

We had originally thought the information gleaned from existing sources would merely whet the appetite of audience members for the kinds of specific information that would have to be obtained from laborious searches through more obscure sources or by doing original research. Although there are occasional questions of this nature, the vast majority of the audience is satisfied with the kind of information the Market Research Section can uncover with its limited resources.

**Creation of Messages**

The concise and lively presentation of information is popular with the audience. Many people send in electronic messages saying they know they can always count on these summaries to be interesting and worth the time it takes to read them. The shortness of the summaries is a big plus for most readers. Many comment that they tend to delete longer messages or print them out in an often futile hope of reading them later. They say they know the market research summaries will be short, so they read them on the screen as soon as they come in.

References to earlier summaries of a similar nature produce requests for both the earlier summaries and the original source material for those summaries. Similarly, production of an updated index or list of summaries produces requests for older summaries. We originally thought the volume of requests might be too much for our limited staff to handle, so we made plans to put the summaries and indexes in a user-accessible electronic file in the national office. Although there is a steady stream of requests, they are few enough that it remains more effective for a staff member to answer the requests via the computer than to set up a system to allow the end users to serve themselves.

The content of the summaries underwent one major change over time. The abstract gradually became a "management implications" section, evolving from a list of the main findings of the research being summarized to a direct expression of exactly what actions managers should contemplate taking because of the information contained in the summary. Audience response to the early summaries indicated that many readers wanted or needed something to indicate what they were supposed to do with the information. Over time, we came to state the management implications quite directly without complaint from our readers.

Audience members reacted favorably to messages that were timely. They were delighted when messages reached them just as they were experiencing a need for them, and pleased when they received them before they received similar information through the mass media.

We discovered and summarized an article from *Backpacker* magazine on something called the Wise Use Movement. Although Forest Service units in the western United States had been coming in contact with various parts of this movement for a couple of years, it was only beginning to be recognized as a movement when the article appeared. The Market Research Section's summary was widely read and became a desk reference for many managers in the agency as more stories about the movement appeared in the national and regional press over the next year or so.
Our quest for information on public opinion concerning such workplace values as the treatment of women and people of color led us to summarize Susan Faludi's *Backlash* before it became widely popular. When the book became a best seller and was mentioned in most media articles on this topic over the next year, Forest Service readers remembered they saw it first in a market research summary. Within a day after the McDonald's fast-food chain bowed to public opinion and abandoned its styrofoam recycling program in favor of switching to paper wrapping materials, the Market Research Section distributed a summary showing the connections between this corporate decision and the Agency’s positions on environmental issues. Readers showed a strong interest in this market research summary because of its tie to current news.

The information in many messages does not have to be timely in the same sense as news is timely. We discovered excellent sources of information that were two to five years old and still new to our audience. Some of these sources came to our attention in magazine articles or academic journals that appeared long after the original information had been published.

**Distribution**

Electronic distribution of summaries turned out to be more flexible than originally thought. The need developed to send a few copies of market research summaries to specific co-operators outside the agency. We met this need electronically through the ability of the Forest Service electronic mail system to interface with other electronic mail systems and to send facsimiles from the agency’s computer system to fax machines anywhere in the world.

The movement of the market research summaries through the electronic mail network proved to be much faster and much more widespread than anticipated. Specialized networks, including a women’s network, a sociologist’s network, an environmental network, an Hispanic network, and many others, forwarded summaries to all of their members as soon as one member received an “official copy.” Electronic requests for hard copy information mentioned in the summaries demonstrated that the information was reaching all levels of the organization nationwide.

Market research summaries are being sent outside of the Forest Service by some recipients, as demonstrated by a number of requests for specific items received from citizen groups, industry associations, and universities. Such organizations would not know of this material if they were not receiving information from the summaries, either electronically or in hard copy.

**CONCLUSION**

To anyone who has spent years watching newsletters and other forms of written communication languish in mailrooms, stockrooms, bookcases, and in-baskets, the success of distributing messages electronically is a welcome change.

Audience members seem unable to resist the electronic messages in their computers, particularly when those messages are short, snappy, timely, and come from a consistent and reliable source.

Making a diverse audience of busy people aware of your messages requires a concerted effort. Keep your messages short; send them one at a time; emphasize the main point by repeating it three times; get information out quickly; offer in-depth back-up materials; refer to your earlier messages on the topic; and index your messages for later retrieval.

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Richard A. Lindeborg received the M.S. degree in journalism from Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY. He is a public affairs specialist for the Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, and has taught technical writing at Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, and Baker University, Baldwin, KS.