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United States
Department of
Agriculture

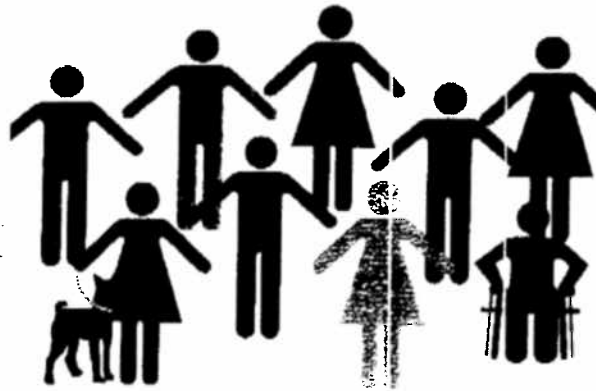
Office of
Communication

Office of
Outreach

Unlocking the Barriers

Keys to Communicating With Under-Served Customers

March 1998



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Unlocking the Barriers: Keys to Communicating With Under-Served Customers

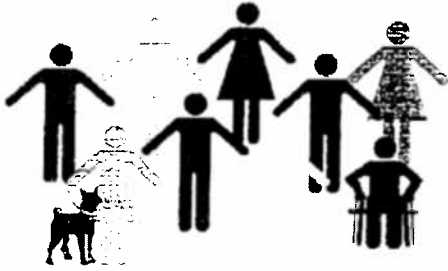


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Unlocking the Barriers: Keys to Communicating With Under-Served Customers

Message From the Secretary



One of our most important responsibilities at USDA is to provide our customers with the information they need to make the best use of our programs. That means more than having information available to someone who knows where to look—it means working hard to reach everyone who might benefit from our wide-ranging services.

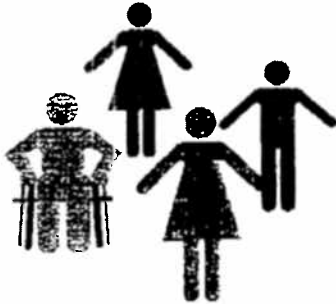
This reference guide was created to do just that. Written as a response to recommendations in "Civil Rights at the United States Department of Agriculture: A Report by the Civil Rights Action Team," it gives ways that we can reach people our past efforts may have ignored.

As you know, improving our record on civil rights is a top priority for the Department. A critical part of that commitment is making sure program details and assistance are available to everyone. We can't do that without effective communication—something for which we are all responsible.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Glickman".

Dan Glickman
Secretary

Introduction



Effective communications to diverse audiences involves learning about their needs as well as enabling them to learn about USDA programs — it's a two-way street.

This guide was created to help you communicate more effectively with limited-resource customers and under-served communities. It provides guidance on writing and implementing communications plans that will help get USDA information to the widest possible audience.

Overview

Limited-resource customers and members of under-served communities have often had a difficult time in the past participating in USDA programs, in large part because they were not receiving basic program information. One reason for that has been our under-use of the media outlets and community organizations to which these customers turn for information.

We must respond to these real and perceived issues. One response is to plan to communicate program information to as many diverse groups as may be affected. We cannot assume diverse and limited-resource customers are getting our information through sources we consider routine. To be an effective communicator, you will need to be creative and “think outside the box” by putting yourself in your audience’s shoes. Effective communications to diverse audiences involves learning about their needs as well as enabling them to learn about USDA programs — it’s a two-way street. Since traditional efforts have not been successful, you must find new ways to reach your customers. The best way to get started is to talk —and listen— to members of the groups with whom you want to communicate.

This publication will help get you started by providing you with information on getting to know your community; tips on how adults learn; ways to develop communications plans that match your customer’s needs; choosing the right outreach methods; sources of information on translation services; information on alternative formats; and information on training.

Who’s Responsible

All USDA employees are responsible for communicating with customers about their jobs and the services the Department offers. At the local level, we have a responsibility to make sure that all customers have information communicated to them in the most appropriate, effective way. This sometimes requires extra effort. It requires commitment by all USDA employees, especially those on the front lines, to remove barriers and meet the public at the local level.

Know Your Customers and Their Communities

To better serve your customers, consider their values, environment, social and cultural customs, and language. Many of our customers can be described as limited in resources, socially disadvantaged, or as living in an under-served community. These individuals often reflect un-leveled management skills, less formal education, and perhaps are less willing to take business risks or adopt new technologies. They are often faced with barriers of limited access and limited finances, discrimination, and differences in language and culture that make communication difficult.

Building Trust

Many people today distrust the government because they've had negative experiences. Here are some ways to overcome that:

◆ *Establish a Community Contact*

Learn as much as you can about your limited-resource customers and under-served communities. The best way to do this is to introduce yourself to the community's leaders. You can identify leaders by asking community members whom you should contact. Establish rapport by telling them about yourself and USDA's programs. Ask them about the needs, goals, and operations of their community. Once you establish a relationship with your limited-resource customers or someone from the under-served community, you can solve many of your communication questions simply by asking them for information and assistance.

These contacts can help you understand the challenges and barriers faced by under-served communities. Identifying a community contact and establishing a relationship of mutual respect and dialogue is one of the single-most-effective ways to improve USDA service to under-served communities and groups.

◆ *Take to the Field*

Ask your contacts to accompany you on site visits and demonstrations in the targeted community. Having your contact person with you will increase your credibility among other members of the community.

Field visits provide opportunities to create good relationships. Make sure that your hosts know that you want to help them establish projects that will benefit everyone involved. Emphasize that USDA technical assistance offers them opportunities to help themselves and their communities.



...introduce yourself to the community's leaders... establish rapport by telling them about yourself and your program, and by asking them about the needs, goals, and operations of their community.

Tips for Communicating



Identifying a community contact and establishing a relationship of mutual respect and dialogue is one of the single-most-effective ways to improve USDA service to under-served communities and groups.

◆ **Keep Your Language Plain and Simple**

When speaking with your customers about programs and activities of the USDA, avoid using slang, agency jargon, or acronyms. Keep your language simple and concise. Written information should be translated into clear language, similar to the level at which newspapers are written. Avoid technical terms whenever possible. When you do use them, be sure to provide a definition.

◆ **Always Be Ready to Listen**

Encourage people to identify their needs in their own language. If there are language difficulties, try visuals, hands-on activities, or other interactive methods. Have an interpreter or translator available.

◆ **Be Realistic**

It can take time to overcome the effects of many years of under-service. Be patient. If cultural differences are large, recognize that progress will take time.

Understanding the knowledge and values of diversity is becoming ever more important to life in the United States. Different cultures may have different learning styles.

◆ **Eight Points for Effective Communication**

1. People learn more effectively when education focuses on problems that they have experienced.
2. People are more willing to learn after they see that a problem exists.
3. People usually draw on their past experiences, knowledge, and beliefs to understand and solve the current problem.
4. Learning is enhanced when new information confirms existing knowledge, experience, or beliefs.
5. When new information conflicts with their existing knowledge, experience, or beliefs, people often resist the new information, or they require more time to learn. When this happens, it is usually more effective to acknowledge their understanding, and then share new information. It is important to have and show respect for people's existing knowledge, even if you do not agree with it.
6. We can learn from our customers, too. Communication with our customers should be two-way whenever possible. Careful listening is one of the keys to communication.



Acknowledge and respect people's existing knowledge and expertise. They are more likely to learn new information in an atmosphere of respect.

7. People have many demands on their time and budgets. They want to use the fastest and least expensive way to learn. Provide information and opportunities to communicate at times convenient to your customers, and keep any cost as low as possible.
8. Acknowledge and respect people's existing knowledge and expertise. They are more likely to learn new information in an atmosphere of respect.

Learn by Doing

Offer your new customers "hands-on" experiences that demonstrate USDA technical assistance. If this is not possible, provide them with clear and concise "how-to" instructions so that they may learn on their own.

Learn Through Dialogue

Encourage two-way communication with your customers by talking with them frequently. Listen carefully to what they tell you. The following are some simple fill-in-the-blank phrases that you can use to keep the conversation going, and avoid misunderstandings:

- ◆ "What I understand you to mean is _____. Is that correct?"
- ◆ "Help me look at _____ from your point of view."
- ◆ "Tell me more about what concerns you about _____."
- ◆ "How can we work it so that _____?" (Be sure to include mutual concerns.)
- ◆ "What will it take to _____?" (Again, include your concerns and theirs.)

Steps to Designing a Communications Plan

Reaching your customers and effectively communicating with them always works better if you take the time to think out and develop a clear method of approach. It also helps to put this plan in writing. There are three critical steps in developing a communications plan:

◆ Step #1. Analysis

A good communications plan begins with teamwork. Talk with your contacts and other partners who are involved in your outreach. Make sure everyone has opportunities to contribute to the plan. Ask for advice. Consider having listening sessions with members of the community you are trying to reach to determine their concerns.

Together, analyze the social and economic conditions of the people and communities to be served. Look at cultural factors. Take into account the needs of people who have disabilities. Write a summary of the situations, set objectives, and establish a strategy for your outreach. When doing so, consider the following:

- ✓ Who are you trying to reach?
- ✓ What do you know about your customers?
- ✓ What do your customers know about you?
- ✓ What do you want to say?
- ✓ What are the problems and opportunities?
- ✓ What do you want to happen?
- ✓ What kinds of research need to be done?
- ✓ How will your customers and your partners benefit from your outreach?
- ✓ How will you know when you've done what you set out to do?
- ✓ Who else can help you (partners)?

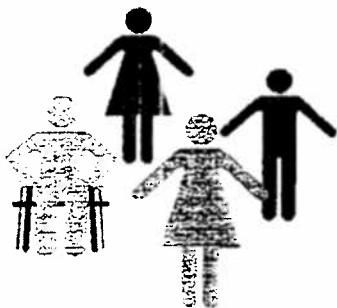
◆ Step #2. What To Put Into Your Written Communications Plan

Your communications plan should include:

- ✓ Background on and reasons for the outreach;
- ✓ A description of why the outreach is necessary;
- ✓ A list of your audiences;
- ✓ Goals and objectives of the outreach;
- ✓ The messages for your audiences;
- ✓ The media that you will use to reach your audiences;
- ✓ Partners and cooperators who will help you;
- ✓ A time line of key events in your outreach;
- ✓ How you will measure the effectiveness of your outreach; and
- ✓ How you will get feedback from your audiences.



Reaching your customers and effectively communicating with them always works better if you take the time to think out and develop a clear method of approach.



A good communications plan begins with teamwork.

■ Step #3. Putting Your Plan on Paper

Keep your plan simple. Create a table that has a column for each of these categories:

- ✓ Priority — rate the importance of each item;
- ✓ Target audience — identify with whom you will communicate;
- ✓ Desired response — what is the response you desire from your target audience;
- ✓ Target message — what is the main point you want to communicate;
- ✓ Action — what step you or partners will take to help meet the overall strategy;
- ✓ Schedule — the date when the action will start; and
- ✓ Remarks.

While the table on the next page provides a model, you will need to make your table match your project. Add columns for information such as who is responsible for each aspect of the plan, which partners and cooperators will participate, what additional resources are needed, and evaluations of the effectiveness of your tactics.

Steps to Designing a Communications Plan

Communications Plan Tactics Table

Priority	Target Audience	Desired Response	Targeted Message	Tactic	Schedule	Remarks
1	USDA employees	Begin working with local customers on what the new program means.	USDA has developed a new program. Here are final rules on what it is and how it will work.	Presentation	August	Deliver at staff meeting.
3	Local media	Media publish stories on what the new program means to make program available.	USDA is implementing a new program. Here are final rules on what it is and how it will work.	Press release	August	Hand-deliver release to media.
2	Potential program participants	Customers understand the impact of the new program so they can make informed decisions.	USDA's new program can benefit you.	Community meeting		Hold meeting at community center.

Priority is designated 1, 2, 3, or high, medium, low. Everything is not high priority. Target Audience is, as specifically as possible, whomever we wish to communicate with. Desired Response is whatever we want to happen as a result of the communication. Targeted Message is the main point we want to get across. Tactic is a product or method that will help meet the overall strategy. Schedule is when the action needs to be put into effect. Remarks column allows the planner opportunity to include any additional information that would help make the action work.

Choosing the Right Outreach Method

News Media

Many communications plans include the use of news media. To do this effectively, you must find the right media, craft a message especially for it, and persuade people in that media to send out your message. Again, your contacts in the local community will be critical in helping you with these steps.

Begin by creating a list of local media that reach your target audience. Your cooperators and other partners can help you identify them. Ask your contacts if they know people in local media; having this "in" can give you an important edge in getting your message in print or on the air.

USDA's Office of Communications and your agency's public affairs staff are other sources of media contacts. They can supply, for example, media lists specializing in the interests of ethnic groups such as Asian and Hispanics, religious groups, senior citizens, and persons with disabilities. You can secure information from the USDA Office of Communications by contacting your agency's national communications office.

If you've never worked with the media, the information that follows will give you some tips. Your contacts can help you identify the best media for your community. One thing to always keep in mind — you must be able to clearly state the benefit the media's audience will receive from your message.

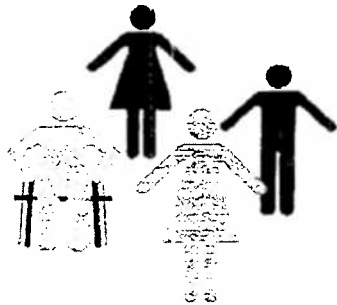
Television

Television reaches more people than newspapers and magazines. It's more immediate than print. To persuade a local television station news director to use your story, send him or her a press release or letter that clearly states your story idea. Follow up by telephone to find out whether the station is interested. Be ready to suggest shooting locations, props, and on-camera speakers that will make the story more interesting and appealing to the eye. Please note that you may be asked to supply broadcast-quality video footage or to work with the television station's own camera crews.

Radio

Radio offers a wide variety of formats to reach your target audience — music, all news, public-service, special-event, talk, and call-in shows. Many are also broadcast in a variety of languages and feature programming designed for specific audiences.

When approaching a news director, be prepared to communicate your story idea clearly. Offer articulate and knowledgeable experts who speak the language or come from the audience community to be interviewed on the topic of your story. You can also supply written public-service announcements for broadcasters to read on the air. Be sure to contact the station about its guidelines for submitting a public-service announcement before you start to write it.



One thing to always keep in mind — you must be able to clearly state the benefit the media's audience will receive from your message.

Choosing The Right Outreach Method

Newspapers

Newspapers are lifelines into local communities that provide useful information. Keep in mind that newspapers have varying publishing schedules — daily, weekly, monthly. You must time your information accordingly. Many newspapers are also targeted to a special interest or have specific sections such as lifestyle, food, home and garden, or real estate. If you are aiming for a specific section, shape your message to match the format.

Magazines

Magazines provide highly targeted and specialized, in-depth information. Most magazine editors are interested in receiving story ideas and full-length articles. All stories must be customized to the magazine's readers. To be accepted, stories need to be well researched and written, and accompanied by high-quality photographs.

Before offering an article to a newspaper or magazine, contact its editor to find out if your message matches the interests of the readers of the publication.



...newspapers vary in the publishing schedules — daily, weekly, monthly — you must time your information so it has a chance to be used.

Special Interest Groups

Special interest groups and community-based organizations offer abundant outreach opportunities. These groups include service clubs, women's groups, environmental groups, farm or woodland groups, trade and professional associations, non-profit groups, educational associations and schools, civic and business organizations, land-grant colleges, and religious organizations. You can probably think of other groups. You can contact these groups through their leaders and members. Make yourself available to attend their meetings, special events, or to make presentations to them. Consider submitting news items for their newsletters and other publications. Special interest groups are also usually willing to share their perspective. They can provide you with an effective way to encourage dialogue and two-way communication, and will help you get to know about the diverse interests and activities in your community.

Special Events

You can hold an event to get attention for USDA assistance to people and communities. Include as many of your contacts, partners, and customers as possible. Include opportunities for "hands-on" learning. For example, give demonstrations on how USDA technical assistance is done and have written information that people can take home or share with neighbors.

Hold a walk-through of a USDA project or a field demonstration. Invite USDA agencies and affected groups in your area to participate, and have USDA personnel on hand to provide on-site assistance.



...look for opportunities to participate in special events held by the under-served communities. Make yourself available.

Also, look for opportunities to participate in special events held by the under-served communities. Make yourself available. Create a display featuring your project, and use it by showing it at farm and trade shows, libraries, and meetings of business persons and civic groups.

Brochures and Fact Sheets

Nearly every agency will produce community level brochures, fact sheets, and other types of publications to explain available programs. No matter how technical the subject matter may be, it can be written so that it is easy to understand. Keep your language simple and concise. Readers should have no more trouble understanding our publications than the material they read for pleasure. Apply the following tips to a well-written document:

◆ Aim Your Writing

Know your audience. Understand to whom you are directing your message. Think about their experience and level of understanding. Write as if you are speaking to them.

◆ Study/Outline

Be sure you fully understand the material before you begin to write. Outline your writing to help organize the document for information flow. It can be changed as the actual writing progresses.

◆ Think Short

The usual culprits in poor writing are long words, long sentences, and long paragraphs. Titles and subtitles should be kept short — preferably no longer than six words. Acronyms are not included for thinking short. Spell out those abbreviations or use another word.

◆ Use Active Verbs

Don't avoid making direct statements. You know your subject and your message — so get to the point.

◆ Give Visual Relief

Don't be text heavy. Graphics are an important element in writing and in bridging cultural and language barriers. Words are not the only way to convey a message. Illustrations, tables, charts, and drawings are important tools to a writer. However, use graphics only when they will clarify or replace large blocks of text. Don't create unnecessary graphics.

Empty or white space on a page is not wasted space. Used properly, it will give readers visual relief and aid their grasp of the message. Writers can add white space by writing short paragraphs. Another way to add white space is to convert suitable text to list formats. An illustration or photograph may be another form of visual relief. If a manuscript describes a procedure, use an illustration of the form next to the procedure.

Remember...text size may be a concern for those with visual disabilities. Stay away from type any smaller than 10 or 12 point. Never exceed a line length of 75 characters; eyes lose track if the line is longer. Choice of colors should also be a consideration. Keep text in a high contrast for n, preferably black on white. If colors are used, maintain high contrasts of dark on light backgrounds. Text positioned over backgrounds should maintain the same contrast. Stay away from textures or screens that will lose high contrasts. For assistance, follow USDA's format guides and standards available from the Design Center, Office of Communications, Washington, D.C.



In your outreach efforts, make sure that you consider the special needs of all your customers — and it is appropriate to ask people their preferences.

◆ **Use the Appropriate Language**

Typically, your documents will be produced in English. However, there will be some instances when you should translate the information into languages appropriate to your community.

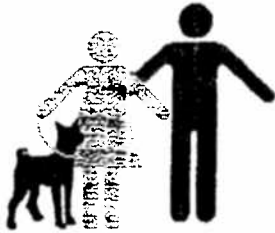
There are several ways you can make your documents available in the language of your customers. First, ask someone to translate it for you. Often, members of the community you're trying to reach will volunteer this service because they know the information may be valuable to their peers. Other community resources such as schools, local governments, and religious and civic organizations may be able to help. You can also work through your agency to engage the services of a professional translator.

In addition, the USDA TARGET Center in Washington, D.C., will provide you with information on translation services. The TARGET Center can put you in touch with the U.S. Department of State's Office of Language Services, universities and colleges, and private businesses that offer translation and interpreting services.

Future Document Uses:

Any document created should be available in other forms. Ask your computer specialist to create computer files in ASCII, HTML, and PDF.

These computer file formats aid in acquiring alternative information mediums by your customers, i.e., Braille or audio conversions. These files are also used for uploading to the Internet sites in USDA.



Providing the right kind of training is an important element of effective communication with diverse USDA customers.

Using the Internet

Like most other Federal agencies, USDA is making increasing use of the Internet—both for internal and external communications. Internet usage among USDA agencies is at various levels; however, USDA agencies are encouraged to use Internet communications more and more as a means of distributing information. Text, graphics, audio, and video provide multiple opportunities for communicating information and educational resources to any audience. Various related information sites are also easily accessed via the Internet. One key advantage to placing informational resources on the Internet is that people with disabilities will often have the necessary software to be able to read and translate the resources. Software that reads text, displays it in large type, or even translates is available for the computers of the audience you may be trying to reach. If you incorporate graphics in to descriptive text, you will improve communication for hearing impaired individuals. Help in getting your information on the Internet is available from your agency.

Special Needs

In your outreach efforts, make sure that you consider the special needs of all your customers — and it is appropriate to ask people their preferences. Providing appropriate auxiliary aids or services to persons with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, where necessary, affords these people an equal opportunity to benefit from the services.

Alternative Formats

Providing your information in other languages is not your only consideration. The needs of the disabled community must also be taken into account. For example, there are several alternative formats available for people who have visual disabilities. These formats include Braille, personal readers, cassette recordings, audio description videos, ASCII computer diskettes of information, and large-print publications.

In addition, there are many resources available that will convert printed information into alternative formats. The U.S. Library of Congress National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped, Washington, D.C., maintains resources to assist people with visual disabilities.

Individuals with hearing impairments may need sign-language interpreters or certain seating to accommodate lip-reading. Keep in mind that individuals with mobility disabilities need to have physical access to and within a given location.

Again, the TARGET Center has current information on alternative formats and common-sense suggestions. Many of TARGET's suggested devices are free or available at very low cost. Providing these aids and services to persons with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, where appropriate affords these people the opportunity to benefit equally.

Training



For information on translation services and alternative formats, contact the USDA TARGET Center at (202) 720-2600 (voice and TDD) or <http://www.net.usda.gov/oo/accessible.html>

USDA Employees

USDA requires all employees to be trained in and aware of policies, practices, and procedures that guarantee effective communications to all of its customers, including under-served individuals and communities.

Providing the right kind of training is an important element of effective communication with diverse USDA customers. Like nongovernmental businesses and organizations, government agencies need to address growing cultural diversity through action plans, the recruitment of a diverse work force, and a management program that prepares employees to work and communicate not only with each other but with customers and clients having different racial and cultural backgrounds, sexual orientations, and unique needs.

An effective diversity training program comes in many forms. It is important to design a flexible program tailored to suit a particular agency or office. An effective training program must contain a mix of elements including: Clearly defined training goals that will engender cultural awareness and knowledge; provide skills and tools to respond to diverse needs; target and remove unconscious discrimination; and provide knowledge and accessibility to a wide range of available resources.

There are a variety of training methods available to employees who work with under-served customers. These include in-house and off-the-shelf classroom and laboratory training, on-the-job training from other employees, and self-study modules.

Training is available in these formats:

- ✓ Lectures and discussions;
- ✓ Manuals or other printed material;
- ✓ Audio-visual;
- ✓ Training for small groups;
- ✓ Case-studies;
- ✓ Practice exercises;
- ✓ Computer-based training and other interactive technologies.

The range of training opportunities is significant and information is available through the USDA Graduate School and your agency's employee development program.

DEPARTMENTAL REGULATION 4360-1**Communicating With Under-Served Communities**

Office of Outreach

1 Purpose

To establish Departmental policy to ensure that educational and technical assistance services and communications materials are available to all customers in languages appropriate to the community being served, and that USDA offices use appropriate media outlets to distribute information to under-served communities.

2 Responsibilities

- a. Communicating USDA Programs.** Agency heads shall develop and implement communications plans that include an outreach component. Agency heads shall adequately fund these plans to meet all civil rights obligations pertaining to developing publications and documents in alternative formats (i.e., Braille, large print, cassette, open or closed captioning), and in languages other than English, as deemed appropriate for the agency mission.

When developing a communication strategy for the program or service area, the plan must include media outreach to under-served customers such as women, racial and ethnic minorities, and persons with disabilities.

Plans should also include providing information in other languages, public service announcements in publications, and outreach to radio and TV stations serving persons in other languages.

- b. Employee Training.** Managers and supervisors shall ensure that all employees are aware of policies, practices, and procedures guaranteeing effective communication to all customers and others, and that each employee holding a "public contact position" is aware of USDA's civil rights obligation and commitment to ensuring equal opportunity to access information and services. Managers and supervisors are responsible for effectively implementing this requirement and will be held accountable in their performance standards for their actions.

3 Cross Reference

Further information on communicating with persons with disabilities may be found in the Department's section 504 Handbook.

Departmental Regulation 4360-1

4 Interagency Cooperation

To reach limited-resource customers and under-served communities, wherever possible, agencies shall collaborate and cooperate in producing information items and when conducting communication activities.

5 Non-Traditional Outreach

To reach limited-resource customers and under-served communities more effectively, agency heads will ensure that communications plans include informal communication outlets such as community leaders, schools, and associations.

6 Aids and Services

Agencies shall provide appropriate auxiliary aids or services to people with impaired sensory, manual, or speaking skills, where reasonably necessary, such that agencies assure that these persons have an equal opportunity to benefit from the agency's services.

It is USDA's intent to meet all such reasonable requests for aids and services. Alternative formats include, but are not limited to, the provision of information in the language of the community being served; formats such as Braille, large print, and cassette tape; use of a sign language interpreter; use of a language translator; room seating arrangements to accommodate lip-reading, visual impairments, and other special needs; verbal descriptions of flipcharts, transparencies, and so forth, for people who have visual impairments; and sites that are fully accessible to people with disabilities.

7 Use of the Internet and Electronic Technologies

All national publications shall be accessible on the Internet or available in other forms of electronic technology. At a minimum, agencies are required to post a notice on their homepage which:

- a. States the availability of the publication in other electronic formats (i.e., ASCII);
- b. States the availability of the publication in alternative formats (i.e., Braille, large print, cassette, and/or other languages); and
- c. Provides ordering information for those requesting documents, which includes an agency mailing address, facsimile, Telecommunications Device for the Deaf, and voice telephone number.



United States Department of Agriculture
Office of Communications
Office of Outreach
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