

## Inspiring leading-edge communications through practical training

By Joanne Falk

The world of communications is filled with reporters, photographers, writers, spokespeople, columnists, editors, and others working in various mediums. Committing to any one of these jobs requires dedication, training and hard work. But can you imagine tackling all of these roles at once?



Well, nine students at the University of Guelph have chosen to do just that. We are the first group to enroll in the Graduate-level Diploma program in Agricultural Communications. This distance education program is the first of its kind in North America, and we're learning more than we ever could have imagined from a team of world-class instructors.

Despite concerns about the investment of time and energy, when combined with our full-time jobs, we knew the return on our investment would be significant. Although we each work in different areas of the agricultural sector (three of us are farmers, three are involved in business and marketing and three are professional communicators), we are all driven by a common goal – to more effectively communicate with our audience. This program is designed to help us achieve that goal.

Our 16-month journey began in September 2007, when we met for the first time and were put to work right away by our lead instructor and the program's academic coordinator, Owen Roberts. As a long-time agricultural communications instructor and administrator at the University of Guelph, Owen was instrumental in designing and implementing the program, with guidance from his academic, communication and journalism colleagues in Canada and abroad, in the agri-food sector and elsewhere.

Our initial task was to pitch a story to Ed Cassavoy, senior news editor at the Toronto Star, who joined us in Guelph for part of the one-week residential session that kicked off the program. Trying to convince him, in a 30-second proposal, to print an agricultural story in an urban newspaper was a big challenge. His feedback was candid, creative, and crucial to our understanding of the way messages are positioned to reach target audiences. What we say or, more importantly, how we say it changes depending on whether we're focusing on industry organizations, government agencies, special interest groups, or consumers. Environmental and health concerns are becoming more important than ever to the public, and agricultural communicators need to be mindful of whether or not our messages are meaningful to those we're trying to reach. This was made clear again during a session in which Ed taught us writing for the web.

Next on the list was the realm of the professional photographer, and we couldn't have asked for a better instructor than Kyle Rodriguez for day two of our residency. I have a much greater appreciation for the skill involved in taking a print-worthy photo after spending time with Kyle on a photojournalism field trip to Canada's Outdoor Farm Show. Approaching strangers and

asking permission to photograph their activities at the show was a daunting task, but also a significant confidence-building exercise.

With no rest for the weary, on our third day of residency we entered the blogging world. In an on-campus computer lab, we created our own blogs and committed to posting at least twice a week for the duration of the program. Chuck Zimmerman of ZimmComm New Media in the U.S. is a premiere blogger, working with a long list of international clients, including Pioneer, Fleishman-Hillard and Farm Credit Canada, to promote interest in agricultural issues and events. His guidance in designing and launching our sites was the key to our success as bloggers. We may have been skeptics at the start, but I think we all appreciate the power of the Internet for communications, and see the value in being able to express opinions or report on issues in real time. Although there are always topics to write about, we are challenged with keeping things fresh and finding new angles for our stories.

In addition to hands-on training with experts in various mediums, the online portion of the program focuses on different types of writing, including news releases, columns, op-ed pieces and ghost-writing. We've interviewed industry stakeholders for profiles and news stories, and faced the challenge of capturing their thoughts and creating objective, yet interesting, pieces. As well, we've had the chance to review the work of classmates, allowing us a glimpse into the life of an editor, meeting deadlines, ensuring quality and providing valuable feedback.

Ethics in agricultural communications is a key component of the program and, although we haven't reached this study area yet, I am really happy that it is included. The importance of maintaining a high standard for ourselves and our work should always be first and foremost in our minds.

In a broader sense, the program is teaching us to think in new ways, to view things from different perspectives, and to turn communication challenges into opportunities. I can't think of a better way for communication professionals to hone their skills, and strengthen their ability to convey the issues and opportunities in agriculture to a broader audience.

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**For more information about the Guelph program, visit [www.agcommunications.ca](http://www.agcommunications.ca)  
Applications for the 2008-2009 cohort are being accepted now.**