



## **Guidance For Planning A Successful Outreach Event**

The Agricultural Research Service (ARS) is planning several activities to celebrate our achievements over the last 50 years and the promise of the next 50 years of service and beyond. Included in the celebration is Dr. Knippling's charge that each ARS Lab hold at least one public event over the next year. The purpose of these events is to:

- make the public aware of or remind them of the lab's impact on their quality of life, food they eat, clothes they wear, and environment in which they live;
- showcase how Federal investments in the lab are paying dividends to their agricultural community; and
- convey in lay terms the lab's research program scope and goals (emphasizing problem solving, outcomes, and public benefits).

The following guidelines are from a few ARS Labs where event organizers have been "perfecting" the art of pulling a quality event together. Following the guidelines are examples of different event formats that may give you even more ideas.

### **Plan, Plan, Plan!**

In a perfect world, planning for your next event began within days following the last, with a full staff review of successes and problems encountered. If you haven't done this, the next best thing is to set the date that ensures event organizers sufficient time to produce a quality event. BARC has held successful Public Field Days the first Saturday in June for years. Planning begins in mid-April. For events where certain dignitaries are going to be invited to speak, you need to get started at least six to nine months ahead. If you don't believe there is sufficient time for planning, scale back the event to fit the time frame. Keeping it simple can be a good thing. Remember that geewiz stuff to show everyone and free food goes a long way in bringing folks to your door!

### **Get everyone involved!**

Successful events require a team effort from staff and, in some cases, local support groups. "Team Attitude" must be established so that everyone feels included. Participation in the preparations also creates a sense of ownership and pride among staff members, which is communicated to your visitors. When the big day arrives, everyone is "on stage". A successful event is a production where each "cast member" believes their contribution enabled the event to be better than it could have been without their "showmanship". Also, when staff and local groups are involved, they encourage family and friends to attend the event. If extra hands are needed so employees can cover lab-specific duties, consider asking local groups, like FFA, 4-H or a Friends of the Lab group to help park cars, fill out name tags, cook food, drive the tractor for a hayride, etc.

### **Preparation!**

At the first planning meeting, assign 5-6 people to head up the planning committee/subcommittees that meets bi-weekly initially to develop planning; weekly while major tasks are being accomplished; and daily for the last weeks as problems and/or opportunities are discovered and last-minute details completed. Divisions of

labor or subcommittee roles could be along the lines of invitations, promotion, budget, refreshments, tent set up, tours and/or presentations, parking, emergency services, preparation of name tags, information desk, entertainment, etc. Half of the event organizers who contributed to these guidelines recommended that one individual be recognized as the over-all 'go to' decision-maker during the event. At Mandan, the Planning Committee is led by one scientist-leader (focused on over-all direction, theme development and organizing the scientific tour) and a staff-manager (develops promotion, activity planning, budgeting, and staff coordination). Also, the previous year's planning-team leaders serve as advisors to the current planning committee.

When it is closer to "show time", have everything prepared and cleaned. Hold a 'walk-through' meeting so everyone understands his/her role. Oversee the development of scripts and visual aids for presentations early. Be as creative as possible when planning the agenda. For a symposium type event, one well-known speaker from the community was recommended. Do whatever you can to ensure that all presentations are brief and crisp, and have lots of ancillary high-energy components to the program such as posters of the science. In preparation for their Public Field Day at BARC, the coordinator sends forms to all the labs for their exhibit requirements and then prepares a tent layout which shows the size of the booth required, electrical and Internet connection requirements, and the number of tables, chairs poster boards, etc. each lab will need.

Develop a 'theme' for promoting your event. If this is an annual event, do not showcase everything every year. You will lose your audience over time. Selecting a theme for your event can help generate additional ideas for activities as well as help focus other elements where many options may exist. Depending on the nature of the event, a theme can also increase its "fun factor" and create broader public appeal. Keep in mind the nature of the message you want to share, however, and let it determine the level of "playfulness" you incorporate into your plans. A "mad scientist" might be a fun addition for a school field trip, but may seem too frivolous for a producer field day. Consider your audience and the nature of the event when picking a theme. Once selected, however, incorporate the theme into all your promotional materials...posters, brochures, invitations...even go so far as to design a logo and pick a color scheme to use for your event to give it that professional look and feel. "Branding" your event also helps your intended audience readily identify pertinent information and helps remind them that they don't want to miss it!

## **Promotion!**

Know the key radio and television producers and media personalities, and print writers in your region. Contact them about your event no-less-than four months in advance. Be prepared to offer story ideas and information about the event in accordance with their prescribed deadlines, which, for TV and magazine announcements, can range from weeks to months ahead of the event. Arrange for live event broadcasts, guest appearances on broadcast programs, news articles, etc. Arrange for newspaper interviews at least three weeks and magazine stories three months in advance of the event. Press releases and "Current Events Page Notices" to print, Radio, TV (and public/community TV and radio) media should be sent at least 30-45 days before the event. Paid advertising is a last resort. Post eye-catching' promotional posters conspicuously throughout the community at least 45 days in advance. Flyers can be distributed to local schools, libraries, community centers, bulletin boards at grocery stores, churches, etc. The local Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau may need up to one year advance notice to include the event in their annual publications. Some

local businesses may even include invitations or notices in their monthly mailings to customers. Personal invitations should be sent to local dignitaries, customers, stakeholders, and supporters, while generic invitations can be handed out by employees to neighbors, friends, and family.

If this is your first event, don't have a history of annual events, or your lab is located in a remote part of the country, make personal contact (phone calls or meetings) with key people, opinion-makers in the community, etc. a priority in your promotion strategy. Tell them what you are planning and why they should attend. This interaction is also a good time to begin gathering information on what people would like to see at future events. Another excellent thing to do is to attend meetings of your local agricultural and civic groups and ask for a few minutes of floor time to talk about your event. Find out if any of the groups have a "calling tree" and ask members if they would be willing to use that mechanism to remind members shortly before the event is to take place.

Promotion of you laboratory and programs during the event shouldn't be overlooked. For example, handouts are a good way to incorporate a lot of other information that may not be displayed otherwise. Examples of this information would be contact names, phone numbers and emails, brief mission statements, etc. Putting the information in a single booklet or folder is a good idea so your visitor doesn't have to juggle too many items.

### **Financing!**

This can be a sensitive area so think carefully on how you want to proceed. At Mandan, ND they have learned that corporations doing business in industries your organization sustains, budget funds to support 'industry events'. Greater recognition gained from philanthropy will garner greater interest and support on their part. Learn what amounts are reasonable and customary for their industry. Inform their local representative or public affairs specialist of their opportunity to contribute, but do not solicit. You may begin your presentation with, *"I'd like to tell you what we are doing. There is no pressure to participate, but I don't want you to feel you were intentionally excluded."* Our experience is that 95% of supporters say, "Yes, I want to participate". Budget your resources for high impact activities that maximize your (and their) exposure and the quality of your event.

Local businesses or industries may often offer financial help for certain items such as food that government agencies cannot typically provide with government funds. They may also donate door prizes, give away items, etc. At the Sidney, MT location, contributions from corporate groups have been used to provide donations to other non-profit volunteer groups providing services for their events such as the local VFW or Boy Scouts doing a flag raising, or including developmentally disable residents or Native American dancers in other parts of a program. At Fort Keogh, MT Livestock and Range Research Laboratory's Open House, they feed their guests hamburgers and hotdogs provided either by the local Chamber of Commerce or their partners at Montana State University.

### **Drawing Card!**

Plan for great weather! Also, analyzing what will attract your target audience is critical. Midweek in a mild weather month assures a better turn out. On the other hand, maybe

your location is close to a football field and you could piggy back on the Friday game by scheduling an open house prior to kick off?

A free, high-quality barbecue, entertainment, well-known outside speakers, high-value give-away goods, technical certification in continuing education opportunities, or whatever help push them over the edge of resistance to attend. Think about having local art groups involved with displays and local 4H and FFA activities such as competitions and/or judging events. Industry leaders respond to different stimuli than the masses so be mindful of ways to get them to attend your event.

### **Follow-up!**

High impact community outreach is time consuming. You should develop high standards through continual evaluation. Ask your customers to evaluate your performance and provide new ideas for your next effort. Always provide your staff the opportunity to critique their (and your) performance to encourage continual growth and improvement. This feedback not only determines where changes may be needed, but also identifies those elements that proved particularly successful and to acknowledge everyone contributing to them. Respond as if you value their assistance and support, because you do. Write thank you notes to speakers and people outside your lab who made contributions or assisted in a special way in making your event successful.

Ultimately successful events are made even more successful by what you do the rest of the year. If employees are involved in their community; if the lab is a good neighbor and takes its responsibilities seriously regarding its customers, partners and stakeholders, then support for lab events will be forthcoming.....assuming you've done the proper planning, of course!

## **Examples of Formats for Events and Contacts for More Information**

### **Open House**

The guidance information applies primarily to an Open House type of event. Basically, you want to follow those 7 rules of thumb for planning a successful event and be as creative as you can possibly be. An Open House showcases geewhizz technologies and accompanying posters of research findings. If you are serving food, start around 4 p.m. with dinner at 6:30 p.m. Lastly, involve local officials if you can.

For more helpful hints, contact:

- Jon Hanson on 701-667-3010 or email him on [jon@mandan.ars.usda.gov](mailto:jon@mandan.ars.usda.gov)
- Kris Havstad on 505-646-4842 or email him on [khavstad@nmsu.edu](mailto:khavstad@nmsu.edu)
- Rod Heitschmidt on 406-232-4970 or email him on [rod@larri.ars.usda.gov](mailto:rod@larri.ars.usda.gov)
- Beth Redlin on 406-433-9427 (ext 127) or email her on [bredlin@sidney.ars.usda.gov](mailto:bredlin@sidney.ars.usda.gov)
- Tony Svejcar on 541-573-8901 or email him on [Tony.Svejcar@orst.edu](mailto:Tony.Svejcar@orst.edu)

### **Technology Showcases**

This type of event would be aimed at acquiring CRADA and other partnerships with in-state businesses to spur economic growth and assist in getting ARS technology in the

marketplace. Both oral presentations and poster displays of research are used and researchers interact directly with attendees. The event can be held indoors or outdoors under tents. Interaction with state and county economic development groups would be essential for this kind of event. The advantages are a sharing of the costs and assistance with advertising, invitations, putting together information packets, etc.

For more helpful hints, contact Ron Korcak at 301-504-5193 or email him on [korcakr@ba.ars.usda.gov](mailto:korcakr@ba.ars.usda.gov)

## **Facility Groundbreaking or Dedication**

For this type of event you will probably want to have your congressional delegation or a key Senator or Representative. Informal contacts with them or their staff should be made as early as 6 months in advance of when you want to hold the event. Work with the ARS Legislative Affairs Office (OLA) on the congressional contacts and scheduling and keep the ARS Headquarters and the Area Office in the loop. It is good to know dates that do or do not work for the Administrator, Area Office Director before you get close to confirming a date with Representative(s) or Senator(s). You want to avoid scheduling this event when they are not available if possible but the congressional availability is usually the priority. For the congressional people, events held on a Monday or Friday is good but holiday and recess periods are better. OLA will tell you when the holiday and recess periods are scheduled.

When you have a day/time, draft an invitation letter from the Administrator formally asking the Representative(s) and/or Senator(s) to be the keynote speaker(s); a decision memo to the Secretary's scheduling director (note: this does not always apply) inviting her/him to participate; and another letter to the Under Secretary asking him/her to participate. Again, the OLA will assist you with the tasks.

Alert ARS Information Staff as early as possible about the event so they can begin developing a press release, press packets, etc. Alert the Deputy Administrator so the National Program Staff will be in the loop and Dave Rust/Linda Drew so they will know the Administrator will need prepared remarks for the event.

Develop a VIP and general guest list; get address labels and invitations printed. You may decide to send letters from the Administrator, Area Director or yourself to the VIP and general printed invitations to everyone else. There is no set rule on this so do what works best for your situation. One note of caution: wait as long as you can before printing and mailing invitations. Dates sometimes change. But don't wait so long that people have made other plans.

Finalize the agenda with the Congressional, Area Director, and Administrator's offices. Make sure the principles know what they are suppose to do and how long they have to do it. Any agenda running over an hour is too long. You may want to have a breakfast beforehand for a VIP group or a luncheon/reception following the event for the larger group. If so, use this time if necessary to recognize or give speaking parts to folks you didn't have time for on the agenda. Nice touches for these events are the National Anthem sung by a school choir, presentation of a flag flown over the US Capitol, a plaque of appreciation, etc. And always offer to provide transportation to your key speakers and always write them thank you notes.

For more helpful hints, contact Marshall Tarkington on 202-720-3173 or email her on [mtarkington@ars.usda.gov](mailto:mtarkington@ars.usda.gov)

### **Field Tours**

You can start the tour with a PowerPoint presentation briefly highlighting the general research program, lab history, and major stakeholder issues. Focus the presentation around video-clips and titles of important research issues cutting out as much text as possible. Limit the number of sites making sure there is something to see at each stop. Usually 3 stops with the last stop being combined with lunch is a good agenda. Plan for plenty of discussion time at each stop because you get more communicated here than in information handed out. Direct the Q&A sessions so that people are not bored and specific objectives are discussed at each stop. Try to have stakeholders and supporters participate in the tour. Their “testimonials” on how your research programs benefit them are priceless.

For more helpful hints, contact Stuart Hardegree on 208-422-0728 or email him at [shardegr@nwrca.ars.usda.gov](mailto:shardegr@nwrca.ars.usda.gov)

### **Public Field Day**

The type of event may be best illustrated by outlining what the Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) does for its annual field day. For starters, they display their exhibits inside two large tents. Outside the tents, all types of farm machinery, police cars and motorcycles, and fire trucks are ready for children to climb on and grown ups to admire. Hayrides or bus tours are a good way to show people the location and describe what is going on. You can tailor the hayrides for children and another one for adults. The adult hayride/bus tour would include someone from the lab telling about the research being conducted and interesting facts about the location. At the BARC Field Day they have the APHIS Beagle Brigade demonstrating how they protect agriculture from foreign pests and diseases from entering the U.S. through our airports. They also had the Traveling Agricultural Showcase from the Maryland Agricultural Education Foundation. Inside the showcase, children could actually see what it feels like to milk a cow and there were interactive exhibits appealing to children and adults. The local police and fire department and mounted police from the U.S. Park Service also participated in the BARC Field Day and the National Institutes of Health displayed their HAZMAT and decontamination trailer. Light refreshments and picnic lunches are provided for a nominal fee with the proceeds benefiting a local high school, 4-H club, scout troops, etc. BARC also provides accessible transportation for disabled visitors and interpreters for those with hearing impairment. Volunteers provide shuttle service from the parking lots to the tents.

For more helpful hints, you can contact Sandy Martin on 301-504-8253 or email her at [martins@ba.ars.usda.gov](mailto:martins@ba.ars.usda.gov) (note: Sandy has a comprehensive To Do notebook and timelines for planning the BARC Public Day)