

Impression Management and Specialists

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Consciously or unconsciously, people control impressions others receive of them. The author adapts Goffman's discussion of this idea to a role analysis of the Extension specialist and his problems. Through observation and interviews in Illinois, the specialist's relationships with agents, other specialists, research contacts, and administrators are examined. By use of the theatrical interpretation of impression management the specialist is shown to be, among other things, very county-conscious.

ANY SOCIAL establishment may profitably be studied from the point of view of how impressions are managed, suggests Erving Goffman in his book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*.¹ He argues that when an individual appears before others he has many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of him in given situations. Goffman has outlined what he terms a dramaturgical approach for studying this occurrence in social establishments as closed systems. Specifically, the dramaturgical perspective ". . . would lead us to describe the techniques of impression management employed in a given establishment, the principal problems of impression management in the establishment, and the identity and interrelationships of the several performance teams which operate in the establishment."²

Using theatrical terminology, Goffman discusses ways in which the performer presents himself and his activities to others. The author differentiates between the front region, where a performance is presented, and the back region where the performance of a routine is prepared. Each performer in a social establishment has teammates who cooperate to present to an audience a given definition of the situation. Sometimes the acts are thoroughly calculated and conscious, sometimes largely unconscious.

¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959), p. 238.

² *Ibid.*, p. 240.

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The following report represents an effort to apply the framework of Goffman's dramaturgical approach of impression management to Extension subject-matter specialists in agriculture. His approach seems to offer a useful perspective to the analysis of such social groups. It builds naturally upon role analysis by helping to identify and explain responses which arise from functional relationships, responses that normally go unobserved and unaccounted for within social structures such as Extension.

The author obtained part of the data for the following analysis through observation of Illinois Extension specialists during their meetings and other contacts with farmer-clients, county personnel, and fellow members of the state staff. Further insights arose through interviews with other Extension persons who had worked closely with specialists.

Several subject-matter specialists themselves were interviewed. A willingness among specialists to discuss relationships and the methods which they use to solve problems stemming from those relationships supports Goffman's idea that what he calls "impression management" is partly conscious. Goffman adds, however, that not all such acts are calculated. Sometimes the individual will be calculating in his activity but be relatively unaware that this is the case. Sometimes he will intentionally and consciously express himself in a particular way, but chiefly because the tradition of his group or social status requires this kind of expression. Sometimes the traditions of his role will lead him to give a well-designed impression of a particular kind, yet he may be neither consciously nor unconsciously disposed to create such an impression.³

Therefore, the actions described here should not be considered the fruits of cold calculation. These actions should be interpreted as some of the conscious and unconscious responses of specialists to built-in pressures of their professional roles. Such a word of clarification seems fitting at this point because the stage-oriented terminology of Goffman's type of analysis tends to imply conscious manipulation, whereas it actually refers to both conscious and unconscious actions.

PATTERNS IN THE FRONT REGION

The University car smells dank as he gropes in the glove compartment for an ice scraper. It is a few minutes before 6 A.M. and still dark. His thermometer showed 28 degrees when he left the house and the drizzle is freezing almost as fast as it hits the ground.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Four hours from now this Extension specialist is due at a meeting to talk to farmers in a county 130 miles north. He has packed for an overnight stay because he knows he may get stranded. The meeting is not likely to be large; in fact, he expects only 15 or 20.

With windshield somewhat cleared and motor running, he buckles himself in, backs out of the driveway, and fixes his mind on the ribbon of ice ahead. He is on his way. The performance has begun.

This kind of action, common among Extension specialists, expresses clearly one major aspect of their efforts to adjust to their position in the Extension system. No one orders them or even expects them to operate under major stress and personal risk; yet the responses of specialists to requests from counties and areas are consistently vigorous and painstaking.

Conversely, specialists commonly show far less enthusiasm for attending administrative meetings on campus, even though such meetings demand less time and are more convenient than those at the county or district level.

THE SPECIALIST'S AUDIENCES

These are signs that the specialist is extremely county-conscious. One could say that the specialist considers field personnel to be his front-row audience. Farmers and other clients of Extension occupy the second row and other seats on the main floor. Administration is in the balcony. Correspondingly, the specialist seems more interested in applause from agents than from others in the audience.

Why is this true? Why is the agent such a vital audience for the subject-matter specialist? The field agent is major producer-director of the specialist's performances to farmers. The agent decides which specialists will do the acting in his county and largely dictates what they talk about (if not what they say). The field agent also is publicity director for individual performances which specialists stage in his county or area. If the agent chooses to publicize an appearance heavily, the specialist may enjoy a full house. The field agent also controls reporting of "box-office receipts." After a meeting, he can tell administration the "success" of the performance in terms of audience enthusiasm.

Field Agent

One of the major themes in the specialist's routine with field staff is "You can count on me." The specialist dare not have the agent accuse him of being indifferent; so he is willing to get up early and

drive in blizzards, even to talk to just a handful of farmers. As one observer put it, "He has an uncanny sense of 'the show must go on'."

A second major theme is, "You're the boss." In most cases, when a specialist goes into the field he must view himself as working for the agent. His words and actions must imply that the agent is in command. The specialist may build up the ego of the agent by asking for direction, even when he may know what he wants to do. Almost without exception, he will minimize any idea of competition between himself and the agent.

Sometimes a specialist also favors the host agent by referring to him respectfully during sessions with farmers. He may publicly credit the agent with knowing technical subject matter and defer to the agent during a meeting, raising questions which he knows the agent can discuss. Often he advises groups, "If you have specific problems about this, see _____."

At the same time, the specialist needs to retain an air of unique knowledge by portraying confidence in his grasp of subject matter. If one of the technical journals publishes an article of general interest and the specialist rewrites it for field personnel, his action tells them that he retains unique knowledge in that subject area.

The specialist uses a number of methods to sell himself and his overall program to field staff.

1. The most common and most effective way is for the specialist to build a reputation among agents for "putting on a good show."
2. He may solicit official administrative endorsement for a program in his subject area. If key administrators conclude that his discipline has special importance for Extension at the moment, he may be able to do a number of things: (1) Draft a letter to agents, signed by an administrator, encouraging them to include his program in their schedules; (2) present his appeal directly to all field personnel during periodic district meetings.
3. By emphasizing to agents that he is on a first-name basis with prominent individuals in his discipline, he may earn their invitations for local appearances.
4. He may cultivate personal friendship with individual agents to earn their participation. During informal, social situations he may serve mainly as a good listener, or he may take active part with an "I-know-how-you-feel" approach. This often has at its core mutual feelings of isolation and of being misunderstood.
5. Subject-matter specialists may use audiovisual aids to help create acceptance among field personnel, who often favor the use of such aids. An agent told one specialist, "One thing I like

about you, _____, you always bring a lot of visuals.”

Apart from his intense desire to please the agent and “be asked out,” the specialist can and does exercise some sanctions. One of these is control over his speed of response to requests from field personnel. If he wants, he can be slow to answer requests for assistance, assuming a manner suggesting, “I’ve just been so busy. . . .”

One of the obvious problems in specialist/agent relationships arises when farmers reach specialists directly, bypassing field staff. Agents and specialists try to control this potential trouble spot by a set of widely shared understandings. When a farmer contacts a specialist directly, the specialist may reply directly but is expected to “carbon” the agent. The specialist may suggest that the farmer discuss his problem with the agent, but usually handles the matter directly. The carbon copy of the specialist’s response assures the agent of his priority and shows him that the specialist knows the answers to questions.

Likewise, if the specialist wants to work with local groups other than Extension, he usually does so through the agent. He may ask the agent to set up the desired contact or he may organize it himself, meanwhile keeping the agent informed. In all cases, it appears that both parties agree that a specialist does not build up his own local audience, except in conjunction with the agent.

Farmer-Client

The field agent’s expectation of a “good performance” puts the specialist into show business. Each specialist employs methods which experience has shown to be effective, methods probably dictated partly by his personal makeup and partly by subject matter.

Some specialists use a “forced-feeding” routine. In this case, a specialist might launch a presentation with this introduction: “I’m pleased to be here. We have so much material to cover and I know you have many problems. Take careful notes because we may not have enough time to cover everything, let alone go back and repeat. We’ll skip a break in order to cover more material.” He then proceeds with basically unadorned facts. A specialist using this approach can thus, consciously or unconsciously, emphasize the importance of his subject area and his command of knowledge of it.

Other specialists concentrate on audience involvement. Before a meeting the specialist may ask the agent about special talents of individuals who are likely to attend, then draw on them for information during the meeting. He may open a meeting by handing out a list of possible topics and asking the audience to choose those in

which they are most interested. This approach identifies the specialist as being flexible. Like the forced-feeding approach, it highlights the specialist's command of his entire subject area.

Some specialists sprinkle their presentations with humor. They may use cartoon characters as visuals, slip joke slides into their presentations, use homespun language, and rely on wry jokes to help liven their programs. Such methods highlight a down-to-earth, "I'm-like-you" empathy between specialist and audience. Still other specialists rely on demonstrations which they have found can capture attention and arouse interest.

One problem which the specialist faces in his contact with farmer-audiences is that agents usually are in the audience along with farmers. So that the agent does not grow bored with the material, the specialist has to revise it more often than he might like. If the specialist does not present new material regularly, agents may become disenchanted with his assumed expertise.

This analysis reveals few examples of what Goffman terms "performance disruptions."⁴ No respondent had seen a specialist stumped and embarrassed before a farmer-audience because of lack of technical knowledge. When a specialist does not know the answer to a question, he generally turns to one of several techniques:

1. He may admit that he does not know, especially if the question is minor.
2. He may admit ignorance, but offer to seek the answer and relay it to the questioner. Probably the most common response in a "don't know" situation, it gives him time to find an answer.
3. He may use a "smokescreen" tactic, responding with a flow of jargon which begins at a point relevant to the question but soon takes a turn into the unknown. The lingo must be technical enough that it seems real to the audience. Goffman calls this a "mystification" device.
4. Another diversionary tactic involves responding to "don't know" questions with humorous stories which the specialist may keep in mind for such occasions. One example cited: There was once a centipede which had corns and bunions on each of his hundred feet. He was in great misery and sought advice from the wise old owl who advised, "Become a mouse. Then 96 per cent of your pain will be gone." "But how can I become a mouse?" the centipede asked, to which the owl replied, "That's your problem. I only make policy." Such a tactic allows the specialist to avoid admitting directly that he does not know an answer, yet it keeps the audience in a favorable mood.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

Fellow Specialist

A relatively high degree of camaraderie exists among subject-matter specialists. They compete for approval and recognition, but they do not compete in their fields of authority. Indeed, specialists actively enforce a division of authority. Each understands that he is not to speak about topics outside his specialized field. If he should be compelled to give advice beyond the bounds of his discipline, he is expected to acknowledge his lack of authority and give credit to the proper source of material which he has cited. Generally, however, specialists avoid subject areas other than their own. Because subjects overlap, this is not always easily done. One common approach of specialists is to call an interdisciplinary meeting and draw the desired lines of authority.

Research Colleague

Although the Extension specialist depends upon the research man for much of his technical knowledge, he brings practical knowledge to the relationship. That is, he trades his practical problems, situations and solutions for the researcher's data. He stresses his knowledge of farmers and farm problems and often serves as a kind of antenna for the research man in locating needed types of research. One observer noted that young research workers often view the Extension specialist as a kind of oracle.

In addition to stressing his practical know-how among colleagues, the specialist knowingly or unknowingly creates an impression by his tight schedules and frequent absences from his office. Even during his absences, the office itself reflects busyness. A pile of correspondence testifies that the occupant is in the mainstream of activity, as indeed he often is. Whereas researchers and teachers are likely to keep books and bound volumes of journals on display in shelves, the specialist usually displays trade magazines in piles. Various trophies, citations, and awards in his office reflect the activities of one more industry-oriented than his colleagues.

Extension Administrator

While the specialist conforms to administrative procedure and policy, he tends to feel less empathy with administration than with county personnel and he is more likely to direct what Goffman calls "unofficial grumbling" toward it. That is, he is more apt to criticize Extension administration to an administrator than criticize field per-

sonnel to an agent. However, such open criticism usually is carried out only by veteran specialists.

TEAM OPERATIONS

In one sense, the specialist usually operates as a one-man team. Some observers feel that he tends to work alone out of self-interest, to maximize identification of himself with his overall program. He may feel that if he joins forces with other specialists in a major way, his own program may lose some of its identity. However, even when he works alone, the specialist associates himself strongly with the university. His remarks to farmer-clients often include references to "we." For example, he might remark, "Here is what we think is important in evaluating. . . ."

Also, when the specialist appears at a local meeting, he and the agent operate as fellow performers, sharing in the presentation even if the agent's part is limited to volunteering one or two comments. With few exceptions, an agent will do his best to help a specialist's performance. To that end, he avoids expressing differences of opinion during a meeting and generally exhibits what Goffman calls "skill behavior."⁵ This means that the agent provides a visible model which tells farmers how they should respond to the presentation. The agent initiates a response, such as applause. He also helps in the staging of a performance by his introduction of the specialist to members of the audience.

Some specialists would like more buildup than they get. One was uncomfortable after an introduction such as this reported one: "Folks, this is _____ and he has a speech he wants to give you." But the specialist may also become uncomfortable if the agent reads a 10-minute detailed biographical sketch.

Under backstage conditions the agent would refer to the specialist by first name, but when operating as a team during a meeting the specialist and agent often suppress backstage familiarity. The words "doctor" and "professor" get frequent use, especially in reference to the specialist. In a given instance, actual handling of titles depends on the agent, the prestige of the specialist, and his familiarity with the particular audience.

Similarly, during Extension Conference (at which members of the state staff are performers and field personnel are onlookers) the state staff shows teamwork characteristics. When speaking to the group, the staff members commonly refer to one another by rank rather than by commonly used designations.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

BACKSTAGE BEHAVIOR

Talk about the performance comprises one common type of backstage activity in which specialists take part. Coffee sessions after local meetings offer the specialist a chance to get reactions from field agents about his presentation. Specialists also share presentation ideas among themselves, both informally and in meetings planned for that purpose.

Some of the backstage conversation of specialists centers around what Goffman terms secret pleasures. For example, they may exchange recommendations on restaurants and lodging places throughout the state. Some backstage talk involves administration, as specialists share facts and views about what they can or cannot do in relation to individual administrative workers. Part of the folklore among specialists stresses successes of individuals in hoodwinking the "system."

Discussions about field personnel are included in the specialists' backstage talk. One observer remarked, "Specialists can cite chapter and verse on what to expect in a county." They often have a rather complete mental cataloging of each agent's mannerisms, tolerances, likes, dislikes, methods, and goals. Poor setups for meetings arouse some shared backstage criticism toward agents, as do situations in which specialists feel agents have given them inadequate publicity.

Specialists also enjoy sharing humorous incidents which take place during meetings and sometimes warn each other about farmers and other clients who have caused trouble. Thus, a specialist appearing in a given county can be on the lookout for individuals who have a record of being antagonistic or disruptive.

CONCLUSIONS

From the standpoint of Extension, this analysis suggests some of the ways by which subject-matter specialists adjust consciously or unconsciously to problems of relationship which the organizational structure imposes upon them. The same approach could be applied to any other segment of Extension as a means of improving various parts of the structure and of helping individuals in Extension understand themselves and their actions more clearly.