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Disseminating information to your clients

This is one of a series of information sheets for people designing and implementing agricultural market information systems in Africa.

You can choose among many different channels to disseminate market information to your clients and promote your services. These fall into six main categories (Figure 1):

- **Mobile:** voice, text messages, apps and social media
- **Internet:** websites, email and social media
- **Display:** notice boards, electronic media boards, digital kiosks, posters, exhibits, banners and billboards.

■ **Audio-visual:** radio, television, presentations, video and mobile cinema.

■ **Print:** newsletters, bulletins, reports, newspapers, magazines, flyers and brochures.

■ **Face-to-face:** word-of mouth, meetings, training and exhibitions

This is not a watertight classification. The channels could be categorised in other, equally valid ways. Other media might be included, and new possibilities and combinations are emerging all the time.







	Dissemination	Both	Promotion
Mobile 	Voice Text messages Apps		Social media
Internet 		Websites Email	Social media
Display 		Notice boards Electronic media boards Digital kiosks	Posters Exhibits Banners Billboards
Audio-visual 		Radio Television	Presentations Video Mobile cinema
Print 	Newsletters Bulletins Reports	Newspapers Magazines	Flyers Brochures
Face-to-face 		Word of mouth	Meetings Training Exhibitions

Figure 1. Types of communication channels

There is considerable overlap among these categories. For example, the same document can appear in print form and on the internet; the same messages can be transmitted on radio, television and via video; and videos and presentations can viewed online.

Dissemination vs promotion

You need to communicate two types of information to your clients:

- **Dissemination.** You want to deliver information to them about markets, the weather, crops, and other topics that they are interested in.
- **Promotion.** You want to make them aware of your services, persuade them to sign up for them, and train them how to use them. See the separate sheet in this series on *Marketing your market information service* for more.

Some channels are better suited to dissemination; others to promotion. Some can be used for both purposes (Figure 1). For example, a display board in a market that shows the latest prices (i.e., dissemination) also advertises your service to passers-by (promotion).

Some channels (like social media) have considerable potential for use in dissemination, but are still only rarely used for this purpose.

Mobile, internet and **broadcast** channels all rely on your audience having the right piece of equipment to receive your message: a mobile phone (perhaps a smartphone), computer, radio or television. If they don't have this, they can't use your service.

Mobile

Mobile phones are becoming universal, and increasing numbers of farmers now have smartphones. Tablets, which have a larger screen and more capabilities, are also becoming more common. As bandwidth and network coverage improve, mobile is becoming the usual way for people to access the internet, often using apps rather than classic websites. That opens up major opportunities for market information services.



- **Targeting.** You can target specific individuals and provide information depending on the user's current location. That allows you to personalise the information based on each recipient's needs.
- **Speed.** You can reach clients quickly: you do not have to wait for the next scheduled radio broadcast or issue of a magazine.
- **Income.** You can charge the client for the service.

■ **Pull and push.** "Pull" services are where the client requests information from you by keying in a code or tapping icons on a screen. "Push" is where the client subscribes to a certain type of information, and you send it automatically to him or her.

■ **Feedback.** It provides an opportunity to get feedback from your clients. You can gather information about individuals automatically (for example, their location), or by asking them to fill in a form when they subscribe. But many people are wary about giving information about themselves. Keep the information you ask for very simple, and make sure the request cannot be seen as spying.

For these reasons, mobile is becoming a very popular way to deliver market information services. Nevertheless, it has risks: farmers may have phones but not understand how to use their features; they may not be literate or numerate enough to understand text messages; they may lack network coverage or be unable to recharge their phone. Mobile phones seem to be less useful for promoting market information services to potential clients.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter could be used to raise awareness about the services you offer, update people on events, announce new services, and alert clients to news and trends. But despite their potential, they are still underused for such purposes. They do not seem to be used to disseminate market information, though individuals may use them to negotiate deals with trading partners.

Internet

The websites of market information services generally both disseminate information and promote the service to clients. Some offer a range of current data for free without registration; others invite users to log in to get a free trial.



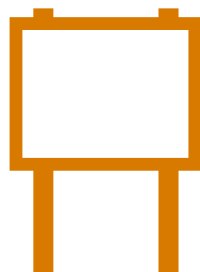
Websites can give users access to a huge range of information: a choice of data on a wide range of commodities and countries, the ability to view graphs or tables, and access to news and other types of information. This can be both an advantage and a curse. Offering lots of options can be confusing, at least for a new user. Some market information service websites seem to be oriented more towards demonstrating programming prowess than to making things easy for the user. Training may be required for someone to become familiar with the site and be able to find the information he or she wants.

So when designing your web presence, aim for ease of use. Provide sufficient explanation so the user knows what to do. Give examples of the type

of information users can get. Avoid having users enter lots of choices for commodities, locations and time periods, only to be confronted with a “no data” message. Keep the bandwidth required low to avoid leaving people in remote areas staring at a blank screen. Make sure users know what is free, and when and how much they will be asked to pay.

Display

Displays are open to public viewing – anyone in the right place can see them. Their main use is to raise awareness of your potential clients about your service. Posters, exhibits at open days and agricultural fairs, banners and billboards all announce your services to would-be clients. Rural markets are a good place to contact people.



Certain types of displays can be used to carry market information as well as raise awareness about your services. Noticeboards and electronic displays in marketplaces can inform passers-by about prices and weather – and expose them to your logo and promotional messages. Digital kiosks can also invite clients to key in their details and subscribe to your service.

Choose the location for displays carefully. Marketplaces, community centres, meeting halls and extension offices are common locations. The managers of such locations may welcome informative, frequently updated displays because they provide a service to staff and visitors.

It is hard to use display channels as a source of revenue – but not impossible. Set up a noticeboard in the marketplace, and you can rent part of it out to advertisers. You may be able to persuade sponsors to pay for your banners or posters in exchange for including their logo.

Audio-visual

Audio-visual channels fall into two groups: broadcast and non-broadcast.

Radio and television are **broadcast** channels. They are a quick way to deliver information to a large number of people. National broadcasters can announce a few prices at major markets; local broadcasters such as community radio stations can carry more prices at nearby markets. Transmitting the information during regular time slots means that clients know when to tune in. The time slots have to be chosen carefully: when farmers are at home, not working in the field.

Radio is cheaper than television and may reach a bigger audience of farmers. It is especially useful

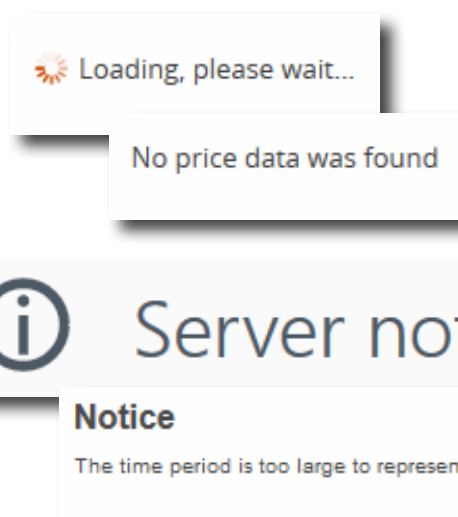


Figure 2. Things you don't want users to see

to reach people who are illiterate or who have little education. Many radio stations broadcast farm programmes that might welcome a segment featuring prices and market news. Call-in programmes allow listeners to pose questions and offer feedback. Listener clubs can help spread messages and raise awareness of your service.

Television production is more expensive, and the audience is different: fewer farmers have television (though they may watch a TV belonging to a friend or neighbour). Television is more useful if you need to show visual information, such as weather maps, disease symptoms or production techniques.

It is hard to earn money from broadcasts. Some broadcasters may transmit your content for free because it attracts audiences, but others may want to be paid. You may be able to strike a deal with an advertiser (such as an agribusiness firm) or a sponsor (such as a development agency) to pay for the content and broadcasting costs. You may also want to broadcast information in order to gain visibility and attract paying clients to your other information services.

Non-broadcast audio-visuals include presentations, video and mobile cinema. Presentations and video are a good way to introduce your services to participants in meetings and training courses. Mobile cinema is essentially a video on wheels: you set up a projector, screen and loudspeakers in a village. You show movies to attract an audience; beforehand (or during the breaks) you can give a presentation or show a video about your market information service. This can be especially attractive in remote locations where residents have few other forms of entertainment.

Print

Print media fall into two major groups: those you publish yourself, and those you don't.

Self-published. These include newsletters, bulletins, reports, flyers and brochures. You write and design the content (or hire someone to do so), and control the distribution. You can hand out flyers and brochures at meetings and training courses (see below), in markets and at extension centres. They are a good way to raise awareness about your services, and can give more details than a poster or banner. Plus, because you can hand them out to people, you can target them better than is possible with a poster or banner that everyone sees.

You can produce a range of reports – weekly, monthly, annual – on the markets you are monitoring. Do a good job with your analysis and presentation, and you will create a reputation for good-quality work. This may lead to larger clients commissioning customised reports on specific markets.

You can produce reports in both printed form and online, downloadable as a PDF. Printing and distributing hard copies costs money, but putting the same thing online is essentially free once you have done the writing and layout.

You give away flyers and brochures, but you can charge for your newsletters and reports. Many models are possible. You might issue weekly reports for free online, but charge for a hard copy and for monthly and annual reviews with more in-depth analysis. You can sell advertising space. You can cut distribution costs by handing out documents at events where your staff are attending anyway.

Can you use printed materials to reach non-literate clients? The evidence says yes. Even if a farmer cannot read or write, he or she can often find someone who can – a daughter, son or neighbour who can read out the text. And you can design graphics that are easy to understand even for non-literate people.

Published by others. You can get your content included in newspapers or magazines produced by others. This falls into four categories: advertising, editorial, paid content and public service.

■ **Advertising.** Here, you pay the newspaper or magazine publisher to include your content. You have to pay for the service, but you can design the advertisement and you control where and how it is displayed.

■ **Editorial.** Here, you do not pay anything, but you do not control what is said. For example, you might send the newspaper a press release, which leads to a news story about your service.



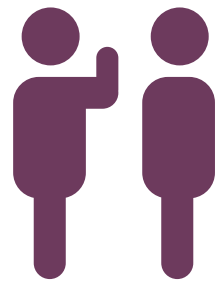
This may be positive or negative – journalists are trained to sniff out controversy! So think carefully before seeking this type of publicity, and plan it carefully.

■ **Paid content.** The publisher of the newspaper or magazine may decide that the information is useful content for its readers. It may pay you to provide the information on a regular basis.

■ **Public service.** The publisher may regard the information as useful content for the readership, so will carry it for free, but not pay you anything. You can negotiate to include your logo and a promotional message next to the market data.

Face-to-face

In an electronic world, is there still a need for face-to-face communication? Emphatically yes. Face-to-face has big advantages: instant feedback, multiple channels (visual, audio, body language, gestures, facial expression, tone of voice, eye contact) and tailored messaging. It is invaluable in building trust, persuading, and solving problems. There is evidence that people trust information received from a familiar face more than from an anonymous voice or SMS message over the phone.



Face-to-face communication is particularly useful for certain purposes: introducing your services to potential clients, demonstrating how it works, training how to use it, and solving problems. The most effective form of face-to-face is with an individual or a small group. But you can also use it with larger groups by combining it with displays and audio-visual presentations.

Arranging your own promotional meetings and training courses is difficult and expensive. So look for opportunities arranged by others: training courses for extension agents, meetings of farmer groups, community gatherings, field days, church meetings and agricultural fairs. Negotiate with the organisers for some time to make a presentation and some space to erect your display and lay out your information materials. Depending on the event, you may have to pay a registration fee, there may be no charge, or you may even get your costs covered as an invited speaker.

Word-of-mouth is also effective in transmitting prices and other current market information. If one person in a village gets your information from an SMS or a radio broadcast, he or she may pass it on to neighbouring farmers. This does not earn you any extra income, but it raises awareness about your service. Eventually, the other farmers may sign up so they can profit from the convenience and detail that an individual subscription offers. Remember, your best sales representative is a happy customer.

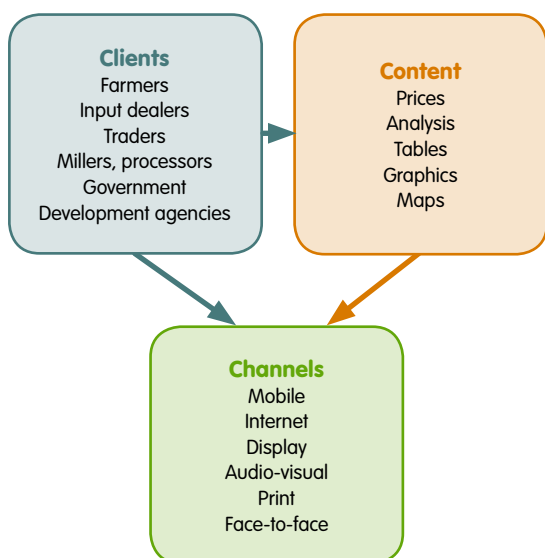


Figure 3. Understand your clients' needs so you know what content they want and how to deliver it to them

You might consider having an agent in each village to disseminate information to his or her neighbours, perhaps as part of a donor-funded development project. But such agents may expect payment for their work, and they may stop passing on the information if they are not suitably rewarded.

Choosing channels

Match the content to your clients

Start off with your clients (Figure 3). What types of information do they need? What types of content would they be prepared to pay for? Farmers are interested in prices of particular commodities in nearby markets, while traders or processors may want more detailed information on more markets. See the sheet in this series on *Identifying clients and planning services* for more.



Match your channels to your clients

Different channels are suited to different clients. It is hard to use SMS to reach people who do not have a mobile phone, who live in areas without electricity or a mobile signal, or who are illiterate. For such groups, radio or big displays in markets (they can ask a literate person what the notice says) may be more appropriate.

For each channel, have a core set of clients in mind. You may design your SMS service for farmers, for example, and your web-based service for large-scale traders or market analysts.



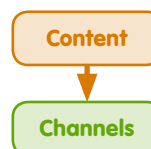
Match the channels to your content

Each channel is good at carrying a certain type of content. SMSs are good for timely alerts on individual prices at specific markets. A website is good at presenting a range of information in graphic, tabular or text form. Radio can give listeners immediate updates on a few prices, along with a short summary of important trends. Printed reports are good for in-depth analysis, but not for getting information out fast. See the descriptions below for further details.

Choose the right language

What languages do your clients understand? What languages can they read? Providing tabulated information in several languages is easy: you have to translate each term only once ("maize", "maïs", "mahindi", etc.), and the software can do the rest. But translating textual material (such as market reports) into several other languages requires staff with the right language capabilities, and can be very time-consuming.

Use words that your clients will understand. Avoid jargon (such as "pathogen" and "opportunity cost") and abbreviations that may confuse them. Check that each message is written clearly and succinctly: no waffle, no unnecessary words. People do not want to read a whole page if a single paragraph will do.



Combining channels

You may want to use several channels to reach each audience. For example, you may reach farmers with both an SMS service and through noticeboards in marketplaces. You can serve traders both via a mobile-phone app and a website. Using multiple channels gives your service visibility, helps you reach a wider audience, and gives the clients a choice of which channel is most convenient for them.

Setting up a communication unit

Producing attractive, informative, easy-to-use information takes skill. And putting together a professional video is different from programming a website or writing, designing and printing a newsletter. You will need a range of skills and facilities to produce the information products you need. You cannot have all of these skills in-house, so need to outsource or subcontract at least some of them.

Set up a communication unit responsible for managing the information materials that you put out. This unit may have one or more specialists with different skill areas: print, web, audio-visual, etc. Its responsibilities should include:

- Developing a **communication strategy** for the organisation.
- **Researching audiences** to determine their information needs and suitable ways of reaching them.
- Designing a range of **information products** to fulfil these needs.
- **Producing** some of the products within the unit. For example, the communication team can be responsible for putting together promotional materials such as brochures, presentations and press releases.
- **Designing and coordinating** the production of other products by your in-house specialists. For example, the communication unit can design the format for a newsletter; your market analysts provide the content; the communication team then edits the text and does the layout.
- **Managing the production** of products or functions that have to be outsourced, such as video production and printing.

Costs and revenues

Costs

Disseminating information and promotion both entail costs. They include:

- **Display:** design, production, set up and updating
- **Print:** design, production, printing and distribution
- **Mobile:** programming, licence fees, distribution via mobile network operators
- **Internet:** programming, licence fees, provider fees
- **Face-to-face:** travel, accommodation, venue, publicity

- **Audio-visual:** production, broadcast fees
- **All channels:** staff time, taxes, overheads.

Turning distribution channels into income streams

Gathering and analysing information cost you money. It is information dissemination that earns you income. For each channel, think of how you can turn it into an income stream. This is easier for some than for others:

- **Text messages.** You can charge per message or a monthly subscription.
- **Mobile apps and websites.** You can charge users to download your app or access certain types of information.
- **Newsletters and reports.** You can sell these to subscribers and in bookstores.
- **Radio and television.** You may be able to get a donor to sponsor the broadcast of market information.
- **Newspapers and magazines.** As with broadcasting, you may be able to find a donor to pay for the printing and distribution.

See the sheet in this series on *Deciding on your business model* for more information on costs and revenues.

Agricultural market information systems in Africa

Sheets in this series

1. Introduction to agricultural market information systems
2. Developing an agricultural market information system
3. Identifying clients and planning services
4. Deciding on your business model
5. Choosing the right technology
6. Choosing and working with partners
7. Collecting data
8. Data analysis and packaging
9. Disseminating information to your clients
10. Marketing your market information service
11. Data: Ethical and legal issues
12. Role of donors and NGOs

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