

How to... pre-test extension materials with smallholder farmers

Pre-testing is an important process in the development of extension materials prior to their widespread distribution. It is a systematic approach to discover what could be changed to make communication more effective. Pre-testing can involve group discussions or one to one sessions with individual smallholder farmers. Interviews with individuals are often easier to manage, while group discussions allow conversations where there is immediate feedback from the peer group. A mixture of the two is likely to be most productive.

Designing a pre-test for materials designed for smallholder farmers

Posters, flipcharts, leaflets, handbooks, radio spots, radio dramas, theatre or films can all be pretested. The different media may need slight adjustments to the questions asked or the way the sessions are structured and run. But basically pre-testing remains the same.

Pre-testing with smallholders can be very straightforward. Even a small sample of the target audience can provide useful and valid information. Pre-testing the reaction of the target group is better than relying on reaction of the production team alone. However, feedback from in-house experts is also an essential part of pre-testing.

In some cases where group discussions (sometimes called focus groups) with farmers are held you may decide to organize single sex groups or use age or education as the way you delineate the groups. Having groups of similar farmers together should create greater parity amongst the group and avoids only the most confident expressing their views. In other cases mixed groups will be appropriate to allow differences to be explored in more detail in the group setting.

Pre-testing in-house

Before going to the expense of field-testing materials it makes sense to undertake in-house review with respected colleagues. This can be done at various stages of the development of the message.

By testing the material with the scientists, researchers or field teams you should be able to make sure that the material is accurate. But you may also get feedback on gender sensitivity and the look and feel of the materials from the extension service or other close deliver partners. One issue you need to consider, however, is that scientists often push for more and more information to be added. You need to balance this tendency with the needs of the target audience to get clear, straight forward and action-orientated messages.

Pre-testing in the field with smallholder farmers

It is usually best to test materials with the target audience in their own environment - where they feel most comfortable. This could be with individual farmers close to their homes, or a familiar setting such as a market.

If you are producing scale-up materials it is important that you work with smallholders who are representative of your target audience. This should not include smallholders who have been actively involved in pilot activity, because they will be too familiar with the techniques and approaches you are trying to introduce. These sorts of farmers may be used as part of the in-house review.

Presentation of material

Materials can be presented to a farmer or group of farmers. They should be given time to consider the materials and information contained.

A radio programme or film script and may be read out or played to a group. Theatre work probably needs to be seen live. Printed materials such as posters and leaflets may be circulated to individuals – or displayed on boards or a wall where people can move around and look at them. Where more than one version is being shared for comparison, make sure all are equally as easy to see. Also present materials to different groups in a different order, in case this has an impact of their choices.

Printed materials need to be as close to the proposed final product as possible. ASHC found farmers could not easily imagine a black and white print out as a full-colour poster.

Length of interviews

One to one interviews should probably last about 10 minutes

Focus groups of around 10 people need to be about 45-60 minutes to cover issues and let everyone speak.

Recruitment

Remember if you pre-test materials with smallholders who have been involved in any trials, they will not be representative – as they will already be sensitized to the messages. Try to find farmers that have not interacted before with the field staff, but who are typical of the target audience.

Consider levels of literacy and visual literacy

It is important to consider the level of literacy and visual literacy in your target audiences.

Smallholders are often predominantly women and older men – these groups are most likely to be illiterate. But smallholders are also exposed to less visual material, printed or audio visual, than most target groups – so it is important to test assumptions about how diagrams and pictures are interpreted.

The level of visual literacy will dictate the way that materials are presented. People with low levels of visual literacy may find it hard to imagine alternatives.

Background characteristics

In order to be able to look at trends you need to be able to split out the answers based on different characteristics of the target audience.

Characteristics about the individual sex, age, education, literacy level, and wealth may also affect the way the people react to materials you are testing. Characteristics about the way they farm e.g. crops grown, whether they own or rent land may also have an impact. So it may be helpful to record who says what – not just what they say and look for trends in the responses you have collected.

What the pre-test measures

Pre-tests are specifically designed to provide information to assist decision-making. It is important to consider the *specific objectives* of the communication materials when deciding what questions to include in your pretest. The in-house review should also give feedback specifically on the area of strategic fit. There are six areas of review listed below:

- 1-5 relate to the in-house review
- 2-6 relate to the field-testing

In the boxes below are suggested questions for use in both the in-house and field-testing. The questions can be adapted, but aim to ensure they are open-ended questions to ensure good feedback, rather than questions with a yes/no answer. It is also important that your questions are not too leading.

Where several approaches are being pre-tested you need to decide which is the most effective. It is important to change the order in which you present contrasting options with different groups. By seeing two similar posters close together it is inevitable that some learning from one poster will inform the understanding of the second. Changing the order is important for criteria like comprehension.

1 Strategy (in-house review only)

- This is key for the in-house review with delivery partners – will the materials fit with their scale-up strategy or objectives to share information?

In-house review questions:

How would you define the core message?

Is the message accurate?

Is the information honest and is it ethical to present this information in this way?

Is this the best approach to get the idea across?

Would the message be more effective if an entirely different approach were used?

Which smallholders are the most likely to be able to act on the messages?

Does this campaign fit with current strategic priorities?

2 Attention grabbing

- These questions aim to test which message is interesting enough to attract and hold the attention of the smallholders. If more than one message is tested, which of several messages attracts the most attention?

In-house review questions:

- Is the artwork appropriate for the intended audience?
- Will the artwork catch people's attention?

Field-test questions

- Is there anything that particularly stands out in this message?
- Is there anything you particularly like about these materials?
 - If so what and why?
- Is there anything you particularly dislike about these materials?
 - If so what and why?

3 Persuasion

- These questions look at how likely the message is to convince the target audience to undertake the desired behavior.

In-house review questions:

- Is there a coherent message about the benefits of the new technology?

Persuasion

- How likely are you to follow the advice in the message?
- What additional information would you need to be able to use the information in the materials?
- Is there anything within the message that you don't believe, or you don't think applies to your situation?

4 Comprehension

These questions look at the clarity of the information? Are the messages clearly understood? This should include both the text and the images. Often extension messages for smallholders are very dependent on illustrations and pictures to overcome literacy issues. So the comprehension of text and interpretation of the images need to be tested on the target audience.

In-house review questions:

- Is the message easily understood?

Comprehension

- What audience do you think these materials are designed for?
- Tell me in your own words what message is conveyed in the material
- Are these materials helpful to you personally?
- If yes, what?

5 Acceptability

Does the message contain anything that is offensive or distasteful by local standards? Is the message credible? Does it contain any annoying elements that would become irritating after repeated exposure to the message? If more than one message is being tested which is most acceptable.

In-house review questions:

Does this communication convey any secondary, unintended message that might have a negative effect -something that might offend the intelligence, integrity or pride of the intended audience?

Acceptability

- Is there anything in the materials that bother or offend you?
- If yes, what?

6 Self-involvement (field-test only)

Is the message perceived as setting out appropriate options for the target audience? Do they feel the message is for you or others like you? Will all groups - women and men; young and older people relate to the message and find them useful? Are there images of diverse and representative gender roles and responsibilities? If more than one message, which of several alternatives is perceived to be best directed to the target audience

Self-involvement

- Are the people you see in the drawing like you, your friends or neighbours?
- If not – how are they different?
- Does this difference have any impact on your feelings about the validity of the message.

What now?

The pre-test may indicate that the materials will be understood and provide useful, actionable information to the target audience of smallholders. You may find some sections need to be reviewed. At the other extreme you may find that you need to completely rework the material and address structural flaws in the campaign.

Pre-tests that show a strong negative response can be disheartening. However the effort of producing materials is as nothing compared to dissemination – so it is essential materials are as clear as possible.

This guide is designed to help you think about pre-testing materials with smallholder farmers. ASHC is grateful to M M Escalada for allowing us to adopt her work to fit an African agricultural context.