



Use VOICE to make good farmer programming

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Using the VOICE tool to make good farmer programming

Farm broadcasters must listen to farmers – if only because, without them, there would be no audience! As a farm broadcaster, have you ever wondered how to improve your program? Do you broadcast at a time that is suitable for farmers? Do farmers' voices really shine through in your programming?

These are the kinds of questions radio broadcasters ask themselves when it's time to evaluate their programs. Sometimes, it is good to take a step back and carefully analyze a broadcast to figure out what needs to be tweaked.

Farm Radio International has developed a tool to help you evaluate whether your farmer radio program is effective. That tool is called VOICE.

VOICE is an acronym, in which the letters stand for the following:

V: values small-scale farmers, both women and men

O: opportunity to speak and be heard

I: information

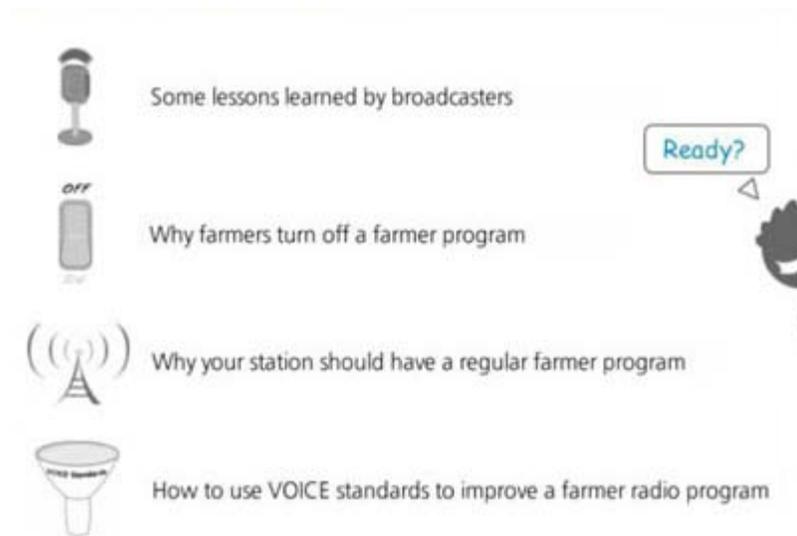
C: consistent and convenient

E: entertaining and memorable



The VOICE tool has been included in Farm Radio International online training courses in the past. But now, FRI is offering a training module on VOICE as a stand-alone, self-taught course on Barza. "Self-taught" means that broadcasters will make their own way through the module without the guidance of facilitators and mentors. It also means that broadcasters can take the time they need to complete the module, and can refer back to it whenever they want.

In the VOICE module, you will find:



The module, called *Using VOICE to make good farmer programming*, is available on Barza at this address: <http://barza.fm/barza-event/use-voice-to-make-good-farmer-programming/>

You may have questions as you work your way through the course. Since Barza is an online community for broadcasters, we have created a peer learning group. Broadcasters can join the VOICE module group at <http://barza.fm/groups/voice-module-1825047206/>, and ask questions, exchange information and tips, and generally help each other out.

We hope that making this self-taught VOICE module available on Barza will help broadcasters improve their craft.

If you have any questions, comments or feedback about the module, please email: nbassily@farmradio.org



Special thanks!

This work was carried out with the aid of a grant from the International Development Research Centre, Canada as well as the support of the Commonwealth of Learning.



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What information do your farmer-listeners need?

Introduction

What is your most important source for finding out what information the farmers in your audience need? The farmers in your audience, of course!

Though other research methods are mentioned in this document, it is highly recommended that you visit with farmer/listeners in their communities. Set up meetings in villages, get transportation and meet with groups of farmers. If women farmers are not able to speak out in the presence of men, then hold a separate meeting with the women.

Some radio stations can spend a lot of time in the field – interacting with farmers, recording their voices, and holding meetings in which farmers can talk about the kind of information they need.

For many reasons, other radio stations find it more difficult to travel to the field. Whatever the situation at your station, the key is to interact with your audience as much as you possibly can. Depending on your resources, on the extent of your previous interaction with your listening communities, and on your familiarity and training in audience research, there are several research activities you can undertake when you visit a listening community. They all involve interacting with farmers – so remember that building relationships is the key ingredient in good participatory programming.

Those stations with few resources or little training in audience research, or relatively little contact with their community, might want to try some of the *Five research activities* listed below.

If your station has had relatively little contact with your listening community, it might be a good idea to start with less structured ways of meeting with people, such as a simple “meeting under the mango tree.” In these less formal settings, you could ask one or a few very broad questions and allow your listeners to speak freely to those questions. For example, you could ask them how your station could better serve them as farmers. You could ask what their most important farming information needs are.

This open-ended approach may allow them to participate more freely in determining the content or setting the agenda for your farm radio program. If you are looking for feedback on farming issues, make your questions about farming as broad as possible, perhaps broadening them to cover livelihoods. (Farmers’ livelihoods include all the ways they make a living)

Those with more resources and training, and regular contact with their listening community are encouraged to try the *three additional research activities* mentioned later in this document. But of course, you are free to try any of the activities described here.

Some of the activities listed below might be new to you. We encourage you to try something you haven't done before. However, it might be a good idea to ask farmers if they are comfortable with you trying something new so you can all learn together. They will likely agree, appreciate that you asked their permission, and be more patient with the process.

The importance of appropriate researcher attitude

Whatever the aim of your meeting with farmers, remember that each time you meet with farmers you are there to learn from them. Don't worry about getting absolutely everything accomplished on your first visit. You are taking steps to build a long-term, two-way relationship with farmers. To establish a good, long-term relationship, a relaxed and respectful manner is necessary. Show humility, respect, patience and interest in what villagers have to say and show. Wander around rather than rushing. By having a relaxed, attentive attitude, and by listening, watching and not interrupting, you will build a better connection with villagers.

By showing respect for the work they do and their ideas, it is more likely that farmers will welcome you back to their communities. It's also important to be honest and transparent from the start. Explain that the purpose of your visit is to meet with farmers and get their input. And that you will use that input to help you design a radio program that will help them with their farming.

Five research activities

Here are five relatively simple ways to interact with your listening communities and find out what kind of farming information they need.

1) Use radio programs and mobile phones to gather information

Radio programs

If you have an existing farmers' program, produce a phone-in show and ask farmers to call and discuss the farming issues that are most important to them.

Voice mail

Set up a voice mail recording system and ask farmers to phone in and name their main farming and food security concerns.

Text-SMS

There are two ways to use SMS. First, you can ask for *feedback* on very specific questions. Program hosts will ask questions, and request that farmers respond to the questions with text messages. You could ask different questions on different days, or set up a "poll" in which listeners respond to a question. For example, you could ask a question to which your listeners respond *yes or no*, OR *always, sometimes, rarely, or never*. Keep a tally of farmers' responses to your "polls" and questions. If you have access to a tool such as FrontlineSMS, you can collect all text messages on a computer. Of course, the usefulness of text messages depends on the availability of mobile phones and the literacy of users. Text polls may not provide a representative sample of the farmers in your community.

Secondly, you can ask broader questions about farming or livelihoods, or simply inform your audience that your station would like listeners to say what farming and food security issues they consider most important. This approach is less targeted. But, especially if you have had

limited interaction with your listener community, it can be an effective way to encourage your farmer-listeners to participate and express their most important needs.

2) Visit local markets

Local markets are a great place to meet with farmers, often from several different communities. You may not be able to arrange group meetings or discussions, but individual farmers who sell goods at the market can give you a good picture of the major strengths and weaknesses of local farmers and the opportunities and challenges they face.

3) Consult farmer organizations

If there are local farmer organizations or co-operatives that hold regular meetings, you might be able to meet with them and gain vital information about important local farming issues.

4) Talk to local agricultural extension services

Depending on the capacity of local extension services, this may be a good way for you to learn about farmer needs. Some extension officers will have a good grasp of what farmers' real needs are, while others will simply list Ministry of Agriculture priorities – which may be quite different from small-scale farmers' priorities. Consider speaking to extension workers in government and in NGOs, farmers' organizations, and private services.

5) Make field visits

With members of your team, visit one or two typical villages in your listening area. Try to choose villages with concerns and farming issues that are common to your broader audience. For field visits, it is critical that you speak the farmers' local language.

Whatever you choose to do in the community, it's important that, before you make your visit, you set up the meeting in accordance with the community's standard procedures. This may, for example, involve meeting with chiefs or other community leaders, or at least receiving approval for your meeting from these authorities. Following these customs carefully will win respect from the community and ease your task.

Here are some ideas for meeting with the community:

- A simple and informal "meeting under the mango tree"
- Annual, three times a year, monthly, or more frequent and regular recordings of discussions in the village
- A "town hall" meeting, *durbar* or chief's meeting (this kind of meeting is known by different names in different countries and cultures)

These meetings could have a broad pre-set agenda. For example, villagers could come ready to talk about their most important farming needs, their most important livelihood concerns, the kind of information they'd most like to hear on the airwaves, what their biggest farming challenges are, or how the radio station can better serve the community. When you contact the community to arrange the meeting, discuss what the aim of the meeting will be.

Social scientists often develop a structured questionnaire to collect information. You are welcome to try this, especially if you are familiar with your community and have some training in this kind of research. See ***Three additional research activities*** below for more specific guidance on methods which use a more structured approach.

Whether you use a structured questionnaire or a broader and less formal approach, it is useful to analyze your conversations in terms of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges that were expressed. A more structured approach often asks specific questions about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and challenges or threats. These questions are designed to obtain information on:

- The **strengths** of farmers that contribute to their agricultural success. For example:
 - their knowledge of soil, seeds and crops
 - their farming skills
 - the markets for their crops
 - the tools they own
 - the labour they have access to (maybe their older children and other relatives)

- The **weaknesses** that prevent farmers from meeting their full potential. For example:
 - lack of access to land, seeds, water and other inputs
 - lack of skills to farm effectively
 - lack of markets for their produce
 - not enough labour at key times of the year
 - poor soil, low-quality seeds, or crops susceptible to disease and pests
 - drought, pest infestations, floods, and unpredictable rainy seasons
 - poor health, injuries, or other situations that prevent them from working

- The **opportunities** that farming women and men have to improve their livelihoods. For example:
 - new crops and markets
 - new ways to boost soil fertility and yields
 - new ways to store crops and protect them

- The **challenges** or threats that farmers face. For example:
 - climate change
 - political unrest
 - a drop in market prices or market demand
 - shortages of inputs such as seeds or fertilizer

You will be able to use the information you receive from field visits to help make improvements to your farmer program.

A farm visit

While in the community, you might want to visit an individual farm and ask the farmer to show you around. It's a good idea to arrange this farm visit before meeting the community. Ask the farmer about the agricultural calendar – what crops he or she grows at different times of year. Ask questions about what you see and about how things used to be, or what the farmer is planning to change in the future.

Three more research activities

For those with more experience and/or training in audience research and more regular contact with listening communities, here are three more structured exercises you can undertake during field visits to help you gather information:

1) Gather a group of farmers for a “focus group discussion”

What is a focus group discussion? It is simply a group of people, guided by a facilitator, talking freely about specific issues. Focus group discussions often ask people to respond to specific questions, though the questions can be very broad or narrower and more specific.

Aim to have at least one focus group with female farmers, one with male farmers, and, if possible, one with young farmers. You might also want to have a meeting with older farmers. Prepare for these discussions by formulating some key questions. After each key question, ask follow-up questions based on how participants respond. Make sure everyone in the group gets to speak. Ask one of your team members to take detailed notes and an audio recording of the discussion, so that you can concentrate on asking good questions and listening carefully to the answers.

Here are some example questions that can help kick-start and guide your discussions. Remember that it’s critical to find out why farmers gave the response they did. But here’s a tip: don’t use the word “why” when facilitating the discussion. It’s your job to *find out* why. Finding out will help you understand their situation.

Question (about strengths): What is working well for you in farming right now? Please describe how it’s going well, or “Please give me a few more details,” or “Please explain.” (These requests for more detail can be used to follow up questions about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or challenges/threats.)

Depending on the response, follow-up questions might include:

- What crop/livestock is bringing you the most success?
- What are you especially good at as a farmer?
- What supplies and equipment do you have to help you with your farming?
- Who is available to help you with your farm labour?

Question (about weaknesses): What is not currently working for you in farming? Please explain.

Follow-up questions might include:

- What crops/livestock are causing you problems? How?
- What inputs are hard to find?
- Is there any information or knowledge you are lacking?

Question (about opportunities): Are there things that might happen in the future that could help you with farming? Please explain.

Follow-up questions might include:

- Are there any new government services/subsidies/policies that could help you?
- Are there any new NGO projects that could help you?
- Are there any new marketing opportunities that could help you?

Question (about challenges or threats): Is there anything that might happen in the future that could harm your work as a farmer?

Depending on the response, follow-up questions might include:

- Are you concerned about future loss of land?
- Are you concerned about changing weather?

It's also important to find out how farmers interact with the *value chain* for the crops they sell. A "value chain" in agriculture is defined as the people and activities that bring a basic agricultural product like maize or vegetables or cotton from production in the field to the consumer, through stages such as processing, packaging, and distribution.

Question (about value chain): Ask farmers if they sell some or all of their crops.

Follow-up questions might include:

- Where do they sell them? To whom?
- Are they part of a farmers' co-operative?
- Are they satisfied with the prices they receive?
- Do they process any of their crops on the farm? Through the co-operative?
- Do they or their co-operative sell processed products? To a retailer? To a manufacturer?
- How about inputs? Where do they purchase inputs? Are they satisfied with the prices they pay?
- Are they satisfied with their interactions with the value chain? Do they feel they are being treated fairly?

For further guidance on conducting a focus group, see the document "How to conduct a focus group".

2) A transect walk

A transect walk is simply a conversation between you and several local farmers which happens as you walk from one side of the community to the other. Ask villagers to choose a route with the most diversity in terms of landscape and farming. Your job is to observe, listen, and ask questions about what you see and the area you are passing through.

Ask farmers to point out anything of interest, including but not limited to:

- the crops they grow or livestock they raise;
- landscape features that help them or make farming more challenging (for example, hillsides could increase soil erosion, and a river could be used for irrigation); and
- communal areas and protected areas.

Make sure you ask lots of questions. For example, you might ask:

- if men or women grow a specific crop,
- who owns the land,
- which family members and community members make farming decisions,
- who controls resources (men or women; young, old or middle-aged; which cultural or ethnic group; poorer or better-off), and
- how crops are rotated.

Have someone with you to take notes on what is observed and what is being discussed.

3) A "ranking" exercise

Ask a group of 8-10 farmers to help generate a list of the types of information that would help them as farmers. The list might include:

- Market prices for local and regional markets
- Local weather forecasts
- Information about seeds
- Information about improving soil fertility
- Information about processing and storing harvested crops
- Information about market preferences

Try to group the list into 4-6 types of information. Then ask the group to work together to rank the list from most important to least important. With the farmers, choose physical objects to represent the different types of information. Then give the farmers 20 stones and ask them to decide as a group which is the most important and which is the least important type of information. They can do this by putting more stones next to the type of information they consider most important and fewer stones near the other types.

Give the group plenty of time to make its decision. The farmers may well move stones several times from one type of information to another before they arrive at a final result. Listen carefully, and make notes of the discussion that the farmers have while they are deciding which type of information is most important. By listening, you will learn why one type of information is more important than another.

The table below is one example of how farmers might rank four different types of information.

Type of information	Item farmers selected to represent the type of information	Number of stones
Prices at the local market	coin	8
Information about improving soil	piece of metal	5
Information about seeds	stick	4
Local weather forecasts	bucket	3

Conclusion

Remember that audience research is an ongoing process. Your audience will change over time, as will your audience's need for certain types of information. So it's vital to establish a respectful, relaxed rapport. You are not in the community solely to extract information. Remember that your job is to serve your listening community!

Acknowledgements

Contributed by: Vijay Cuddeford, Managing editor, Farm Radio International, based on documents by Doug Ward, Chairman, Farm Radio International, Blythe McKay, Manager, Resources for Broadcasters, Farm Radio International, and David Mowbray, Manager, Training and Standards, Farm Radio International.

Reviewed by: Doug Ward, Chairman, Farm Radio International

Further information

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