

Alberta Agriculture saves money with plain language forms project by Christine Mowat

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Thanks to Susan Barylo and her plain language committee, the Alberta government now has clear evidence that plain language forms have already saved money for Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD). Few plain language project co-ordinators bother to measure before and after changes. Barylo's results are a welcome addition to plain language research.

In July 1993, AAFRD hired Barylo as the plain language forms coordinator. To date, of the 646 forms, 92 forms have been revised in plain language. Over a million (1,034,530) of the 92 forms are used each year. The longest revision is a 35-page scholarship application booklet; most, however, are one to two pages.

First steps involved choosing cross-department representation and narrowing to an initial 24 forms. The process varied from one-on-one rewriting to gathering a team of people who used the form.

Beware of resistance to plain language changes

Barylo says newcomers to a plain language process react in predictable ways: some resist the policy changes that clarifying language often leads to; some are fearful of changes to their job context, especially with the question, "Is this form needed?" People find it difficult to rethink familiar forms and the process. And some teams do not agree to testing.

Another problem is that some don't like the team approach, and others procrastinate or stall. Initially, certain team members allow only small changes, then months later, when they see the value of the changes, are ready for more. Barylo claims that plain language by edict doesn't work, and that the process must be a gradual, seductive one. News of project successes throughout the department helps add credibility.

How do you start a plain language process?

The plain language writer may begin by sitting down with the user, administrator or "owner" of the form and assuming the "play-dumb" approach. She may ask: What does this mean? What kinds of questions do you get on the form? Where and how is the form used? What do you do with the information?

Barylo outlines the whole process before a project begins, and suggests obtaining data on the *before* form before changing it. For example, her collection of data on the original **Operating Grant Application - Class B Agricultural Societies** made possible this comparison: staff processing time on a grant application was reduced from 20 minutes on the original to 3 minutes on the redesigned form. On the original of a *Grant Report Form*, the department had only had a 25% return rate. With the new plain language form, the return rate doubled. An *Annual Report of Agricultural Societies* form, originally 8 pages, is now reduced to 1 fold-over page. Mailing costs are one-third less.

Before and *after* data on using a Tree Nursery Order Form is especially persuasive:

Tree Nursery Order Form 1993 Original Form 1994 Plain Language Form

Number of applications 2900 3540

Error rates 40% 20%

Staff time to correct errors 10-minute telephone calls per form (almost 27 work days)

5-minute telephone calls to correct (8.5 work days)

Almost 20 work days were saved though there were 22% more applications.

Design is crucial to plain language forms

A dramatic example of a visually enhanced form is the new Elk and Deer Registration Certificate. Formerly the Game Production Animal Registration Certificate, the original was a crowded typed page with segments for data on the animal and its owner and another for applying to transfer ownership. The old form had gaps in the required information for users and confusing requests for information. For example, instead of asking for the genetic status, the new form asks for the species of animal.

On one side of the new form is the registration certificate designed as a certificate and enhanced with lightly monogrammed deer and elk heads. Clear instructions for using both sides of the form, the second a notice to change registration, and a newly designed tear-off notice to update inventory, make the form efficient and multi-functional. The form breathes and is visually welcoming.

Cost savings tell the story

Barylo describes her research as "anecdotal" though she has used surveys, focus groups and participant descriptions. She reports that not all the groups who participated in the forms improvement projects have as yet measured efficiency improvements between the old and new forms.

In AAFRD, the cost savings from the plain language forms project are real. With 400 administrative support staff (average salary of \$24,000), 200 managers (average \$60,000), and 700 professional staff (average \$40,000), Barylo uses as a base an average AAFRD-person-year valued at \$38,154. With 1,034,530 forms processed a year, and savings in staff time at least 10 minutes per form, she calculates the annual savings to the government is an astounding \$3,472,014. Barylo further qualifies that figure. "This is average," she says. "The real savings based on a detailed evaluation may be significantly higher." She refers to a detailed analysis of six redesigned forms from the Rural Development Division. Total staff time saved on 6 forms was 62.1 work days or a total of \$9076.83. Coincidentally, the public's time saved on these forms was 235 days!

In my view, AAFRD's plain language initiative is beginning to produce some of the most significant measurements on plain language this province has seen. The department stands as a model to others in government and business.

'Putting their money where their mouth is' has a new plain language meaning now.

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