



IMARK

Module
Investing in Information for Development

Information Dissemination

Lesson 2: Products and Performance

Learner Notes



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Table of contents

Learning objectives	1
Introduction.....	1
Products and services	2
Products and services: content	2
Products and services: media and channels	3
Products and services: quality	4
Products and services: partners	5
Organizational capacity and performance	6
Organizational capacity and performance: revenues	9
Conclusions	10
Summary.....	11

This lesson is part of the IMARK Module on “Investing in Information for Development”. The Module contains six units. The unit on “Information Dissemination” comprises three lessons:

Lesson 1: Audiences and Markets

Lesson 2: Products and Performance

Lesson 3: New Digital Opportunities

This course is available in self-paced e-learning format on CD-ROM and the Internet

(www.imarkgroup.org).

Learning objectives

At the end of this lesson, you will be able to:

- Be aware of the importance of gaining a comprehensive insight into your current products and services;
- identify some criteria to analyse the capacity of your organization to disseminate information effectively and efficiently.

Introduction

Our focus up to this point has been on the **external** aspects of our dissemination plan: we have analysed audience(s), their needs and the media to reach them.

Now we will look at **internal** considerations:

- the **products and services** that we have in our current portfolio; and
- the **resources and management procedures** that we have in place to create and disseminate them.

The key questions are:

1. Which products and services should we continue to offer? Which are candidates for elimination? Are there new ones that we might add?
2. Does our organization have the personnel, infrastructure and budget to generate and disseminate new types of information products and services?
3. Does it have the management flexibility to adapt its structures and procedures to a new dissemination environment?

Products and services

Let's start with the consideration of current products and services. Our analysis will centre on four themes:

- **Content.** What subjects does our organization specialize in?
- **Media.** What media does it use to disseminate information on these subjects?

Are both content and media suitable for our audience(s)?

- **Quality.** Does our organization disseminate products and services that satisfy our audiences' needs?
- **Partners.** Does it try to disseminate everything itself, or does it collaborate with other organizations?

Products and services: content

The first stage of the analysis should focus on **content**.

What type of content does your organization include in its products and services?

The content can be categorized.

This can be done in several ways, for instance as:

- activities;
- variables; or in
- formats.

We also need to define how the content matches the needs of your audience(s).

Categories of agricultural information	Description
Activity	Production Processing/Storage Marketing
Variables	Resources (land, seeds, livestock) Technologies (machines, chemicals) Performance
Format	Text Data Images (photos, maps) Audio/Video

Products and services: media and channels

The second stage of the analysis should focus on **media**.

How are our information products and services disseminated to audiences? In 1964, Marshall McLuhan wrote that the “medium is the message”, meaning that content is fundamentally shaped by the way in which it is presented and disseminated.

No matter how high the quality of our content, if inappropriate media are used the audience will have difficulty accessing or using it. Therefore, the medium and the packaging should be analysed, and then related to:

- (a) the **nature** of the **audience(s)**; and
- (b) the **nature** of the **content**.

Once we determine that the media used are appropriate to our audience, we can continue the analysis by considering the **channels** used.

Try to answer the questions below on the basis of what you know about the products and services in your own organization. The answers to these questions, combined with the analysis of your audiences' needs and the existing market, will help you identify the products and services that need improvement, or the new ones that need to be introduced.

1. What dissemination channels are used?

What channels have you established to disseminate the information for internal and external audiences? (e.g. normal mail, website, email, radio).

This issue is paramount, since it affects costs, coverage and effectiveness. Try to see whether these channels are appropriate, and if not, how to improve the channels in order to reach your existing and potential audiences more effectively.

2. How often do you disseminate the information products or services?

Is it a one-time response to a request such as for a Question & Answer service (QAS)? Or is it an on-going regular service such as a periodical, a Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) service, or a series of radio programmes?

3. Are the products and services reactive or proactive?

Reactive – Do you take a more passive approach, which means responding to a request? (e.g. Question & Answer service (QAS))

Proactive – Do you take a more active approach, which means anticipating demand? (e.g. a reference book/CD)

4. How long does the information product/service take to reach the audience?

Do you ensure that the information is available when the audience needs it (timeliness), or when it is due (in case of a subscription or regular service)?

5. In what condition do the products/ services reach the audience?

They may be damaged during distribution (e.g. in the post). This is especially critical for priced publications.

Products and services: quality

Whether our organization creates all its content itself, or whether it has partners, a major issue for all of its products and services is **quality**. ISO 8402 is an international standard which defines quality as “the totality of features and characteristics of a product or service that bear on its ability to satisfy stated or implied needs”.

High quality is important for all three of the themes that we are considering:

1. **Content**. Low-quality output will not meet audience(s) needs.
2. **Media**. Some types of media (e.g. CD-Rom) should only be used if commonly accepted data standards are adhered to.

3. **Partners.** Current collaborators will turn to alternative suppliers and distributors if outputs are of questionable quality.

Here are the main features/characteristics of information content quality. Many of them are inter-related:

- **Validity** – correctness/accuracy of the information content.
- **Reliability** – consistency and regular dissemination of the information content.
- **Currency** – the availability of information relating to recent time periods, which is critical if decisions are to be based on this content. This is more important in situations where content is changing, and the regularity of presentation/dissemination should take into account the rate of change of the information.
- **Punctuality** – the speed of processing and disseminating information (affects currency).
- **Accessibility** – the form(s) and method(s) used to disseminate information: affordability, language, technology/medium and presentation style.
- **Coherence** – the ability of the information to be combined with other information from different sources. Coherence mechanisms include the use of indexes or metadata to tag/mark information objects, so that relevant information can be easily identified, merged or compared.

Products and services: partners

The fourth stage of the analysis should focus on **partners**.

Many organizations try to create, package and disseminate their content themselves. But new information technologies are encouraging collaboration.

Here are some questions to help you decide where and when collaboration would be desirable:

1. Which parts of the creation, packaging, and dissemination chain can our organization do best?
2. Which parts of the chain does our organization perform weakly in?
3. Which organizations could be brought in as collaborators to handle the weakest aspects?

Organizational capacity and performance

Our analysis will now move on to issues of **organizational capacity** and **performance**.

These are the areas to consider:

1. STAFF

Does our organization have personnel with the skills required to generate and disseminate our information products and services efficiently?

2. TECHNOLOGY

Does our organization have, or will it have, adequate infrastructure, particularly in information technology, to generate and disseminate our information products and services efficiently?

3. MANAGEMENT

Does our organization have the flexibility to adapt organizational structures and procedures to a new dissemination environment?

4. COSTS

Does our organization have sufficient financial resources?

1. Let's start with the consideration of **Staff**.

What is the staff situation in our organization?

- Do your people have the skills required to create and disseminate new digital materials? What investments will you need to make?
- Will training of existing staff be sufficient?
- Will you need to think about recruitment of some new staff?
- Will you bring in some external consultants?

If you think that you do need new staff, and if your budget is low, what about the possibility of cooperating with other organizations on some of your dissemination tasks?

2. The next area to consider is **Technology**.

How much should your organization invest in Information Technology to support information dissemination?

Here are two general principles regarding such investments:

- **A wide user base.**

Invest in access to Information Technology for as many staff as possible involved in dissemination. Allow direct involvement of all internal stakeholders.

- **Economies of scale.**

Invest in Information Technology that will be compatible with other organizations, whether partners or customers.

3. The third issue to consider is **Management**.

What is the management structure of the organization?

Some revisions to the existing organizational structure might be necessary, because of new positions, new functions, new technologies, new products and services, new media and new audiences.

For example, many organizations have created the position of "**Chief Information Officer**". Some have co-located their publications operations in the library. Others have chosen to "outsource" many dissemination functions to partner organizations. There are no "right" or "wrong" structures, but whatever you decide, the key point is that you and your management team will have to remain flexible.

4. The last issue we will consider is **Costs**.

How much money does your organization currently spend on information dissemination?

Adequate budgetary planning for the production and dissemination of information is important. Therefore, it is paramount to know in advance both the costs of each of your activities, and the budget available. (As an example, imagine the case of a Director-General of an organization, who decides to publish an extra edition of the statistics bulletin, only to find out from his Finance Director that there is no budget allocation to cover the costs of the edition.)

The organization's annual budget has to include provision for the production and dissemination of its information products and services. Organizations delivering commercial products and services will probably already be aware of the complete costs of sales. But what if this is not the case? What if the organization provides services for free? Are there effective ways to assess costs and budgets?

Each organization has different ways to proceed. However, usually there are some common costs regarding **human resources, equipment, material** and **activities**.

Based on these main elements, it is possible to build a table which may help systematically define costs. Here is an example:

Costs	Type of product/service			
	Annual Report	Website	Market Information Bulletin	Monthly Farmers' Magazine
Human resources 1. Staff time 2. Training				
Equipment 3. Software 4. Hardware 5. Maintenance 6. Equipment (including depreciation)				
Material 7. Production materials 8. Stationery				
Activities 9. Communication 10. Dissemination 11. Promotion & Advertising 12. Consultancy				
Other				

Organizational capacity and performance: revenues

Information dissemination requires investment, and one way to recover some of these costs is to **charge** for selected products and services.

Many public organizations actually have a tradition of charging. They have sold books and levied fees for subscriptions to journals. On the other hand, it is harder to charge for products and services destined for audiences less able to pay (e.g. farmers).

Whatever option our organization chooses, it may be useful to develop a **business plan** for each product or service. Here are a few questions to consider:

- **Policy**

Does your organization provide free products and services, or does it have some flexibility to price and sell its outputs?

- **Practice**

If you can charge, how do you do so? Do the prices that you charge meet your clients' general ideas of affordability? In general, do you think that your prices are too low or too high?

- **Internal costs**

How much do you pay for packaging, storage, shipping and (if applicable) billing? What proportion of the costs of production do you expect to recover from sales revenues?

- **Marketing costs**

How do you market your products and services (e.g. via distribution of free copies, publication of promotional leaflets, conference exhibitions via the Internet)? How much do you spend on marketing?

Conclusions

With the evaluation of our organization's current costs, our brief analysis has come to an end. Now we should have a clear picture of both the external and internal environment: the data gathered will be paramount for the design of our information dissemination plan.

Summary

To analyse the internal aspects of our dissemination plan, we should particularly look at:

- products and services that we have in our current portfolio; and
- the resources and management procedures that we have in place to create and disseminate them.

We should analyse issues such as Content, Media and Partners, keeping in mind that our audience(s) needs determine both the content and the media used (and not vice-versa).

We should also assess the quality of the products and services of our organization, and see how are they disseminated or shared with the users.

Also, we should analyse our organization's organizational capacity and performance.

Finally, we should consider how much money our organization spends for dissemination, and see whether it is possible to recover some of these costs through revenues.