

Training Curriculum for Women Landowner Ambassadors



GOAL

To help women landowners become effective in talking to the media, peers, and to people with little experience with farming about conservation practices such as soil health.

OBJECTIVES

- Provide coaching for refining personal stories into short messages that work in media and other situations.
- Develop a support network between ambassadors.
- Offer content specific to the sustainability issue at hand – e.g. soil health – and how landowners can impact the issue through their interactions with others and their operators.
- Provide time for preparing and practicing in front of each other and with using relevant technology including short video interviews, short PPTs, and virtual presentation platforms, among others.

OVERVIEW

This curriculum was developed with funding from NCR-SARE (North Central Region Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) during 2019-2021, a time that spanned the initial year of the pandemic. The first group of ambassadors met and received training during February 2020 and all subsequent communication and support as well as the majority of their presentations occurred through virtual platforms.

This curriculum is described as mainly an in-person training conducted over two half days with an overnight stay at an appropriate location. There are adaptations offered throughout if the training is offered through a virtual platform and presentations are virtual. As anyone who has delivered outreach during the pandemic can attest, in-person and virtual events require two separate and thorough plans and preparation.

We focused on cover crops and soil health for our project, but any conservation topic or issue would benefit by including non-operating landowners telling their stories. Elevating landowner responsibilities to use their land for good soil health and water quality is important to make them visible and to demonstrate pathways others can take to do the same.

The women who became ambassadors had land and a legitimate story to share about helping their farmers transition to using cover crops. Their farming practices were typical of those used on the landscape around them but for the addition of cover crops and no-till practices. Each had some prior experience with telling their stories and wanted to push themselves to learn new skills in working with media or refining their stories for presentations.

The order of the elements in the curriculum can be adapted. Putting the video practice towards the end allows all other skills to build, but content development can go ahead or behind story practice, for example.

AGENDA

Introductions We recommend having participants work in pairs, interview each other and then introduce each other to the whole group. Encourage everyone to take notes of what they found compelling or memorable about the stories of each person. Don't shorten this time period or hurry it. When working with women, the relationships are the most important part. Let this develop organically and give them time to comment. We used 60 minutes for six ambassadors and three staff/presenters for this section.

Content We focused on cover crop basics, beginner level knowledge. The question we formed our content from was this: What consistent information do all ambassadors need to know so they can each, with consistency, teach the first steps in the transition to using cover crops? Because it was appropriate to our landscape we included no-till because it pairs with cover crop use and for some parts of Iowa it's a practice that is still difficult to get adopted. Everyone has their own personal experience but we wanted everyone to have a consistent message emphasizing what landowners can do, with less emphasis, for example, on details such as how many pounds per acre or how to calibrate a drill. We used an hour and a half for this section but had estimated 45 minutes. Expect lively discussion during this section.

Landowner options We also focused on making sure each of us had additional stories of how women have approached helping their farmers make the transition, including the following: what can women do to support their farmers in starting on the process of learning how to manage those transitions; what leasing arrangements help the process; how to handle costs for cover crops; and a bit on farmers perspectives on cover crops. We settled on the best options at that time and created two PowerPoint slides that were shared with all ambassadors, primarily to give them the content they could insert into their own presentations if they wanted. We used about a half hour because it naturally followed the Content discussion, noted above, about cover crops. We had estimated an hour for this section.

Developing their stories Reserve time for participants to work alone and then together. Instruct them fitting elements together for what a short presentation might include, how to tell it succinctly, and then practice with this. Try for three different stories – quick hit things that come automatically to mind so they always have them to fall back on. Developing stories can take many paths. Consider elements of their stories that involve turning points when decisions were made, possibly conflict or something that needs to change, or being underdogs because of winter or history or future generations. We allowed two hours for this section and could have used more time to practice.

Giving a PowerPoint presentation Show some dos and don'ts, how to storyboard to put a presentation together, include ideas of where to come up with pictures or using videos and consider allowing some practice time with this component. Discuss not handing out materials or slide handouts that may lead your audience to stop paying attention to the speaker. Coach the participants for developing about 15 minutes for most presentation settings. Briefly showing what makes good

photos, as well as other means of illustrating your story options can be valuable. There is a lot of professional advice available on current presentation formats that work for every presentation software from Google Slides to Prezi, etc. We allowed and used 30 minutes for this section.

Giving a talk Some ambassadors may be asked to serve on a panel at an in person, or virtual, conference. If the event is in person, offer tips on standing and delivery (e.g., not rocking from foot to foot, not standing with feet together but take up space and use it, etc.). The tips for preparing for an on-camera media interview are relevant here. A few of these include the following:

- If virtually presenting on a panel or other, offer tips on positioning their webcam for a more flattering angle and lighting.
- Don't have the camera below eye level; no backlighting; practice with glasses if they must be used, including adjusting the lighting so there is less glare off the glasses, if possible.
- Try to gaze into the camera instead of down at notes on the desk.

We allocated and used 30 minutes for this training section because we allowed for time for practice and demonstration, and it was a good follow to the session on Giving a PowerPoint presentation.

Being interviewed This is when being ready with stories really pays off! Tips to share with trainees:

- Be aware that to the extent possible try to meet their needs for timely responses. Whether print, radio, or TV, they are always a deadline for the next news cycle. If you're not prepared to respond when they call, ask if you can call back in 10 minutes and then do it. They'll appreciate not being blown off and understand if you need a few moments to compose yourself or finish a project. More often you'll have some lead time for their story and again they'll appreciate your prompt replies to any communication.
- Consider asking how you can help them, which sets up a friendly situation and is less likely to get the "gotcha" question, though you may still get these types of questions. Try to anticipate what these types of questions might be. For example, one question you may get is, "some farmers say cover crops don't work, what do you say?". This question could be hard to answer if you're not prepared with a calm response.
- What to wear for on camera interviews (including virtual presentations)
 - Avoid reflective silk materials
 - Solid colors are best, avoid herringbone or small checks or spots
 - Avoid extreme color contrasts, white and black
 - Check collars are flat, flies zipped, blouses buttoned
 - Avoid other distractions like dangly earrings, pens in pockets

We took about 45 minutes for this section.

Being on camera Everyone can take a turn to practice answering a couple basic questions. Set this up with a tripod and cell phone to shoot video or a camcorder and a microphone which can help increase the realistic factor. You can expect participants to be nervous. Everyone learns a lot and almost universally points to this as the most important thing they did. Having a person with TV or radio interviewing experience speak to the group can up the ante as well and they can also be so reassuring. Use their credibility to help you with this part. Some basic tips are below but defer to your media trained experts to include the most helpful advice. It is helpful if you can share the large

video files with participants afterwards if you shoot all on one camera. But a helpful alternative is to shoot the video on their personal phones, and they can review and learn without sharing more widely. This can go as long or short as time permits. Some tips to give trainees:

- If your interview is being recorded, you can say, “let me start over” if you get tangled up in talking. “I’d like to word that better.”
- You can ask for how long a sound bite or story the interviewer is looking for.
- Don’t be afraid to pause and use your hands for natural gestures you would make.
- Don’t use jargon, fake answer or lie.
- Flag your ending with key points, such as, “The bottom line is...”, “The most important thing is...”, “We have to remember that...”.

MATERIALS AND SUPPLIES

We created space for evening activities that were not presentation or content driven. As a group we tended to visit about what we had in common related to farming. We had art materials available and invited the women to bring any projects they were working on. Most of us were so tired we didn’t linger long in the evening and many made calls to family members before coming back to the fireplace and socializing further. Because developing the camaraderie between ambassadors was part of our goals and we know that when working groups include an overnight during the agenda, there are synergisms that happen that are greater than we would otherwise achieve. We had women from different parts of the state participate. We allowed in the agenda for a half day travel each way so that everyone could drive home during daylight hours.

Optional items

- Projector and a screen or blank wall for projecting PowerPoints, and a laptop that can connect.
- Laptops (we encouraged trainees to each bring their own), a collection of their own photos of their farms and cover crop photos that could be shared if needed. PowerPoint software is common, so we did not need to teach them how to use it or provide it.
- Flip chart, markers, easel, sticky notes or content posters.
- Electronic files for logos and relevant language to give attribution to sponsors and funders.

A note on using this curriculum: WFAN developed these materials to be shared as open-source guides. Materials were developed and implemented with support of NC SARE, and WFAN intends to continue to expand, enhance and evaluate them. However, we do not want to hold them back as proprietary when we know the need for this education is great and far reaching.

For more tips and tools for storytelling, refer to our storytelling resource guide:
www.wfan.org/storytelling.