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CENTRAL AMERICA INFORMATION CENTER ASSESSMENT

Assignment Number: ST-169

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UNDER THE AUSPICES OF:

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JULIE E. STEWART, PMA PROEXAG - TRIP REPORT

I. DATES AND DESTINATIONS. June 3 and 4, 1993. To Belize, C.A.: Belize City and San Jose (San Pedro, Ambergris Key).

II. PURPOSE OF TRAVEL. Visit information center at Belize Export & Investment Promotion Unit (BEIPU) to review materials, objectives, cataloging and classification systems, give general management advice, advise on information dissemination, format (including CD-ROM), and information interchange. Attend Agritrade meeting to advise how PMA's information center database can provide information to assist with exposition marketing.

III. PERSONS CONTACTED.

PROEXAG: Bruce Brower
BEIPU: Santiago Gomez, Bibi Gaznebbi, Martha Marin-Guerra
Agritrade meeting: Representatives from associations of Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Belize, Panama and El Salvador.

IV. ACCOMPLISHMENTS.

A. BEIPU. Nancy Tucker, Connie Akin and I initially met with Santiago Gomez, Bibi Gaznebbi and Martha Marin-Guerra for introductions, an explanation of our purpose for visiting Belize, and a brief tour of the new farmers' market. We then proceeded to the BEIPU office.

At the BEIPU office, Bibi Gaznebbi demonstrated and explained how their information center is set up and how it works. Their center consists of two key areas: a hard cover library section and a computerized section, using a PROEXAG database set up by Bruce Brower, and connected by modem for regular updates.

The library section, using a standard manual card catalog system, was organized and initially cataloged by an outside specialist; it is now maintained by Bibi Gaznebbi. The database, used primarily to retrieve current information on shipping and prices, is updated by PROEXAG staff in Guatemala, with these updates being transferred by modem to BEIPU.

The BEIPU information center is available free of charge to members, who number about 550, including most of the major businesses in Belize. The procedure for requesting information is to first contact Bibi Gaznebbi, who does preliminary research, including locating the appropriate documentation; the member then comes into the information center to finish his research.

A primary goal of the BEIPU information center is to commercialize its service and to recoup costs. In preparation for this discussion, I had prepared a package of information on PMA's information center, including a history and current budget, sample brochure, subject list and industry fact sheets which information center staff compile and update.

Because information dissemination is such a time and labor intensive task, I advised that partial recovery of costs is the most realistic goal. At PMA, our information center is perceived as a key member service; hence, fees to our members are minimal (only for reproductions from microfilm). However, for nonmembers, who comprise about 20% of our customers, we charge the "going" hourly rate for research and reproduction fees, which helps recoup some costs. This also differentiates between the service which members and nonmembers receive, and gives additional value to our service.

I advised that promotion should be done in the most cost-effective way, preferably through mediums which are already available. At PMA, we primarily promote our service through our association's various newsletters and through press releases which are then picked up by the trade press. Our brochure is not fancy or expensive: it basically explains our service, subject categories and fees. This is supplemented by a subject list which outlines the categories we cover.

In closing, we discussed and agreed to pursue a reciprocal information-sharing arrangement. As each organization's information center is more proficient in its own area, an arrangement such as this would benefit both organizations and hence the members of both.

B. Agritrade meeting. As this meeting, I was primarily an observer. As one of the few attendees not fluent in Spanish, I was most gratified by the graciousness of the others, who either spoke in English or translated their comments into English for my benefit. At the conclusion of the meeting, I offered the services of the Information Center to the other attendees, specifically our substantial database holdings on "exposition marketing."

JULIE E. STEWART, PMA PROEXAG - TRIP REPORT

I. DATES AND DESTINATIONS. June 7 and 8, 1993. To San Jose, Costa Rica, C.A.

II. PURPOSE OF TRAVEL. Visit information centers at CINDE (Coalicion Costarricense de Iniciativas de Desarrollo), CADEXCO (Camara de Exportadores de Costa Rica) and CNAA (Camara Nacional de Agricultura y Agroindustria) to review materials, objectives, cataloging and classification systems, customer base, costs, give general management advice, advise on information dissemination, format (including CD-ROM), and information interchange.

III. PERSONS CONTACTED.

PROEXAG: William Barbee
CINDE: Elizabeth Aguilar, Militza Guido
CADEXCO: Doris Osterlof, Gabriela Sanchez
CNAA: Gerardina Gonzalez, Alejandro Delgado, Esther Pelecano

IV. ACCOMPLISHMENTS. I met with the information center and other key staff of three Costa Rican associations. In preparation for each meeting, I had compiled a package of information on PMA's information center, including a history and current budget, sample brochure, subject list and industry fact sheets which information center staff compile and update. This information was designed as both background information and to emphasize key points for budgeting suggestions, specifically concerning costs and sales.

A. CINDE. I met with Elizabeth Aguilar and Militza Guido for most of the day on June 7. The morning was spent with a demonstration and explanation of CINDE's information center service. During the afternoon I offered my advice and suggestions.

Their center, which has been in operation for several years, consists of two key areas: 1) a hard cover library section and 2) a computerized section, using a database set up by UNESCO (Micro CDS/ISIS).

The library section uses a simple and effective manual card catalog system set up by Elizabeth; it is organized and quite comprehensive, with both Costa Rican and international publications. The database is separated into three separate areas: subjects, subscriptions and organizations. The search capabilities are versatile: documents can be retrieved by subject, title, or author.

The information center supports both CINDE staff and association members. Set fees are charged, in an effort to recoup costs. As in many organizations, there is an ongoing challenge to provide a first-rate service with a minimal budget, particularly in an organization undergoing reorganization as CINDE. It is also a challenge to justify the costs of maintaining and

disseminating information which is, by its nature, a time and labor intensive process. Staff needs to emphasize the value of the information center, both internally and externally, whenever possible.

As with each organization I visited, I advised that partial recovery of costs is the most -- the only-- realistic goal. At PMA, our information center is perceived as a key member service; hence, fees to our members are minimal (only for reproductions from microfilm). However, for nonmembers, who comprise about 20% of our customers, we charge the "going" hourly rate for research and reproduction fees, which helps recoup some costs. This also differentiates between the service which members and nonmembers receive, and gives additional value to our service.

B. CADEXCO. During the morning of June 8, I met with Gabriela Sanchez who showed me their information center and explained their service and challenges. I also met briefly with Doris Osterlof.

CADEXCO's information center became a priority about 18 months ago, so it is still in an early stage of development. In fact, construction of the final information center facility is still in progress. In spite of this, the organization of their materials is impressive.

As with other organizations, information is organized both manually and by computer. During the time of my visit, their computer program was being fine-tuned, to be delivered the following week. Hence, I didn't have the opportunity to see this demonstrated. However, during our discussion, it became evident that when this database was installed, there would be an enormous amount of information to be entered. I felt that this could not be accomplished by Gabriela alone, especially when she still would need to respond to information requests. I suggested that she hire a "contract" data entry person, for a specific amount of time, perhaps six months, to reduce this backlog.

Again, cost was a topic of discussion. Because CADEXCO does not charge a fee for its information center, many students use its service. The breakdown of customers is as follows: 60% members, 25% students and 15% other organizations or companies.

C. CNAA. During the afternoon of June 8, I met with Gerardina Gonzales, Alejandro Delgado and Esther Pelecano. Because Alejandro does not speak English, and I do not speak Spanish, Gerardina graciously interpreted for us.

Alejandro was hired four months ago to manage CNAA's information center...it is in its infancy. Since 1986, when she started at CNAA, Gerardina has been concentrating on different key areas within the organization. Now is the time for the information center, which she sees as a key member service. This is how PMA views its information center. It is a key factor in PMA's success and membership value.

As they are just beginning, I stressed that a comprehensive information center is not an overnight task. It took about a year for PMA's information center to get up and running. We discussed the database program which they will be using -- the PROEXAG database developed by Bruce Brower, as well as budgeting, specifically costs, sales and priorities. I explained how PMA promotes our service in the most cost-effective way possible, through existing mediums -- PMA's various newsletters and through press releases which are then picked up by the trade press.

Gerardina was most interested, however, in how PMA's information center is managed, which is a team effort, from microfilming to answering requests. Each person is a key member of our team and a significant amount of my time as manager is spent ensuring that this message is conveyed; I believe this is time well spent. A part of this is recognizing that each person is a specialist in what he/she does, more so than I am. I rely on these specialists to give suggestions/advice at our regular weekly meetings or at any other time.

D. Summary. Each information center was at a different stage of development. There was duplication of publications and materials between CINDE and CADEXCO. As the CNAA information center grows, it is likely there will be duplication here as well. To more efficiently use resources, it would be good if the three organizations could agree to specialize in a particular area of information management, or join together to sponsor an information center. I realize this would not be easy, due to the competitive nature of these organization, but it would be the best way to serve their members.

At each association, we discussed and agreed to pursue reciprocal information-sharing agreements, which will benefit all involved. I will follow up on these upon my return to the U.S. with specific items which we discussed at each meeting.