

# Information Technology for the Masses: Can It Be TV?

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*Globo Rural and Pequenas Empresas e Grandes Negócios are two of Brazil's televised commercial programs that are part of Rede Globo media enterprise's regular offerings. Their goal is to increase the productivity of the country's farmers and microentrepreneurs through televised informal training. Typically the programs include interviews with workers and experts and innovations or solutions to common real-life problems that the viewers can relate to. Surveys suggest that over one 4.5 million TV sets are tuned into Globo Rural and that Pequenas Empresas e Grandes Negócios, a much younger program, has approximately 2 million viewers.*

## **The Landscape**

Both programs are part of the regular offerings of the Rede Globo, a Brazilian media enterprise that is rated as the world's fourth largest TV network. Both are completely commercial programs, run for profit by an entirely private conglomerate. In other words, while this article will try to suggest that they are socially useful, they are entirely paid for by advertising, like any other program run in commercial TV.

Brazil is a highly diverse country, classified as middle income but offering extreme inequality among its 160 million inhabitants. Yet it has a single language and a relatively homogeneous culture, so the same programs can be transmitted and understood throughout the territory.

The poor and the rich Brazilians have something in common: close to 90 percent of the population has access to TV sets. This market, covering over 100 million spectators, has generated a major TV industry, making Brazil one of the top exporters of soap operas.

If there are TV sets, millions glued to them and a sophisticated production capability, then it makes much sense to use this combination to benefit education and training. Much sense indeed, since Brazil has been chronically short of quality education and training—and extension services, in the case of agriculture, the focus of one of the programs. The Globo formula is simple: high quality image, good technical content, appropriate style and language, all of this targeted to farmers and small entrepreneurs. Where vocational schools and extension services fail to reach, TV may fill the gap.

*Globo Rural* is the oldest program, having been on the air for 20 years and *Small Enterprises* for 8 years. Notice that a somewhat equivalent program in the United States (*Money Hunt*) is only three years old and broadcast on public television, rather than private (even though programs on hobbies and house improvement are common and quite successful).

The formula for both programs is quite similar. The programs cover a range of areas that might be of interest to farmers and small entrepreneurs. The core messages focus is on teaching practical lessons and offering ideas for new activities, technologies, or markets.

## **Globo Rural**

Farmers want to know about droughts, early rains, prices of commodities and other such germane subjects. The program does comply with short spots on those issues. But a core formula remains in place and dominates the program: how to improve crops, fix problems, adapt technologies and reduce losses in farms.

The program invariably takes place on a farm that has adopted the proposed solution. The message emerges from interviews with farmers, agronomists and extension workers. Occasionally, a researcher in his laboratory may also be interviewed. The “before” situation is compared with the “after,” when the innovation has been adopted and the advantages discussed. The costs are sometimes presented and the technical procedures receive a lot of attention. The goal is to teach practical lessons that can be adopted by the maximum number of farmers. Credibility comes from the interviews with real farmers in their real farms.

The image is highly professional and full of shots of the local landscapes. The talk is simple and to the point, there is no technical gibberish. The music is, suitably, Brazilian country.

Below are a few examples of topics treated:

- ? Management of natural forests in the Amazon. The program reports a pioneering effort to introduce management techniques suitable to small farmers. The land is divided into ten plots, selectively cut: one per year. Hard data on yield and revenues are also presented.
- ? Bananas are very fragile crops and traditionally more than half of the harvest is lost due to improper handling. A farmer explains every step he took to reduce the damages and losses. It also shows how an extension worker helped the farmer in each step. There is also an interview with a banana growing expert and the farmer's final comments boasting his overall reduction in losses.
- ? A farmer explains a simple method to get rid of ticks in his cattle.
- ? A relatively long clip displays a farmer who employs his nine daughters to work on his property using very traditional methods. The entire background description of what is going on is in rhymes, sometimes presented as poetry, sometimes as music. This one is not to teach methods but rather to present a picturesque case of the many and various methods that can benefit Brazilian farmers.

In parallel with the TV program, there is a magazine following exactly the same line and with the same name (on-line version: [www.globoruralon.com.br](http://www.globoruralon.com.br)). Given the nature of the printed media, there are more technical data, more statistics and a greater variety of subjects. Significant space is devoted to answering technical questions sent in by readers. This is the “Ann Landers” column of *Globo Rural*: advice for real-life problems. Each month, 140,000 copies of the magazine are sold.

### **Small Firms, Great Deals**

Throughout the past century, Brazil has devoted most of its energy to the development of large enterprises. And indeed, it has been quite successful: the country boasted one of the fastest rates of growth. However, while large enterprises remain critically important to the country's economy, their ability to create employment to all the active population progressively became sorely inadequate.

Lately, it has become crystal clear to all that small enterprises are the best bet for absorbing surplus labor. But they can do this only if they become more efficient, competitive and productive than they have been in the past. Hence, the health of small firms is a critical element for the prosperity of the country. The *Small Enterprises* program responds to these efforts to improve efficiency and promote the growth of these firms, raising their profile and lime-lighting their potential.

The formula is not much different from that of *Globo Rural*. In fact, one can easily see that a winning solution was transposed to another sector. The half-hour programs present innovations, show spectators how to contact specialized government agencies, promote *web sites* that help small exporters and so on. But the main thrust of the program is to show examples of successful small entrepreneurs or good ideas that can be adopted by other would-be entrepreneurs. Below are a few examples:

- ? A man who transforms the metal sheets of recycled cans into sculptures of animals. The clip starts in his backyard, full of colorful or shiny toucans, roosters, alligators and many other animals. It then moves on to show how he works the sheet metal and the tools he has created to shape them into feathers, animal skin and so on. The following part shows how he managed to get an exclusive contract to decorate a supermarket chain and the economics of selling his art. It ends with an interview with the supermarket buyer discussing the economics of selling in small enterprises.
- ? Another craftsman created a simple cooler for beer and soda cans: press a lever and one can at the time is released without opening the box. After this demonstration, the clip mentions that the inventor is looking for partners or entrepreneurs who might want to manufacture or commercialize his idea.
- ? A small manufacturer has produced a pizza oven on wheels that can be transported anywhere. It works from bottled propane for outdoor operation or from electricity for indoor use. After presenting the price of each pizza chariot, several customers who purchased it are interviewed and the costs of raw pizzas and the sale prices are presented, as are typical uses and monthly revenues generated.
- ? A firm has taken an American product and adapted it to Brazilian conditions. It is a display or exhibit kit for posters and samples of products that unfolds. After use, the contraption can be easily collapsed for storage in a rollaway plastic container (that looks like a narrow trash can). Again, prices are shown, as are the consumers of the product.

Like in the case of *Globo Rural*, there is a companion magazine with the same name that goes with it (online version: [www.Pequenasempresason.com.br](http://www.Pequenasempresason.com.br)). Presently, 120,000 copies are being printed every month. The magazine shows hundreds of products, ideas, offers, and prospects of new business. The January (2000) issue has the following headline on the cover: “Open your firm now: 51 opportunities waiting for you, 20 business ideas costing less than US\$10,000, 16 machines to get your business started and, the month’s 15 good ideas.”

Understandably, management techniques and problems are perhaps, the most common subjects featured in the magazine. The January issue has a piece on how to deal with arrears and customers who do not pay, how to open a firm, how to avoid the common causes of bankruptcy and so on. Considerable space is also devoted to answering technical and economic questions from readers.

Brazil is the third country in the world in number of franchises. Accordingly, the franchise business is one of the most common subjects, both for the TV program and the magazine. Indeed, one of the standard features of the magazine is offering examples of franchises. The same issue features franchises that have succeeded and become heavy weights.

Again, given the nature of print media, the magazine, more so than the program, is a market place for ideas, products and services. In addition to references to all firms and products described, it provides substantial space for paid classified ads.

### **Do They Work?**

What is the ultimate meaning of these two programs? A harmless and useless effort to help farmers and small entrepreneurs? Entertainment for them? A significant contribution to real life productivity?

Unfortunately, there has been no effort to evaluate the impact of either program, even though *Globo Rural* has aired for 20 years. The producer is a commercial media network. For it, impact is measured by the bottom line, i.e., cost of production versus advertisement revenues.

What can we say about socioeconomic impact? Something, but not too much. First of all, the programs are slick, well done, and the image is refined. But they are, by no means, entertainment. The programs are serious and direct. It is hard to imagine anybody watching them for fun. It makes sense to assume that advertisement contracts would not flow if there were no audience. Therefore, size of audience gives some suggestions as to how the programs are perceived by spectators.

Recent phone surveys (roughly extrapolated to cover the universe of spectators) suggest that around 4.5 million TV sets are tuned to *Globo Rural* on Sunday mornings. Consider that 20 percent of the Brazilian population lives in rural areas and that about half are working adults (the target audience). This means that if the potential audience for the program is mostly located in rural areas, there would be about 15 million people (including all those who do not have a TV set) tuned in. In other words, in very rough terms, one third of the working rural population watches the program. Conceivably, the audience is a much larger proportion of those owning TV sets. Even accounting for gross errors in these estimates, such audience for a program teaching farming techniques is extraordinary.

*Small Enterprises* also has a considerable audience, although of lesser magnitude. The audience reaches close to two million spectators. This is also quite impressive for a program of its kind and it is only the huge figures for *Globo Rural* that make it look less remarkable. But, of course, *Small Enterprises* is also a younger program.

To sum up this somewhat inadequate evaluation, it makes sense to suggest that programs with little entertainment value will only be watched if they offer something that is useful. If around 4.5 million watch one and close to two million watch the other, year after year, their allegiance seems to be telling us that they are learning something useful indeed. Otherwise they would simply vote with their feet (better said, with their fingers, changing channels). By the same token, private advertisers are willing to continually sponsor the relatively expensive production of both programs. They too must be getting something in return. The bottom line, it seems, is that these programs are an effective way to support farming and small enterprises. We only regret that initiatives that appear to be so productive remain so long without a serious evaluation of their ultimate impact.