

A Low Cost Analysis of the Effectiveness of College of Agriculture News Releases

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Abstract

Many colleges of agriculture have units that write news releases for distribution to local and state newspapers. Knowing where in a state these releases are most heavily used and which story topics are most likely to be printed is information that can improve the effectiveness of news release services. In this study, a clippings service was used to determine that the percentage of use was higher in certain sections of the state and with certain topics. These findings have caused a re-evaluation of the Kentucky news service and directions for further study.

Statement of Problem

For more than 20 years, Agricultural Communications Services at the University of Kentucky has produced a weekly packet of four to five news releases. This weekly service is an integral part of fulfilling our education and information mission as employees of the Cooperative Extension program of the College of Agriculture.

The service is distributed to 126 weekly and 24 daily newspapers throughout the state. Kentucky is a largely rural state with only two cities having populations exceeding 200,000. The vast majority of the state's newspapers are in small towns. Newspaper circulations range from 268,000 for the largest metro paper down to 760 for the smallest rural paper.

Topics for news releases cover the four major areas of Kentucky Cooperative Extension: agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H/youth development, and community development. Stories also include other college-related activities, including research, awards, and grants. Our news service emphasizes state (rather than local) events and programs, and releases are written for readers living anywhere in Kentucky. This contrasts to newspaper columns or releases originated locally by county Cooperative Extension agents.

Our news releases are written in a journalistic style consistent with that used by most newspapers in Kentucky. They contain information useful to a wide range of Kentucky residents, including farmers, gardeners, business

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owners, homeowners, and youth. The releases are produced by a six-person team of professional print and broadcast journalists in our News and Information section. The section had not, in recent years, investigated which news outlets were printing the releases or which releases had the highest use. Section members determined that if such information could be generated, it would be valuable for improving news release quality and service.

Purpose

The study sought to reveal which areas of the state were most effectively served with the news service and what story categories were most heavily used. We also wanted to use the results to help us improve the quality and effectiveness of the college's news service and to determine where we need to do further study.

Background

Agricultural Communications Services subscribes to the clippings service provided by the Kentucky Press Clippings Bureau, which is part of a division called News Group owned by the GeoTel Corporation. Its corporate offices are in Columbia, Missouri.

We pay a \$70 monthly fee plus an additional 70 cents a clipping. That averages about \$325 a month. Employees of the company search 150 newspapers a week. Twenty-four of those papers are dailies, which means in a given week as many as 250 papers may be scanned for our news stories.

The weekly search is conducted using four key terms: University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, UK Cooperative Extension Service, UK College of Agriculture, and Kentucky Extension Service. These word or terms must appear in the headline or the text of the story.

We produce about four or five stories per week. These stories are distributed by U.S. mail, fax, e-mail, and are on our college Web site. The first three methods are self-selected in that the news organization requests our weekly service and selects the method of delivery. This self-selected distribution list was generated from a mass-mailing survey about four years ago.

Method

Our study sample included news releases produced from mid-March 2000 (when our clippings service started) until the end of December 2001. The total number of releases produced during this time was 356.

On a map showing all 120 Kentucky counties, we divided the state into three sections: east, central, and west. This allowed us to determine where

our service was used and what areas needed targeting for more coverage and media visits.

Lines were drawn as straight as possible down the map to make a three-way split without consideration of the number of counties within an area. For example, Warren County in southern Kentucky could have been central or west. It was determined to be a western county based in part on farming practices and its western Kentucky heritage including Western Kentucky University.

News article categories were based initially on the three areas of extension: agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and 4-H/youth development. The next step was to further define categories within these areas. We tried to keep the categories at 10, then 15, before determining that 16 were needed. 4-H/Youth (Y) and Family and Consumer Science (FC) remained as single categories, while agriculture categories were more fully defined.

Agriculture was divided into agricultural economics (AE), tobacco (T), grains (G), livestock and forages (LF), dairy (D), forestry (F), pest and diseases (P), fruits and vegetables (FV), and horticulture (H). Many of these fell along departmental areas but not all. Some areas were split to reflect major differences between them such as fruits and vegetables and other horticultural crops.

Additional categories were selected by reviewing the clippings to determine where a particular article best fit. For example, we had to determine an appropriate category in which to place an article on the naming of a new agriculture dean. This led to the addition of awards and promotions (A), new technology-alternative enterprises (NT), weather (W), community development (CD), and environment/water quality (E) as categories.

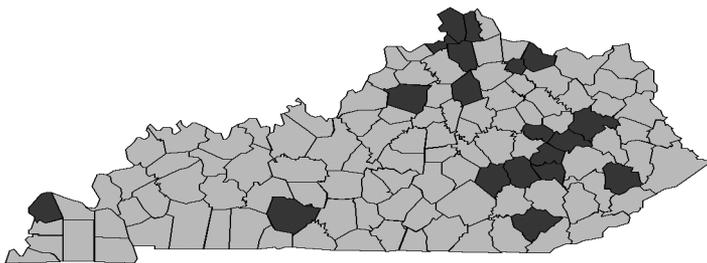


Figure 1. Counties with newspapers using news release. The study showed that 101 of 120 counties use University of Kentucky College of Agriculture news releases. (Dark shaded counties = 0 use of releases).

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Once the categories and areas of the state were determined, the clips were reviewed. Each clip provided by the service contains the newspaper name, circulation figures, date the story ran, and the city or county where the newspaper is located. The information on each clipping was used to place it within the appropriate area of the state. A list of stories written by the section was cross-checked with those found in the clippings service to determine what was not used. Then those stories were also categorized and noted as not being printed.

Clippings were identified by newspaper, counted and placed in notebooks. A review of all the clippings from our sample time period showed our news releases were used by at least one newspaper in a given county in 101 Kentucky counties (Figure 1).

The dark-shaded counties represent the 19 counties where we observed no use of our releases during the period sampled.

Results

We compared the number of stories written to how many were actually used. A story is considered used if it was printed by at least one newspaper. For example, 44 grain stories were written by Ag Communications, and 43 were used.

Results indicated a fairly high percentage of stories being used, with the exceptions of family and consumer sciences (FC) at 71 percent and youth (Y) at 62 percent (Figure 2).

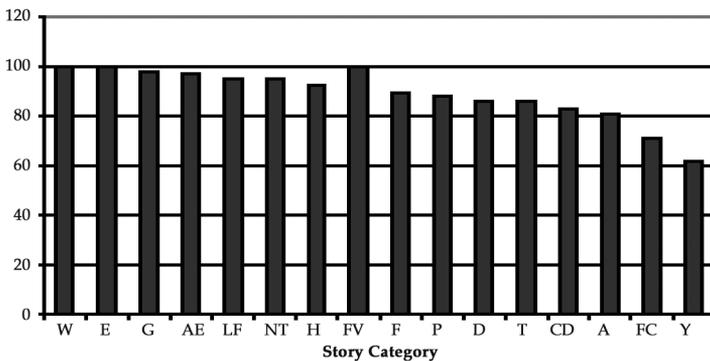


Figure 2. Percentage of stories used. News releases highlighting weather, environment and fruits and vegetables were used most, while awards, family and consumer science, and youth releases were used least.

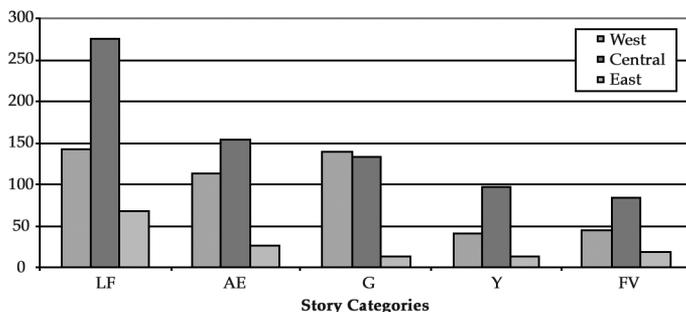


Figure 3. Distribution of five most-printed categories by region. The study showed news releases highlighting livestock and forages were printed most frequently in the state's central region; the state's eastern region had the fewest printings of any of the five most popular topic categories.

The relatively low percentage of these two categories may reflect that our stories are designed for statewide release and do not contain the names of local people (unless the people we interviewed in the local county where we traveled to do the story).

We also determined the five "most-printed" story categories (Figure 3). These data show that livestock and forage (LF) had a relatively large number of printings in the central part of the state (276), but not so many in the east. Grains (G) had a large number of printings in the west and central parts of the state (274), as might be predicted, because these areas are the primary grain producers in the state. Probably the most significant thing this chart shows us is that we are not getting heavy usage of our stories by newspapers in the eastern part of the state. This is likely attributable to two things: (1) we are not writing as many stories about topics geared to eastern Kentucky editors as we are about topics of interest to the western and central parts of the state, and (2) we perhaps have not marketed our news service to eastern Kentucky editors as aggressively.

Because our team may write more releases in one category compared to another, simply knowing how many times a release was printed did not tell us how popular a given subject may be to newspaper editors. Therefore, we devised a "power index" by dividing the number of stories written for each category into the total number of stories printed for that category (Figure 4). This power index told us how much "bang for the buck" we are getting for each type of story category.

For example, we wrote only nine weather stories, but they were printed 93 times. When you divide 93 by 9, you get a power index number of 10.3. At the opposite end we wrote 14 environment stories and had only 58

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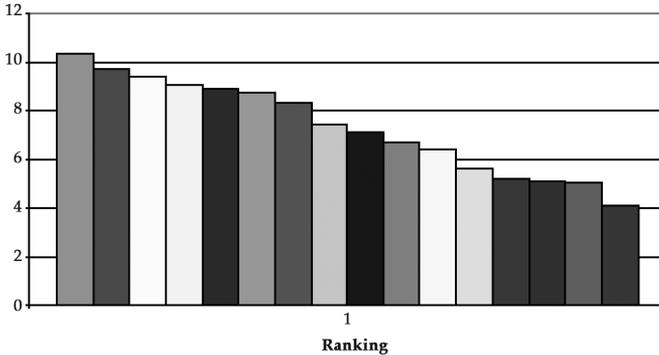


Figure 4. Ratio of stories written to stories printed by category. Dividing number of news releases written into number printed produced a numerical value indicating popularity of topic categories. Weather releases were most popular with newspapers, while environment releases were least popular.

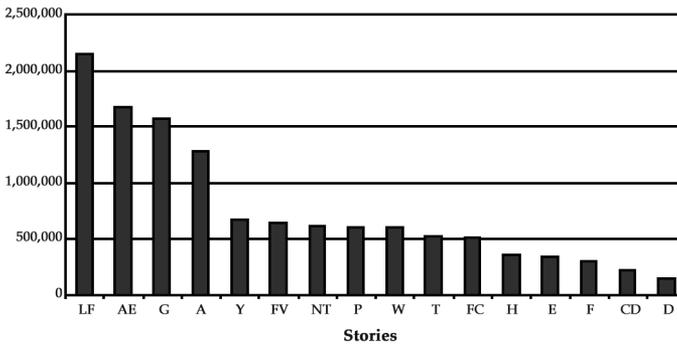


Figure 5. Categories ranked by total newspaper circulation. Based on supplied circulation figures for each newspaper, news releases on livestock and forages reached the largest number of readers, while dairy releases reached the fewest readers.

printings of these 14 stories for an index number of 4.1. The categories ranking second, third, and fourth in this power index are tobacco-related stories, livestock and forage, and horticulture. This may indicate editors are looking for topics that reflect the state's shift from a tobacco-dependent agricultural economy to a diversified system where cattle, hay, fruits, vegetables, and nursery crops are on the rise.

This final chart ranks our story categories according to total newspaper circulation (Figure 5). These figures were derived using the circulation infor-

mation printed on each of the small newspaper ID tags returned to us each month by the Clippings Bureau. Circulation is defined as the total number of households, businesses, or individuals purchasing a particular newspaper.

It should be noted that circulation is not the same as reach, which is the potential number of people reading a given newspaper when you consider that households and businesses may have several people who share the newspaper between them, passing it from reader to reader. In terms of circulation, we are reaching the most readers with our stories on livestock and forage (LF), agricultural economics (AE), grains (G), and awards (A) stories.

We are reaching the fewest number of readers with our forestry (F), community development (CD), and dairy (D) stories. However, we are not producing as many of these kinds of stories as we are the livestock, forage, and grain stories.

We also developed a list of our top 10 stories in terms of circulation. It shows that our tobacco and grants stories have done quite well in terms of reaching Kentucky audiences.

Conclusions

Our News and Information section needs to concentrate coverage and develop better media relations in eastern Kentucky and other areas where news release usage is lacking. We also need to re-evaluate the number of stories we write in certain topic areas. Topics with high usage may need greater emphasis while those in areas with lower usage may need to be written about more sparingly.

Furthermore, we need to re-evaluate how some stories are written. Youth stories, for example, could be customized for specific counties by adding names of local 4-H'ers or adult leaders. Similarly, family and consumer sciences releases could include more local names or provide contact information for a specific county Extension office that offers a program similar to the one highlighted in the release.

We need to improve our job of maintaining the news release distribution list by making regular updates as recipients are added, deleted, or change address. In addition, we need to review the search terms used by the Clippings Bureau. Some terms may need to be re-evaluated to determine if they are the most effective in casting the widest "net" for our stories. For example, 4-H is not one of our search terms but may need to be added.

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Future Study

We are conducting a similar study using clippings of our “exclusives,” which are releases written and distributed to county agents for use in their own newspaper columns. In this study we hope to determine what subject areas are most popular among county agents and how we can increase usage in certain areas of the state. We also have initiated a study of magazine use of our news releases. In addition, a follow-up study of our news releases will be conducted.

About the Authors

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