

A Rose By Any Other Name Might Be More Noticed: Attracting Journalists' Attention in the Digital Age

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Abstract

An article in the Sept. 12, 2002, issue of *Media Insider* reported PR Newswire's media relations team visits hundreds of newsrooms each month where it has observed many different schemes for managing information. The author suggested peppering news releases with variations of key-words that journalists may use to search wire feeds, incoming news releases or archived information on Web sites. This paper reports an informal testing of search engines and words that might commonly appear in news releases and other documents written by land-grant university communicators. Searches for 54 words or phrases [Table 1] on Web sites maintained by two popular newspapers, two land-grant universities, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture corroborated the *Media Insider* author's assertion that expanding use of keywords will increase prospects of being found by journalists who use search engines. Further, the study indicated that nomenclatures popular with educators may reduce prospects for media exposure.

Shakespeare asked, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Gertrude Stein said, "A rose is a rose is a rose." The implication is that it doesn't much matter what we call a thing.

If that ever were true, the Digital Age is challenging the venerable tradition as journalists turn to technology to help them cope with a hurricane of information that overloads their computers and their brains.

Without mentioning the word, Jonathan Evans suggests in "Bust Out the Thesaurus," which appeared in the Sept. 12, 2002, issue of *Media Insider*, that synonym success may be the key to capturing the attention of reporters and editors. Evans reports

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that journalists approach the management of information in diverse ways. Computer search engines allow them to swiftly sort enormous amounts of data in their quest for items of interest. Whether they are searching wire feeds or a news release archive on company or organization Web sites, a document that contains more than one noun for a subject has an improved chance of attracting their attention.

In the old days when news releases were scanned by a human eye, exact search words weren't so important because an alert journalist could correlate words in a nanosecond. Computers scan much faster, but they also are much dumber. They find exactly what they are told to look for and nothing but exactly what they are told to find.

While computers have in some respects made our work easier, they also give us who write in hope of gaining media exposure a new and difficult challenge. We must write with search words in mind (they tend to be nouns), and we must rethink our attitudes about redundancy, thinking of multiple ways of saying the same thing.

As Evans put it, "Success comes down to anticipating how a journalist might search and positioning as many potential keywords as possible in order to get snagged by their search agent. In short, it's time to dust off that thesaurus . . . and re-visit those boilerplates."

Those of us who write on agricultural subjects face a particularly daunting challenge as the faculty we work with abandon time-honored nomenclature for new names. This is problematic, not just because journalists often shorten the formal names, but because it introduces complexity in Web searching protocols and requires more sophistication on the part of journalists searching for information. The same problem exists with the renaming of academic units, such as departments. For example, the Washington State University Department of Agricultural Economics recently changed its name to Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics and the WSU Agricultural Engineering Department became the Biosystems Engineering Department. Thus a journalist who sets a search engine to seek "agricultural economics" or to find "agricultural engineering" may miss current documents, including news releases.

The problem also manifests itself in the names that institutions give their faculty. In news releases, they may be called faculty,

Table 1. *List of 54 words and phrases used to test search engines*

Search words or phrases	farm workers	orchardists	scientist
agriculture	farm workers	orchardists	scientist
agricultural	grain	pig	scientists
corn	hog	pigs	swine
county agent	hogs	pig producer	swine producer
county educator	hog farmer	pig producers	swine producers
extension agent	hog farmers	pork	wheat
extension educator	hog producer	pork producer	wheat farmer
farm	hog producers	pork producers	wheat farmers
farming	horticulture	producers	wheat grower
farmer	horticulturist	ranch	wheat growers
farmers	horticulturists	rancher	wheat producer
farm labor	orchard	ranchers	wheat producers
farm laborers	orchards	researcher	
farm worker	orchardist	researchers	

This table displays results of 54 search words or phrases entered into search engines at six archives. Results show that even slight differences in wording can significantly affect results.

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investigators, researchers, or scientists, depending on their local culture. Across the country, university scientists have responded to pressures for political correctness by changing certain words. Seemingly no self-respecting agricultural economist speaks or writes of farmers, who now have become producers. Cattlemen have become cattle producers, and orchardists now are tree fruit producers, for example.

University nomenclature poses more than one challenge for communication specialists, but the only aspect germane to this paper involves the writing of news releases and other documents sent to the news media and posted on Web sites. The words used may determine whether or not a journalist's search engine finds the reference, and that is an issue with which agricultural communicators in education must deal.

To validate Evans' advice, I tested responses of search engines on six Web sites. I picked *Media Insider's* archive of news releases distributed by PR Newswire because the idea for this investigation originated with an article in the *Media Insider* newsletter and because the Web site posts a large volume of news releases written by PR Newswire clients. I selected two major, general circulation newspapers for inclusion, the *Seattle Times* and the *New York Times*, in part because both have large archives and are available free to anyone with an Internet connection. To these, I added the news release archives of Washington State University College of Agriculture and Home Economics, Purdue University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Purdue was selected because it has a high-volume operation and has been on-line since the early days of Web sites among land-grant universities. WSU was selected as a small-to-medium size land-grant university with a separate news operation for agriculture and home economics and because it archives all news releases issued since it launched its Web service to the news media in January 1996. The USDA site was selected because it is the largest and most complex Web news site for agricultural journalists.

A list of 54 words and phrases that might commonly appear in news releases written by land-grant communicators was run through all six search engines. No attempt was made to determine what agricultural terms journalists might put into search engines. That would be another study.

The search results are striking. A sample is included in Table 2. A copy of the complete results is available at <http://cahenews.wsu.edu/tables.htm>, or I will be happy to mail a

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printed copy upon request. For example, a search of news stories, news releases, and other archived documents for terms commonly used to describe pigs or those who raise them scored an aggregate 139,925 hits [Table 2]. Journalists searching databases included in this study for “hog farmer” would find 2,706 fewer documents than if the search had been for “hog farmers.” Simply converting a singular word to plural produced a 54% increase in the number of hits in this instance. But in another instance, “hog producer” resulted in more hits than the plural form. This suggests that writers try to use both singular and plural forms if possible.

Another finding is the difference a title can make. It appears that academics are abandoning the term farmer in favor of producer. “Hog farmer” and “hog farmers” produced 13,552 hits compared with 29,513 for “hog producer” and “hog producers.” Journalists searching for “hog” and “farmer” would find 54% fewer hits than if they searched for “hog” and “producer.”

Results of this study suggest that writers need to control the language of news releases. Many writers would argue that it has ever been thus, but the reality is that within our work environment, writers often defer to subject matter specialists on matters of terminology. If agricultural economists speak of growers and producers, and journalists think of farmers, we minimize use of our educational information if we accede to the scientists’ vocabulary.

This is one of many manifestations of what Jon Franklin in an address before the Council for Advancement and Support of Education in 1981 identified as a cultural gap between scientists and our broader society. Franklin, then a *Baltimore Evening Sun* science writer with a Pulitzer Prize to his credit, cautioned writers attending a workshop on communicating university research about the perils of popularizing science when the reader and the writer’s sources (scientists) are of different cultures.

Whether this renaming is good or bad is beside the point. The reality is that information specialists in the land-grant system, and in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, must deal with a new complexity that demands increased use of synonyms and perhaps some intentional redundancy.

In the past, news writers have been advised against use of synonyms to avoid a dull and dreary redundancy because many editors believe it leads to flowery prose. The Digital Age de-

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Table 2. *Terms for pigs and for those who raise them*

Term	Hits	Term	Hits
Hog	2,195	Hog producers	11,965
Pig	3,963	Pig producer	18,093
Pigs	3,632	Pig producers	1,673
Swine	1,447	Pork producer	21,794
Hog farmer	5,423	Pork producers	15,710
Hog farmers	8,129	Swine producer	17,161
Hog producer	17,548	Swine producers	<u>11,192</u>
		TOTAL HITS	139,925

This table displays the results of 14 search words or phrases entered into selected newspaper, university and USDA search engines to test how variations affect the number of hits produced. They were extracted from a larger table, containing 54 search words or phrases, which were tested in search engines for six different archives.

mands we increase our use of synonyms to improve the chances that journalists—or others—will find our works with computer search engines.

We need to study the publications of most interest and value to our institutions to determine what nouns journalists use when writing about the subjects we write about. If reporters write or say “farmer,” our news releases had better include the term, regardless of what terms our agents, specialists, scientists, or administrators prefer. If we don’t believe we can get away with changing their nouns, we at least need to find ways to work vernacular into our stories.

A word of caution, however. We must make these adjustments within the bounds of good journalistic practice. For instance, Evans recommends against abbreviating state names. “Make sure you include relevant state names, written out. If you’ve written Ariz. or AZ, your release will not show up if someone’s keyword searching for Arizona,” he wrote. In our news operation, we have adopted Associated Press style, and I wouldn’t deviate from it for this purpose. But Evans’ point is well made. Success comes down to anticipating how a journalist might search and positioning as many potential keywords as possible to get snagged by the search

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agent. As Evans put it: "Somehow you need to anticipate possible variations of keywords relevant to your subject matter and pepper your release with these words."

This informal study suggests that minor variations in search terms produce broadly different results in Web search engines. This includes both nouns and plural or singular forms. No attempt was made to determine what words journalists writing about agriculture actually use. A study of that subject would add information for ACE members who write news releases. Another study would be a comparison of agricultural terms published in general circulation newspapers, agricultural specialty publications, and in news releases from universities and U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies.

References

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