

A Study of Michigan Farm Bureau's Publication: *Rural Living*

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The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of various communication vehicles of the Michigan Farm Bureau's (MFB) information and public relations division. Specifically, this paper addresses Farm Bureau's publication *Rural Living*. The method for performing this evaluation was a survey of the organization's membership. The study was designed to allow management of the division and the overall organization to gauge the effectiveness of the division's output through the eyes of the consumers of the materials.

Because MFB relies heavily on its membership, this latter point was considered vital. That is, management believed that the best way to determine whether improvement was necessary in the organization's communications was to go to those at whom the communications are directed. With this in mind, MFB commissioned the researchers to conduct a comprehensive study of member attitudes, opinions and behaviors toward a variety of information division functions. Utmost among these functions has been the monthly publication *Rural Living*, so the focus of the study was membership reaction toward this magazine.

Specifically, the following questions were addressed in the study concerning *Rural Living*:

1. Does the magazine carry the proper mix of organizational information and general information about agriculture? Increasing demands from organizational management to make the

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publication oriented more toward MFB activities may have conflicted with readers' desires for more feature-oriented material on agricultural issues and less hard-sell material. The study was designed to find out whether the conflict actually existed.

2. How does *Rural Living* magazine compare with the *Rural Leader* newsletter published by MFB's information division? In part, this question relates to the first issue in that the *Rural Leader* newsletter is designed to provide the hard-sell information mentioned earlier. If, however, *Rural Living* were duplicating that function, one would expect respondents to have a preference for either publication.

3. To what extent do MFB members read the regular features of *Rural Living* magazine, such as the president's message and the classified advertisements?

4. What is the nature of *Rural Living* readership in terms of when it is read, how much of it is read, reasons that members do not read it more frequently, and who is reading it?

In addition to the specific research questions related to *Rural Living*, the study addressed many more general issues on organizational membership and its acquisition of agricultural information.

5. How important to MFB members are various issues related to where members obtain information about those issues? To assess these questions, respondents were asked to rate the importance of several issues. They were also asked to indicate their current primary sources for agricultural information and what their preferences would be for the information, if they had the choice.

And finally, the study explored membership acquisition of agricultural information from broadcast media and from county Farm Bureau newsletters. For the latter item, respondent members indicated their attitudes and opinions toward the newsletters in a variety of ways, such as how much of the newsletter was read, reasons for not reading the newsletter, and satisfaction with content of the newsletter.

Methods of Study

The sampling design for the MFB communication study was a stratified random sample design. That is, respondents were chosen at random from two separate groups, associate members and regular members. Theoretically, simple random selection would have resulted in equal representation of the groups, because each group represents approximately half the organization's membership. That is, drawing a sample from the entire MFB membership population would have yielded an equal number of regular and associate members. To insure that this was the case and to increase precision, the membership was divided into two subgroups—regular and associate—and half the potential respondents were chosen from each.

The questionnaire administered to respondents was basically the same for both groups of members, although the introductions differed slightly and additional questions were included for regular members. Respondents answered questions dealing with the importance of various agricultural-related issues, their preferences for getting information about those issues, and their opinions about Farm Bureau publications.

Trained interviewers administered the questionnaire by telephone from the Farm Bureau Center in Lansing, MI the week of Sept. 9, 1985. A total of 206 interviews were completed and 92 potential respondents refused to be interviewed, resulting in a completion rate of 69 percent.

The data were analyzed with a Control Data Corporation Cyber 170, Model 750 computer at Michigan State University. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences was used.

Summary and Conclusions

In general, the data clearly show that public policy issues such as the cost of health care insurance, the federal budget deficit, and the farm financial crisis are perceived as having much greater salience to the respondents than organizational issues like the activities of other MFB members, MFB membership drive activities, and political action committees. The inference drawn from this analysis is that the more salient items should have greater reader interest than those perceived as being less salient.

While the data might seem to suggest that only *Rural Living* magazine qualifies as a significant source of information, it is important to remember that not all the respondents has access to the other MFB communications sources. Without more detailed analysis of the readership of *Rural Leader* or the *County Newsletter*, it is difficult to assess their communication effectiveness. Additionally, more in-depth analysis should be made of the "other sources" cited frequently by the respondents. From the data presented here, however, it does appear that *Rural Living* is thought of by all its readers as an important source of information, both practically and ideally, for all of the content areas considered.