

Research Briefs

Publication of University of Idaho Ag News Releases by Idaho Daily and Weekly Newspapers in 1983

In an effort to determine how well our 1983 Ag News stories were used by Idaho print media, The University of Idaho Agricultural Communications Center compiled data based on clippings obtained from the Idaho Newspaper Association.

I used the Visifile program to record the data, designing it to include each story's title, author, release data, dateline, target audience, source, topic, commodity, frequency and distribution. All Idaho newspapers were assigned three-letter codes so that a long string of them could fit into the space remaining for the distribution category. I found I could have used a lot more space than was available.

The data described 284 stories, for which altogether 1,627 newspaper clippings were collected. Clippings from agricultural magazines were not included, and records of story-use by radio and TV newscasters were not available.

These figures should silence, at least momentarily, the administrators who ask us why our stories "never appear in the papers."

Stories were used an average of 5.7 times. I was particularly interested in discovering which stories were most likely to be published—by title, commodity, dateline, and target area.

By Title: A 13-part, year-end economic outlook series, completed in cooperation with Washington State and Oregon State universities, was used altogether 87 times.

The single story used most frequently (21 times) discussed poisonous Christmas plants. It was followed by

stories on the fall invasion of insects into homes and overcoming holiday blues (20 times each), the economic hardships facing sheep producers, grain stubble being too valuable to burn, and an announcement of a statewide 4-H leaders meeting (17 times each). Sixteen clippings were collected of stories about upcoming potato schools, computer workshops, winners of an FFA judging contest, and a plea for more 4-H leaders and funds.

While "soft" and housekeeping news did appear to fly farther than the more challenging research stories, many of the latter were used a respectable number of times—usually in the 5 to 15 range.

Twenty-three stories were never used by Idaho weeklies or dailies (or maybe the clipping service overlooked them)—although some of these were published in ag magazines. These stories generally had a very tight time frame or a very narrow interest range (honoring one 4-H leader, discussing a presentation at one meeting, announcing the resignation of one specialist—or were the second or third story about a meeting that had been announced previously.)

By Topic: Of the 1,627 clippings collected, 204 were of stories about seminars and shortcourses, 199 about economics, 103 about 4-H, 92 about family finance and 90 about entomology.

I also developed a story-use index by dividing the number of clippings representing a topic by the number of stories written about it. The following rank-order resulted:

Future Farmers of America	16.0	Animal Pathology	7.4
Forestry	15.0	Food/Nutrition	6.9
		Crop	
Food Preparation	13.0	Management	6.9
Housing/Furniture	12.0	Schools Promo	6.8
Safety	10.0	Economics	6.6
Irrigation	9.3	IPM	6.4
		Animal	
Family Finance	9.2	Management	6.1
Computers	8.8	PIK Program	6.0
Ag Day Promo	8.0	Soil Fertility	6.0

Ranking among the lowest were Staff Honors (2.5), Farmer-of-the-Year (2.0) and EFNEP (1.5).

By Commodity: In sheer numbers, the stories used most frequently were those about more than one commodity (225), potatoes (164), wheat (75), sheep (74) and grains (63). Applying the story-use index by commodity yielded different results, with home economics stories again doing well above average in placement. In fact, the index of Home Ec Commodity story use was 14.0. Following that were dairy (9.2), cattle (8.4) and potatoes (7.1). Least likely to be used were stories about beans (2.4), grass seed and alfalfa (2.3), and hops (1.0).

By Dateline: There were no startling results here. The most frequently used stories were datelined Moscow, the main campus. Next came a string of off-campus research and Extension centers and district offices. Stories from national scientific meetings with out-of-state datelines did about as well as those with in-state datelines.

By Target Area: Calculating the frequency of story use by target area, we determined—not surprisingly—that the stories targeted to the widest area got the most play. The index for stories aimed statewide was 6.8; for those aimed at southern Idaho (which includes three of Idaho's four districts), it was 6.5. One district—southeastern—scored a high 4.7, but it includes three research and Extension centers and a district office. The other three districts scored 3.5, 3.7 and 3.8—amazingly similar figures.

The 15 daily newspapers in Idaho and on its borders used altogether 643 UI Ag News stories in 1983—or an average of 43 each. That means we got into each Idaho daily a little less than once a week—and theoretically reached every Idahoan who reads a daily newspaper 43 times a year.

All but three of the dailies used 19 or more of our stories in 1983, with the Idaho Falls Post-Register leading the list with 112 clippings. The Idaho Stateman of Boise, with the state's largest circulation, used 60 stories.

The 65 weeklies yielded 984 clippings, or about 15 each. Twelve weeklies used not a single one of our stories, but three used more than 55.

Applications

We now have records of how many, and which, stories were used by each Idaho newspaper, and which topics, commodities, datelines, and target areas were likely to strike it rich. Future conversations with editors can be

grounded in the facts, with discussions progressing quickly to the why's of story-use choices. Of course, if a new editor has been hired, we're back to ground zero—but we're used to that!

Not only can we communicate more effectively with Idaho newspaper editors on their patterns of story use, but we can make more knowledgeable decisions on where to send—or even whether to write—a particular story. Several more years' data would be helpful in making these determinations, since we don't know whether the top-ranking stories this year were simply more interestingly written or whether their topic or commodity will consistently be more attractive to editors.

The information assembled will also be used in demonstrating our unit's usefulness to the College of Agriculture. A survey recently completed by the College's rural sociologist, John Carlson, revealed that news and feature stories appearing in newspapers earned the highest mean score of all methods of communicating with the public about the College of Agriculture. In terms of "usefulness of information," they were rated either very or somewhat useful by 84 percent of those responding. Articles in farm and ranch magazines ranked fifth, television eighth and radio tenth. (The survey was taken before we hired a radio news reporter.)

We knew we were doing well. Now we know exactly how well we are doing—and how we can be more efficient and more effective.

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NOTE: If you would like a copy of all the data compiled in this research, Fritz will be happy to send you one. She can be reached at (208) 386-6126 in Boise.