

Research Briefs

The Home Economics Agent As a Delivery Relay

One of the goals of extension information departments at land grant universities is to disseminate news and feature stories through the established newspaper press. Publication of extension news releases by a newspaper is the decision of the gatekeeper, usually an editor.

Purpose of this study was to determine whether using county extension home economists as delivery relays is better than direct mail for effecting the publication of extension information stories by weekly newspapers.

In the experiment, 100 Kansas weekly newspapers, ranked by circulation, were alternately assigned in five Kansas extension areas to an experimental group and to a control group. Stories were sent to the control group, the same stories were sent to county home economists who acted as relays in the delivery of the stories to the designated newspapers.

One feature story and three news stories, written by the extension information editor, were sent via the two modes—one story per week—during the month of August, 1980. Stories met the criteria of timeliness, current news value and content variety; they were typical of stories that have been written in the past by the extension editor. All newspapers in the study were monitored for story use during August and September.

Results showed significantly greater frequency of publication in the experimental group of newspapers (Chi square 9.649, 1 df), with the result close to the .001 level. The use rate in the experimental group was 24.3 percent, compared to a 11.5 percent use rate in the direct mail control group.

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Employed Women's Use of Mass Media

Two years ago, we surveyed working women in Illinois and Wisconsin to see how employment affects a woman's use of time, how much outside work reduces her time for other activities, and what happens to mass media use.

Sampling was random, but on a geographic basis in Chicago, Milwaukee and their surrounding metropolitan areas and in towns and rural areas.

We found that employed women averaged 38 years in age, were well educated—45 percent had some college—and had salaries averaging \$10,676 annually. (Remember, this was two years ago) Three-fourths were married, less than 10 percent were divorced, had few children—an average of two; one dependent. And women with smaller families were more likely to work outside the home. Almost a third said they wished they didn't have to work.

On media accessibility, we found that 94 percent read a newspaper regularly; 94 percent, a magazine—56 percent read four or more. (Women's magazines first, then general interest ones); 100 percent had a radio they listened to—average number of sets was five; and 97 percent had a television set—86 percent with color (average number of sets was two).

Time spent with media was: TV—2 hours, 5 minutes daily (that's less than the national average of 2½ hours a day); radio—1 hour, 16 minutes, also less than national reports; reading—52 minutes total, which equals the national average. The women spent 25 minutes daily—almost half their reading time—on newspapers.

Content varied considerably by media. For news and weather, they used TV, 21 minutes—sports, 18 minutes; movies, 17 minutes, situation comedies, 13 minutes. But of total time, most use was for entertainment with situation comedies the most favored and least favored programs. They listened mostly to music when they used radio—57 minutes of the 76 minutes a day. News got 8 minutes. When they read newspapers, they read almost everything. Content of magazines included women's items, general interest subjects, news and religious articles. They said they took professional, documentary and hobby magazines mostly.

When asked about sources for various types of information, 53 percent said they got national news from

TV, 25 percent said from newspapers, 17 percent said from radio. For local news, 40 percent said they got it from newspapers, 29 percent said from radio, and 25 percent said from TV.

Magazines ranked as the first source for subjects on fashion, nutrition, discrimination, family relationships and mechanical information. They were second for health care, family planning and child care information. Broadcast media ranked low as sources for these types of information.

Spending 40 hours a week at work outside the home and another 30 hours a week in housework obviously reduced discretionary time, leisure and media use. Both radio and TV time were seldom solo activities—98 percent of radio listening was accompanied by another activity, as was 65 percent of TV time. With radio that was primarily driving, cleaning house or preparing meals; with TV it was hobbies, clothing care and house cleaning.

The study looked at the impact of work on other time and at the impact of other factors on media use. For instance, we found that older women did more newspaper reading and more public affairs TV watching; the more educated women did more newspaper and magazine reading and public affairs TV watching; women with dependent children had less time for newspapers, magazines and TV; and full-time job holders had less time for newspapers, magazines and TV. Age, education, dependent children and full-time work didn't affect time spent watching TV for entertainment and time spent listening to music on the radio. Activities affected were those requiring the most concentration—reading and watching public affairs shows.

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After-Thoughts on Questionnaires

Recently we wanted to find out the information needs of small farm operators in Texas and the sources through which they obtained their information.

To develop our sample, we began with farms of less than 150 acres—132,000 of them. From those with an income of less than \$20,000 yearly we chose 2,515 by selecting every 50th name. We then affixed gummed

labels to questionnaires and mailed them with a covering letter and a self-addressed return envelope to each name.

Our questionnaire focused on demographic characteristics—age, years in farming, education, size of operation, income level, type of farm or ranch and whether full-time or part-time; kinds of information needs—production, marketing, business, government policy, weather, purchasing and energy; sources of information for each of those needs—farm magazines, newspapers, radio, TV, publications, other farmers, farm suppliers, county agents; vo-ag teachers and other government offices; mass media channels used for obtaining information; and degree of participation in extension programs. Most questions dealt with "ranking" of items.

It seemed to me the looks of our questionnaire created much of the success we had in the study. (We had an excellent return, I thought: 49 percent overall.)

The questionnaire had plenty of white space and questions were boldface for emphasis and easy recognition. One of our artists prepared boxes for questions requiring a ranking of items. We printed the questionnaire on gold paper to attract attention.

Of course, we tried to design the questions so we could tabulate results to answer the issues we wanted to address and to make sure we didn't get information that we couldn't use. I also pretested with 50 farmers to see if any problems surfaced in the way they responded.

If I had another opportunity to do a similar study, I'd delete several questions that didn't provide the kind of information I had hoped for and I'd eliminate half of each of the information source questions that dealt with future sources. In my study, there was little variation on respondents' preferred present and future sources, so I would simply ask them to indicate their current sources. I would also shorten each of the seven questions dealing with information sources by reducing choices from 10 to 6.

The study gave me a great deal of information. For instance, mass media rated high as sources of most kinds of information. Operators said they had only limited contacts with county offices and extension programs and activities. Most small operators were part-

time farmers with 50 acres of land or less and engaged mainly in beef production. Most were farming because they enjoyed farm life.

The study convinced me that we're not reaching small farm operators effectively with useful information and not involving them in county programs. To me, this means we in communication need to do a better job of getting information to small farmers through the mass media and to train agents so they can work more closely with local media.

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