

Killing a Sacred Cow?

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SO YOUR OFFICE sends out a weekly packet of seven stories to a list of editors every, every week. Quite an accomplishment! It looks real good on the annual report and in the office files.

"It's a lot of crap. It comes in every week and goes direct from my 'in' basket to file 13. I never even look at it anymore."

This simple, plain and easily-understood statement from an editor may give a clue to what happens to those weekly packets of stories your office sends out.

"It's written strictly by formula. You know the name of the university and some administrator will be in the lead or at least the second graff. If there's any meat to it, it's down the page a ways."

The same editor amplifies. He's not happy.

"They spend money, good money, mailing that stuff out and who uses it? I see the job of a land-grant information office as benefiting the people, not puffing the egos of their bosses. If they don't have something to offer my readers, to hell with it."

Maybe, just maybe, the era of the "weekly packet" is gone. Putting together seven stories a week because "that's the way it's always been done" may not be a good enough reason. Some weeks, and we all know it, those seven stories may not come up. So, we fake it, put together some trash that never should leave a typewriter, and put it in the mail.

But, our seven stories, sorry ones included, are in competition with a lot of offerings from a lot of people wanting a bit of free space. Our first audience, the editor, may take a look at them for a while, but he soon will develop the same habit displayed in the lead graff quote. "In" basket to the trash can, an easy dunk from most any desk in the nation.

What's the answer? There may not be an easy one unless your shop is designed to serve the people of your state and not the administrators. If you and your staff are writing by the pound rather than by the effect, there's not much hope. Oh, you may get something used once in a while if it happens to fit a hole; but you've wasted a lot of motion getting it done.

There are several tips that come from the combined thinking of a lot of "users" we've talked to—the guys with the blue pencils, the guys who decide what goes on the pages. A few of these include:

1-Aim before you shoot. Don't send everything to everyone. If you know it's a beef magazine, don't send a story about brussel sprouts. (Sounds simple, but check your files!)

2-Spend more time talking to sources, thinking about what's been said, and less time pounding the old Underwood. There's a good chance you can bring some of your source's personality into the story, still carry the message, and present a package your potential readers can identify with and appreciate.

3-Don't limit your thoughts to things that HAVE to be done right NOW! It's good occasionally to have a landscape horticulturist say that the best thing for home owners to do is sit back and enjoy the fruits of their labors. Try to keep the pressure off your readers. There are enough pressure times for farmers and ranchers without our emphasizing and adding to them.

4-Make your sources human. If they'll stand for it, make "Stanley" "Stan" and "James B." "Jim." Dr. may mean a lot when your source writes to his colleague in Kansas, but it just doesn't mean that much to the average reader. In fact, as our Extension Director once said, that PhD behind a man's name or a Dr. in front of it could mean that a committee made a bad mistake.

(There will be those sources, of course, who think the most important thing in the lead will be "Dr." followed immediately by his name. With a little patience and understanding, you can cure most of these cases, but not all.)

5-Write for someone. Pick out a reader somewhere and do the story for him or her. Don't be stodgy in your terms. We all know "folk" is the proper term, but "folks" reads so much better. You're not in an English class any more; violate some of the rules and enjoy!

6-Read! Look at the sports pages, the columns, the editorials, books, magazines, anything. Get ideas and adapt them. Nursery rhymes, classics, jokes, puns, quotes, made-up words—all can add life to your leads.

7-(And this may be most important of all) Forget that weekly packet. Send something out on Tuesday and Friday this week, Monday and Wednesday next. Limit the number of stories and improve the quality. Make the editor eager to open your envelope. Give him a chance to wonder what it is and take a look at it rather than know what it is without busting the seal on the envelope.

We're in a competitive world, very competitive. Most editors we have talked to say they throw away at least 90-percent of their mail. It may be difficult for administrators to understand, but our only chance is to make the best use of our skills. If we do less—and fall back on "seven stories a week, every week"—we are not serving our institutions or the people they represent.