

Reactions to "Ag News" Releases: Survey of Idaho Newspaper Editors and Broadcast News Directors

by Marlene Fritz

Communications specialists at the University of Idaho College of Agriculture (UI) surveyed the Idaho media in October 1986 to determine evaluations of "Ag News" releases. Of 166 surveys mailed, 104 were returned (63 percent). Results indicated that the UI news releases were well accepted and rated, at least, "very good." A majority of respondents said the releases were "generally understandable to the public," that the maximum length of a story usually reprinted in full was two pages; and that the news releases were preferable to "tip" sheets for all media except television.

Introduction and Method

To determine the receptiveness of Idaho "gatekeepers" to the UI twice-weekly "Ag News" releases, the Ag Communications Center developed and mailed a questionnaire October 15, 1986, to 166 statewide and regional news representatives.

Questionnaires were sent to all state daily and weekly newspapers, radio and television stations, wire services, and a category of "other" organizations comprising agricultural magazines, newsletters, and news services.

The response to the first mailing was 85 questionnaires, or 51%. A second mailing to 81 non-responding organizations resulted in a subsequent return of 21 questionnaires, or 26%.

Altogether, 104 completed questionnaires were received from 12 daily newspapers (80%), 44 weekly newspapers (75%), 27 radio stations (44%), six television stations (43%), two wire services (100%), and 13 "others" (87%). The overall response rate was 63%. Table 3 describes the methodology used to determine preference scores.

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How Often Do They Use UI "Ag News" Releases, in Whole or Part?

Table 1. Number of "Ag News" Releases Used in Whole or Part

	Dailies	Weeklies	Radio	TV	Wires	Other	All
1 + /wk.	0 (0)	5 (2)	37 (10)	0 (0)	100 (2)	23 (3)	16 (17)
1/wk.	25 (3)	21 (9)	7 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	15 (2)	15 (16)
2-3/mo.	42 (5)	36 (16)	44 (12)	67 (4)	0 (0)	39 (5)	40 (42)
1/mo.	25 (3)	18 (8)	7 (2)	33 (2)	0 (0)	8 (1)	15 (16)
1 -/mo.	8 (1)	18 (8)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	15 (2)	11 (11)
None	0 (0)	2 (1)	4 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	2 (2)
Total	(12)	(44)	(27)	(6)	(2)	(13)	(104)

Note Responses are expressed as percentage (N).

Results Focus on Use

The two wire services, all of the television stations, 95% of radio stations, 92% of daily newspapers, 85% of "other" organizations, and 80% of weekly newspapers reported using the "Ag News" releases at least once a month.

Many used them once-a-week or more. Both wire services, 44% of radio stations, 38% of "other" organizations, 26% of weekly newspapers, and 25% of daily newspapers indicated such frequent use.

How Do They Rate Their Professional Quality?

Table 2. Rating of Professional Quality of News Releases

	Dailies	Weeklies	Radio	TV	Wires	Other	All
Excellent	17 (2)	18 (8)	4 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	15 (2)	13 (13)
Very good	50 (6)	50 (22)	63 (17)	67 (4)	50 (1)	69 (9)	57 (59)
Good	33 (4)	27 (12)	26 (7)	17 (1)	50 (1)	8 (1)	25 (26)
Fair	0 (0)	5 (2)	7 (2)	17 (1)	0 (0)	8 (1)	6 (6)
Poor	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)
Total	(12)	(44)	(27)	(6)	(2)	(13)	(104)

Note Responses are expressed as percentage (N).

Thirteen percent of all media organizations responding to this question rated UI news releases as "excellent," 57% "very good," and 25% "good."

The highest percentages of "excellent" responses were from the weeklies, dailies, and "other" organizations. Fifty percent of the dailies, weeklies, and wire services rated the news releases "very good," as did 63% of the radio stations, 67% of the TV stations, and 69% of the "other" organizations.

How Useful Are UI Stories as News Tips?

All of the dailies and television stations, 81% of the radio stations, 62% of the "other" organizations, 59% of the weeklies, and one of the two wire services rated UI stories "somewhat useful" as news tips, at least.

The highest percentages of "very useful" ratings were from TV and radio stations; the lowest percentage came from weeklies and wire services.

What About That "Old Bugaboo" "Don't Print Stories on Both Sides?"

For reasons of economy, the UI News Service historically has printed on both sides of the page. Some media indicated they definitely objected. According to the survey, 38% expressed a preference for one-side-only printing. But, 15% liked back-to-back printing, and UI was complimented for its attempt to save resources. Forty-seven percent said they didn't care one way or another.

The highest incidence of preference for one-side-only occurred among the "other" organizations, followed by weeklies.

Those expressing no preference or accepting the status quo included both wire services, 83% of the dailies, 67% of TV stations, and 66% of radio stations.

Should Consumers Be Differentiated?

Survey recipients were asked if consumer-oriented releases should be differentiated from farm news releases. Sixty-three percent of those responding said "yes;" to this question, 34% didn't care; and 4% said "no".

Those responding "yes" included 83% of the dailies, 48% of the weeklies, 74% of the radio stations, 67% of the TV stations, 50% of the wire services, and 69% of the "other" organizations.

Are UI News Releases Readable, Or Too Scientific?

Of those responding, 83% indicated that UI news releases are "generally understandable to the public."

Representatives of the wire services, television stations, and "other" organizations were unanimous about this, and at least four-fifth of the radio stations and weeklies agreed.

However, the daily newspapers did not. Only 50% of daily editors found UI news releases to be "generally understandable," with 42% indicating that they "frequently include too many scientific terms."

How Often And How Helpful Are UI College of Ag Faculty Used as News Sources?

The media group using UI faculty as sources most frequently was the daily newspapers, with 75% of these respondents calling themselves regular users. About 67% of "other" organizations

also regularly used UI faculty as sources, along with 48% of radio stations and 37% of weekly newspapers—but none of the TV stations or wire services indicated faculty use.

Of all respondents, 81%—including wire services and 67% of the TV stations—used UI sources at least “sometimes.”

Perceptions of helpfulness of these sources were quite high, with 63% of all respondents indicating that the sources were “very helpful.” The daily newspapers, which used UI sources most frequently, also rated them highest; 92% of daily editors called them “very helpful”—as did 74% of the radio stations, 53% of the weeklies, 50% of the TV stations, and 46% of the “other” organizations.

Would They Rather Get News Tip Sheets and Forget the News Releases?

Respondents were offered three choices to rank in answering this question—news tips only, news releases only, or both. (Presently, the UI sends only news releases.)

The results overwhelmingly suggest continued use of news releases. Of course, most respondents said they preferred receiving both types of news services, although the two wire services actually preferred the news releases alone to the addition of news tips.

The dailies, weeklies, “other” organizations, and radio stations rated the news-release-only option as second, preferring it to the third-ranked news-tip-only option. The margin was very narrow for the radio news directors (preference scores of 16 for the release and 14 for the tips).

Television stations clearly preferred the news-tips-only option to the news-release-only option (5 and 2).

Preference scores were determined by multiplying each first-choice response by 2, each second-choice response by 1, and each third-choice response by 0, then summing.

What Kinds of Stories Do They Like?

Table 3. Preference for Story Types

	Dailies	Weeklies	Radio	TV	Wires	Other	All
1	A (47)	A (146)	F (98)	C (21)	F (10)	E (45)	A (317)
2	E (34)	E (112)	A (87)	F (19)	D (6)	D (42)	E (292)
3	F (30)	F/C (92)	E (70)	A/D (11)	A/E (5)	F (41)	F (290)
4	D (22)	F/C (92)	C (65)	A/D (11)	A/E (5)	B (29)	D (226)
5	C (18)	D (83)	D (62)	B (7)	B (4)	A (21)	C (213)
6	B (8)	B (46)	B (14)	E (6)	C (0)	C (17)	B (108)

Note A = notices of meetings in your area

B = long feature stories about agricultural science

C = consumer news

D = news stories about scientific breakthroughs

E = practical information for agricultural producers

F = news on the farm economy

The number in parentheses is a preference score, determined by multiplying each first-choice response by 5, each second-choice response by 4, each third-choice response by 3, each fourth-choice response by 2, each fifth-choice response by 1 and each sixth-choice response by 0 then summing.

The respondents were given six story types to rank. Averaging across media groups, the priority rating was:

- 1st Notices of meetings in your area
- 2nd Practical information for agricultural producers
- 3rd News on the farm economy
- 4th News stories about scientific breakthroughs
- 5th Consumer news
- 6th Long feature stories about agricultural science

This was the identical priority rating assigned by the daily newspapers.

Radio stations and wire services gave top ranking to farm economy stories, while television stations preferred consumer news and ranked farm economics second.

“Other” organizations expressed the greatest interest in practical information for agricultural producers.

The average fifth-place ranking of consumer news was puzzling. Perhaps these news organizations do not view the Cooperative Extension Service as a dependable source of such information. Is Extension not giving them enough of it; do they prefer receiving it from other sources; are they really not very interested in the topic—or do they just want the other four options more?

The second-place ranking of practical information for ag producers was another surprise, especially among the dailies. It was expected to rank below scientific breakthroughs.

What Do They Want That They Aren't Getting?

This was an open-ended question that generated 38 responses, 11 of which indicated a desire for more stories about people and activities in their local area.

Other requests were for more stories on “hard” farm economics, money management, the private sector, trade team visits, regional crop outlooks, holidays, 4-H, people features, practical farm advice, consumer issues, PR for Idaho agriculture, genetic engineering, and farm-to-market issues.

One respondent requested fewer local stories, suggesting not very gently that UI writers stick to their own territory (campus and research stations) and not compete with local news representatives!

How Long Should UI Stories Run?

On average, the print-media respondents said they would use in full stories that were up to two pages long. The maximum recommended length of a fully reprinted story was two pages for both of the wire services (100%), 51% of the weeklies, 46% of the dailies, and 18% of the “other” organizations.

Twenty-seven percent of the dailies and 26% of the weeklies said the maximum length was one page or less. Willing to fully reprint stories of three or more pages were 27% of the dailies, 23% of the weeklies, and 45% of the "other" organizations.

Is It Worthwhile to Send Photos?

Eighteen percent of both the weeklies and the "other" media said they used "most or all" of the photos the UI sent them. Seventy percent of the dailies, 64% of the "other" organizations, and 60% of the weeklies said they used at least some. But fully 38% of all respondents said they used few or none.

The reason given most frequently for not using photos was lack of space, followed by not receiving any to use and by policies of using only local-interest photos, staff-produced photos, or exclusives, respectively.

Are They Interested in Electronic Transmission?

Forty-four percent of the dailies, 5% of the weeklies, and 20% of "other" organizations said "yes."

The dailies and weeklies that were not interested all cited technological limitations.

The one wire service that responded to this question (AP) said policy prevented electronic transmission, as did 20% of the "other" organizations.

Conclusions

Survey results are presently under consideration, with no immediate changes under way in current operations. Results were communicated to college administrators and faculty.

The survey may be repeated in several years.