

The County Agent's Newsletter— Is It A Sleeping Giant?

By Robert E. Thomas

For years now, county agents have been encouraged to produce newsletters as one effective way to reach their clientele. If you haven't lately, you might want to check in your state to see just how good of a job they have done.

What you see in the home office may be like that tip on the iceberg. There may be a lot more out there than you think. And depending on how you look at it, those "umpteen" newsletters could poke a hole cost-wise in your program or be a sleeping giant to use in tough budget times. In Washington state, for example, a study was made to determine how newsletters were being printed in the counties and to take a look at the quality of what was going out to the public.

The following data show the breakdown of publications into program areas and also the costs involved in the mailing/distribution of the publications. Printing and other production costs were not calculated.

STATE TOTALS

Total number of newsletters	193		
Clients receiving	79,385		
Yearly mailings	752,569		
3rd Class Bulk (Penalty)	365,183	=	\$45,647.88
1st Class Penalty	366,758	=	80,686.76
1st Class Postage	10,350	=	2,277.00
Hand-delivered	8,670	=	no cost

Project Area	Newsletters	Circulation	Yearly Total
Agriculture	97	39,455	366,325
4-H	45	15,510	146,910
Family Living	48	22,904	236,266
General	3	1,382	8,484

Community Resource Development: CRD information was found in newsletters primarily devoted to all four areas above.

The author is chairman, Editorial Department, Washington State University, Pullman, Washington, and an ACE member.

County agent newsletters have several outstanding benefits. These newsletters represent a built-in communications network to key clientele groups—probably a larger network than the home office realizes. The newsletters have credibility and influence. They give Extension greatly needed visibility during a time when government agencies are being forced to compete for shrinking federal and state dollars. They go into every congressman's district. These newsletters—if standardized—can offer state-wide central identity for the land-grant institution. It is as if a little bit of the university arrives in the client's mailbox each month. The newsletters can be highly localized and deal with problems indigenous to a given geographic area. Newsletters also can serve to keep clientele informed and solicit feedback without the agent ever having to leave his/her office. To realize these benefits, however, steps should be taken to help the county agents in producing their newsletters.

First, the newsletters should look professional without being slick or glossy. Most state Extension organizations include some kind of graphic unit as a part of the publication/printing effort. Such graphic units should provide professional design support in developing layouts and logos for the counties. Tips on printing should be made available, keeping in mind that counties vary greatly in their budgets and the printing equipment available to them.

The state graphic units can also be key in providing formats and designs to realize central identity for the land-grant institution. Information departments within Extension should include training as part of their yearly effort to help agents produce effective newsletters.

Especially important now in a time of budget reductions is working with the counties to be cost effective in producing and mailing newsletters. Mailing lists should be purged regularly and the agents should have a clear understanding of the cheapest postal rates. One point that emerged from the Washington state study is that some agents do not make proper use of third class bulk penalty mail. Over \$80,000 was spent last year on first class penalty mail.

Agents also should be asked to look at the frequency of their newsletters. Would perhaps three times a year be adequate instead of four? Is some consolidation possible? Could formats and page numbers be adjusted for more favorable mailing rates? The size of the savings to be realized from these steps can pay big dividends and is worth the staff time.

At Washington state an effort is now underway in which the program leaders and the information department editors critique agents' newsletters. The program leaders review content and the editor's style, appearance and writing levels. The result is professional feedback to the agents in making their newsletters more effective.

The network of agent newsletters is a valuable program communications tool. But like any good tool, it must be cared for, honed and sharpened.