

Research Briefs

An Evaluation of The Home Economics News Packet

When it comes to getting Extension news to editors, county home economists are effective relays. This fact came to light 3 years ago when I did a master's thesis related to the topic. From information gleaned from the research, I revised the monthly packet of news stories sent to home economists.

I wondered if the news packet was now meeting their needs, how they used the various sections and if additional revision was called for.

In its original form, the packet, "Patchwork Pieces," contained six sections:

Story Extra—a feature story intended for home economists to deliver directly to newspaper editors;

That Personal Angle—a story, usually written in the first person, and in a conversational, easy-reading manner;

Ask The Specialists—a tabulation of questions to state home economics specialists with their answers;

Across The Editor's Desk—news, often research-oriented, from various sources (other land grant universities, USDA, etc.);

Columns—from three to six stories for use in weekly columns; and

Punch Lines—single-paragraph shorts.

With the assistance of summer journalism intern, Kay Hunter, I designed a telephone questionnaire and selected 25 home economists—five each from the five Extension areas in the state. Participants were selected on the basis of the number of years of service: 1 month to 4 years, 5 years to 9 years and 10 years and over. Home economists with only one weekly newspaper in a county and those with more than one weekly or those with a daily also were a consideration in the selection process.

Questions covered each section of the packet: how the section was used, if it was rewritten or localized by home economists, how editors received the copy (mailed or delivered) and if the copy was rewritten or cut by editors. Two open-ended questions about what participants liked or disliked about the packet and how they would like to see it revised concluded the telephone survey.

Respondents overwhelmingly liked the packet. Almost without exception, the material distributed to local editors was used and, in most cases, used as received. Additionally, whether or not home economists knew local editors (they did in most small counties in which only one weekly was published) seemed not to influence story use.

One surprising discovery was the number of different ways home economists used material in the packet. Although the packet is designed for columns and newsletters, the survey revealed that the information also was used for radio, additional news releases, background information, and talks to civic groups. Specialized newsletters were an additional use by many home economists along with their regular monthly newsletters.

The Story Extra, originally designed as a separate news release, was hardly ever used in this manner. Home economists most often used it in columns.

As a result of the study, I changed the packet somewhat. The Story Extra now leads the packet and is the one a home economist can "run with," if need be, as soon as the packet hits her desk. Stories are of various lengths to better fit different media formats. Subject matter within a single packet also has broad representation.

A new section in the packet is an FYI page that features communication ideas for news columns, newsletters or radio. The section is written either by myself or by our publications editor, Myrna Daly.

The study reaffirmed for me the packet's importance in delivering timely, factual stories county home economists can use in local newspapers. Because of the increasing use of media channels and the creativity of home economists, Extension information reaches many audiences for very few dollars.

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