

Research Briefs

Statewide Appeal of a Gardening Packet

The Information Department print media writers in the Washington State University College of Agriculture and Home Economics prepared and distributed a packet of gardening information in 1983 for all weekly and selected dailies in the state. The packet contained 24 items—eight stories and 16 fillers. Five camera-ready graphic pieces (two maps, two illustrations, and one chart) supplemented the items. The material was distributed in January and was published throughout the state from March to mid-July.

Based on a tally of clippings, results show the packet was picked up by nearly 40 percent of the papers contacted, reaching a potential readership of over 1.1 million people—more than 27 percent of the state's population.

A total of 51 newspapers ran at least part of the series, representing 40 percent of the 131 papers contacted. This total included 45 community papers and six dailies.

Story Pick-Up

Story use averaged 2.6 for any one paper, with 26 percent of the papers running up to seven stories. Some 35 percent published as many as four, and about 37 percent ran just one. Four percent (two papers) did not run any stories, only fillers.

The story published most often was printed 22 times. It offered practical gardening tips. It also had the highest potential readership.

Publication rates for the remaining seven stories then gradually declined to 21, 19, 18 (twice), 14, 12, and 10. The topics covered by them, respectively, were planting times, nutritional values, dollar values, garden publications, harvest plans, plant maturity, and food preservation.

In terms of readership, however, the rank order of these stories varied somewhat, depending on whether or not the large circulation dailies used them. Most notably, planting times (the story printed second most often) was sixth in potential readership.

Filler Pick-Up

The 16 fillers were generally not as popular as the stories, although as many as 10 newspapers used at least one of them. Average use was 1.8 for any one paper.

Fillers were more popular among community papers than the dailies. Fourteen weeklies used them, but just two dailies did. Of the dailies, a large metropolitan paper published only one, while a mid-sized paper published five.

Another trend was that, with the exception of the largest daily, if a paper used any fillers, it ran more than one.

The most frequently chosen filler was a warning not to use too much nitrogen on tomatoes. Ten papers ran this.

Next in popularity among editors was advice about killing slugs. Nine papers picked up this item.

The third most frequently printed filler was a recommendation about seed depth when planting. Eight papers used this item, including the large daily. Hence, the potential readership for this one was the highest.

Other Considerations

Additional analysis of the clippings reveals the following.

—Newspapers were selective in the materials they ran. They did not simply run the stories in the sequence of the packet. The most frequently chosen story appeared third in the packet. The second most popular was the opening release, and the third most often chosen was the sixth story.

—Story length probably had little influence on the editors' selection of one story over another, since none of the stories was longer than three pages.

—Artwork may or may not have influenced the editors' choice of stories. The most frequently used story did not include artwork, but the second one did. A camera-ready table apparently did not rescue one story from being used least often. Artwork also did not seem to help the fillers. The two containing illustrations were only selected two and six times, respectively.

Conclusions

Stories vs Fillers

Stories have greater pickup than fillers, especially by dailies. While fillers may supplement a packet, the major preparation effort should go into stories.

If fillers are included, many should be prepared. In this study, if fillers were used at all, generally they were used in clusters.

Dailies vs Weeklies

The philosophic distinction between metropolitan and community papers seems unimportant with certain subjects such as gardening. Hence, writers can aim for both high pick-up, which the number of community papers provide, and high readership (circulation), which the dailies generally provide.

Artwork

No conclusions can be drawn about the use of artwork in this study, since there did not appear to be a pattern of use by editors.

In other contacts with the print media, however, editors have expressed interest in and appreciation for artwork. In fact, such positive remarks prompted the use of artwork in the packet.

*Mark A. Claesgens
Washington State University*