

# Research Briefs

## *Science in Agriculture* Evaluated at Penn State

*Science in Agriculture*, the 30-year-old quarterly magazine of the College of Agriculture at Penn State, was analyzed for reader interest and author satisfaction during the academic year 1980-1981. The publication features research but includes extension and resident education articles.

The overall and predominant mood of readers, as indicated in the survey, is very supportive of *Science in Agriculture* as now published. An "average" reader could be characterized as male, middle-aged, college-educated, engaged in some form of agriculture or agribusiness, interested in learning more about a broad spectrum of topics in agriculture, and hence, an avid reader of *Science in Agriculture*. The study is in general agreement with a random sample telephone survey made in 1970.

One of the strong factors enhancing *Science in Agriculture* has been the editorial committee that obtains 13 to 15 articles for each of four annual issues. Committee members, in touch with all faculty members, locate authors and specific articles from research, extension, and resident education. The contents are mostly bylined articles, given to the editor.

Donald Crider of the rural sociology faculty developed and directed the study of reader and author comments, plus a 10-year content analysis. One questionnaire went to 5,850 addresses in the United States and a separate questionnaire was mailed to 480 faculty members at Penn State. The response rate for each mailing was over 60 percent.

Readers were overwhelmingly males, 89 percent. One-third

identified themselves as farmers. Other readers classified themselves primarily as 7 percent agribusiness, 10 percent educators, and 16 percent professionals.

**Education**—*Science in Agriculture* is read by a well-educated population. More than half, 54 percent, have graduated from college, and 49 percent of those went on to earn graduate degrees. Only a small number of readers, 7 percent, reported no formal education beyond high school.

**Ages**—Readers were spread across the active and mature years. People in the ages from 26 to 50 totaled 47 percent, while those in the age group from 51 to 70 came to 39 percent. Equal proportions of readers, 7 percent, were at the extremes of the age spread—under 25 and over 71 years of age.

**Reasons for reading**—The vast majority, 77 percent, reported that they read *Science in Agriculture* to learn what is new in agriculture. An overwhelming 79 percent checked “I like a general mix of articles on a wide variety of topics.” When 27 percent specified what subjects were preferred in that mix, they most often selected—about equally—articles on education in agriculture, rural life, and mechanical arts in agriculture.

**How thoroughly was it read and when?**—The quarterly was read “completely, from cover to cover,” by 43 percent of the respondents. Others reported more selective reading, either by “what appeals at a glance,” 26 percent; or “just the articles related to my work,” 34 percent. Reading for one-third of the people took place on the day it arrived while another 54 percent read it within the week.

**Retention of copies**—Relatively few people discard *Science in Agriculture*. Many readers keep it for future reference, 48 percent; pass it on to friends, 20 percent; or put it with other reading material, 29 percent. To the question, “How many persons read your copy?” the estimates ran from 1 to 50 persons, accounting for as many as 2,500 readers in addition to the total mailing of 7,293.

**Recommendations for improvement**—Eighty-one percent of the readers indicated “keep it just as it is.” Of those who marked the block, “change it as follows,” the pattern of answers suggested using more articles in areas of readers’ special interests. A few novel ideas were presented such as, “make it like a tabloid newspaper and publish it more often.” Such suggestions, however, were not common.

**Faculty authors responded favorably**—Faculty members were generally favorable toward *Science in Agriculture* as an outlet for reporting research. They responded to a Likert-type scale graded from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Authors gave 81-percent agreement to this statement: *Science in Agriculture* is a popular presentation of research findings, with more substantive reports in other forms by the same scientist. Fifty-one percent “agreed” and 30 percent “strongly agreed” with this statement. The faculty highly favored the current makeup of the quarterly with 73 percent very much opposed to the idea of reducing the number of articles to allow for more lengthy reports (14 articles is the average on 16 pages).

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## **Evaluating the Readership of a State Commodity Publication**

Many farm magazines tailor more of their editorial and advertising lineage to appear in late fall and winter when farmers aren't busy with field work.

It's a lesson what we shouldn't forget. You wouldn't read much if you were working 18-hour days in the field, would you?

In early November, 1982, we did a telephone readership study of *Minnesota Wheat*, the monthly publication of the Minnesota Wheat Research and Promotion Council. *Minnesota Wheat* is a monthly tabloid newspaper that varies from four to eight pages. It is mailed to over 34,000 Minnesota farmers who contribute to the Minnesota Wheat Research and Promotion Council through a 1 per cent bushel check-off program. Funds are used for market development, promotion, and research. The council helps fund wheat research at the University of Minnesota's Agricultural Experiment Station.

For the past 2 years we've prepared some special articles for *Minnesota Wheat's* annual progress edition in October. We did stories based on various research projects the Wheat Council helps fund. Our question was how well farmers read