

The Side Benefits Make It Worthwhile

Henri E. Drews

“OVER THE RIVER and through the woods, to grandmother’s house we go . . .”

In that song the objective is grandmother’s place. The purpose is the pleasure of a visit. There is also pleasure from the trip itself, the river, and the woods, but you might say those pleasures are incidental to the end purpose. They are similar and almost as rewarding. You might take the ride in the country even if it didn’t lead to grandma’s.

A readership survey can be like a visit to grandma’s. Through the survey you aim to improve your product, but in doing so some improvements come naturally. Have you surveyed your readers in the last few years? Why do you hesitate? I’m sure you’re not afraid of what you might learn, but do you doubt that the information is worth the time and work? Take my advice — try a readership survey. The incidental benefits alone are worth the effort. In setting up a survey, you will do things that improve your product, its system, and its audience acceptance.

I evaluated *Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes*, one of many extension periodicals produced by the Department of Information and Agricultural Journalism at the University of Minnesota. Over 5,000 copies of MTTN are printed each quarter and sent to the County Extension offices. The agents, in turn, send them to resort owners, outfitters and others on their special county mailing lists. The purpose is to bring University-originated information and other pertinent material to the resort industry. Articles focus on new practices, trends, and regulations.

I wanted to know if the material was read and valued. Was it reaching the target audience without wasting delivery to disinterested people? What were the demographic characteristics of the audience? Did the style and content suit their needs?

To find these answers I designed a 36-question reader survey. Some questions required a simple “yes” or “no”; others were complex, with as many as 20 parts. Realizing that such a long questionnaire might be too imposing to draw a large response, I livened it up with a cartoon character and plenty of white space. I reasoned that people would be more likely to answer an 8-page questionnaire if they are entertained by a smiling, little two-dimensional fellow who would explain things as he walked across and through the pages.



Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes
MEMBERSHIP SURVEY



"First we're giving it a physical check-up."

1. For easier reading do you think the type column size...
(check one) too wide just right too narrow

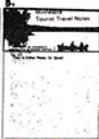
2. Are the articles in Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes...
(check one) too long too short about right

3. Which of the following layouts would you prefer to see in future issues of Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes?
a _____ b _____ c _____ d _____

A.



B.



C.



D.



4. Changing the magazine's first page or cover layout would be...
(check one) very desirable desirable undesirable immaterial to me

5. Normally the publication is 8 pages long. Would you rather have it make...
(check one) 7 pages 8 pages 9 pages 10 pages 11 pages 12 pages

6. If the periodical were "short-hole punched" would it be...
(check one) very useful somewhat useful makes no difference

7. Do you save past issues? yes no

8. Concerning the graphics in the magazine, are there enough...
charts yes no
maps yes no
pictures yes no

9. Is the quality of the graphics generally... (answer for each)
charts excellent good poor
maps excellent good poor
pictures excellent good poor

10. What, in your opinion, is the first impression of Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes for someone who is unfamiliar with it? (check one in each category)

<u>Attractiveness</u>	<u>Interest</u>	<u>Readability</u>
<input type="checkbox"/> attractive	<input type="checkbox"/> very interesting	<input type="checkbox"/> easy to read
<input type="checkbox"/> average	<input type="checkbox"/> somewhat interesting	<input type="checkbox"/> readable
<input type="checkbox"/> unattractive	<input type="checkbox"/> uninteresting	<input type="checkbox"/> difficult reading

"How we must see if it serves its purpose -- communicating tourist information"



11. Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes is published 4 times a year.
How often do you read at least part of it?
 every issue every other issue less than every other issue

12. Which of the following statements best describes how thoroughly you read Minnesota Tourist Travel Notes?
 read most articles thoroughly
 read a few articles and skip the rest
 usually skip the articles

Altogether, there would be enough data from each questionnaire to fill all 80 columns of a computer card at analysis time. It seemed there would be more information than we could analyze, but that seemed preferable to overlooking valuable data.

Of the 475 readers who received the questionnaire, 43 percent did respond. The analysis gave the editor and writers concrete information on what their audience wanted. For example, Table 1 summarizes the results of the most complex question. It gave useful information about the sort of content the readers prefer and the usefulness related to the number of people who read an entire article. Those ratings were highest on practical topics such as "how-to," success stories, or industry information. The difficulty of the material seemed to have little effect on whether an article drew readers; the subject matter seemed more important.

We learned how old, how educated, and how communicative the readers are about topics in the magazine. We learned how many years they had in the business, how large or small their operations were, how long they've read MTTN and how it compares with other tourism publications as a source of useful information. We got opinions on layout and content, length and style, as well as suggestions for future articles.

In brief, the survey met its objectives. Areas for improvement were defined. Thus, the time spent "at grandma's house" was valuable. But what about the "getting there" that I mentioned earlier?

Questionnaires don't just happen. I had to probe, ponder, and do some preliminary work to decide what information was necessary and what parameters must apply.

The ten hours or so that I spent on the preliminary work may have been the most valuable time in terms of immediate effect on the product. My efforts at this stage led to improved writing and distribution of MTTN.

In writing, for instance, the probe for information basic to the questionnaire led to:

1. Better understanding of the publication's purpose among extension staff.
2. New perspectives and source material for the editor.
3. Identification of a few contributors who were writing above acceptable readability levels.
4. Renewed enthusiasm for the editor because someone else was showing real interest in his work.

In the distribution stage, the preliminary work led to:

1. The review of long-neglected mailing lists in the counties.
2. Some agents recognizing the need to give more attention to the tourism industry as a worthy use of Minnesota land.
3. Broadened mailing lists including people in other occupations.
4. Improved "reach" through secondary disseminators.

Exactly what steps caused such happenings? Just the simple preparations for a good questionnaire.

I determined the number of people needed to have a reliable sample. The names would be chosen randomly from a central list of readers which I had to gather from the counties.

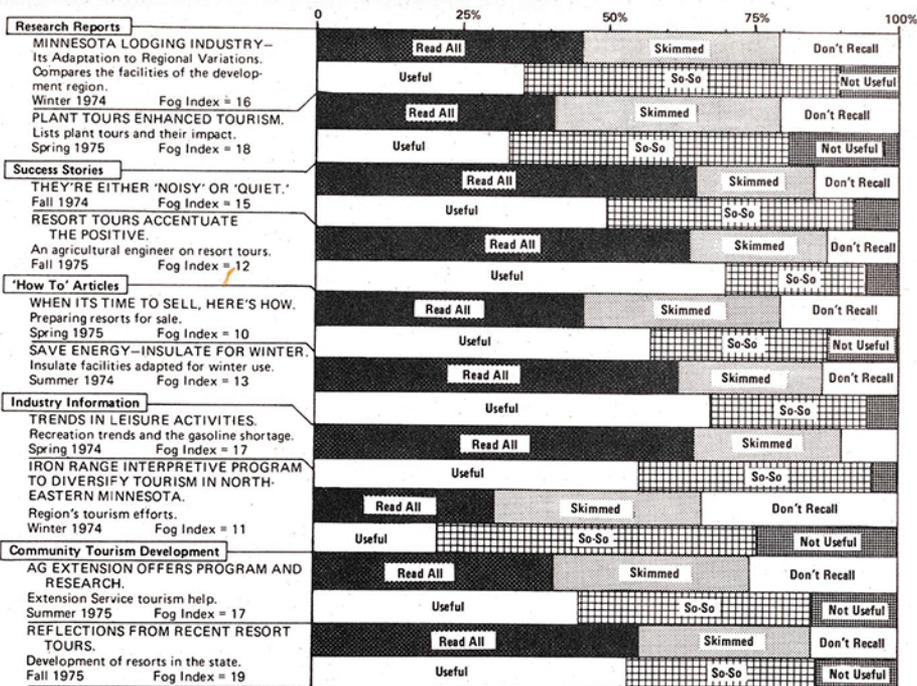
Since I had to write each county office anyway, I polled agents about how often they updated their mailing lists and also about their attitudes toward the tourism publication.

A letter explained my project and asked their assistance. I mentioned the importance of tourism to Minnesotans. A brief questionnaire gained the desired information while subtly suggesting occupations of others who might be interested in reading MTTN. The poll was to be returned along with a copy of their mailing list.

While the first step was in the mail, I pulled recent issues of the periodical, and with the editor's help, categorized the five types of articles that appear. We had to understand what content the readers were used to so we could see if they favored the emphasis of one type of article over others. We compiled a list of other tourism magazines which could serve as information sources for people in the industry. Audience reaction to these could serve as a measure of our comparative success. Major contributing authors were asked to give their views about the survey and the periodical. This topical discussion gave everyone concerned a few new ideas.

To establish our starting point on readability, I calculated the fog index for each of ten articles from recent issues, two from each of the five

Table 1. Articles, Readability and Usefulness



categories. The fog index value would serve as a comparison against the percent of readers who claimed to have read that particular article when the reader survey was finally analyzed. Before the survey was even sent, however, the fog index identified which contributing authors were guilty of writing at too difficult a grade level for easy reading. One rated at the 17th grade school level of readability. The editor could act on that information before the next issue came out.

The preliminary survey of the agents helped distribution efforts on MTTN. Many delayed the return of the survey because their county mailing list was "not in suitable shape just yet." Second and third mailings finally got them all. I'm sure the publication began reaching more people with the next issue because the survey revealed that almost 6 percent of the respondents had seen only one issue before getting the questionnaire. The survey suffered from that fact, but at least we knew we were reaching a larger audience. Among the new recipients were teachers, newspaper publishers, and community developers such as Chamber of Commerce members. Thus the distribution system included more secondary disseminators, which should improve information flow while stimulating more public interest.

About five percent of the questionnaires were returned by the Post Office as undeliverable. This indicates that more work still is needed on the distribution lists.

You can bet, however, that the mailing list and readability situation is worse for any publication that hasn't undergone a readership survey recently. Get off the fence. Shake up your publication and reap some of the side benefits that make it worthwhile.

My questionnaire wasn't perfect. There was room for improvement, but if you would like a copy to help you design a questionnaire for your use, just send your request to:

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HENRI E. DREWS is an artist on the University of Minnesota Extension Staff since 1972. He received a Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree from the U of M in 1973. The article on readership research results from a survey he conducted as part of a recently completed Master of Agriculture Degree. He is curious about the merit of an aesthetic and entertaining questionnaire as an aid to better response rates. Regrettably, the split run test which might have confirmed his theory during this survey would have been too costly.