

Farmers Read Wheat Newspaper Most in Winter

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 that 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 one cent per 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 two 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 the articles. Published stories give benchmark figures on readership for state and national farm magazines, but I've never seen any for state commodity publications like MINNESOTA WHEAT.

In addition to questions on readership about specific articles dealing with research, I worked with the council to develop questions regarding farmer preference for frequency and length of the publication, when it was read most, and whether farmers would object to advertising in the publication (the publication did not print advertising at that time).

The Wheat Council provided us with an "almost random" sample of 130 names from their total mailing (34,000). We originally aimed at a sample of 100. That was done by drawing every 329th name on the list. However, telephone numbers could not be uncovered for about 15, so we drew another 30 names by taking every 1,000th name. That gave us 130 names—110 with telephone numbers.

After an initial screening question to find out if respondents received the October issue of MINNESOTA WHEAT, we had three categories of questions on the survey:

—When farmers read the publication the most. We had three time periods: November through March, April through June, and July through October. Response categories were: *read most*, (defined as having read 75 percent or more of the publication); *read some* (50 percent or more); *glanced at*; and *did not read*.

—Readership for specific articles, both the research stories generated by us and stories on council activities and market development produced or solicited by staff people at MINNESOTA WHEAT.

—General questions about the publication. Staff and board members of the Wheat Council were already considering making some changes in the publication before we did the study. One question the Wheat Council had was whether farmers would object to advertising in the paper. They also wondered if farmers would prefer a one-page newsletter, as opposed to the present format.

Our overall response rate was 76 percent (we reached 84 of the 110 on the list via telephone). But only 36 percent (30 respondents) said they'd received the October issue. Another 27 percent (23 respondents) answered "I don't know." That probably meant most of them had received the publication but hadn't yet uncovered it due to the busy harvest season.

We couldn't ask questions about readership of the October issue if they hadn't received it. But we did ask the 23 people who "didn't know" if they'd received the October issue what months they read it the most. We also asked the questions about advertising and publication format, so we had 53 respondents for those portions of the questionnaire.

Respondents gave an overwhelming margin to November through March as the months when they read the publication the most. Of the 53 respondents, an even 75 percent said they either *read most* (49 percent) or *read some* (26 percent) articles during these months. Another 17 percent answered *glanced at*; 4 percent said *do not read* (4 percent, no response).

From April through June, 9 percent said *read most*; 34 percent *read some*; 42 percent said *glanced at*; 8 percent said *do not read*. Another 8 percent said *do not read*, and there was 8 percent *no response*.

For the July through October period, figures were 8 percent *read most*; 21 percent *read some*, 47 percent *glanced at*; 15 percent *did not read* and 9 percent *no response*.

Here are answers to other questions asked of the 53 respondents:

—Does MINNESOTA WHEAT have:

- not enough information . . . 17 percent
- about the right amount of information . . . 53 percent
- too much information . . . 15 percent
- no opinion . . . 4 percent
- no response . . . 11 percent

—Would you prefer a one-page newsletter instead of the way the paper is now?

- yes . . . 36 percent
- no . . . 49 percent
- no opinion . . . 6 percent
- no response . . . 9 percent

—How useful would you find agricultural advertising in MINNESOTA WHEAT?

- very useful . . . 6 percent
- useful . . . 47 percent
- not useful . . . 36 percent
- no opinion . . . 6 percent
- no response . . . 6 percent

—Would you object to advertising in the paper?

- yes . . . 15 percent
- no . . . 74 percent
- no opinion . . . 2 percent
- no response . . . 9 percent

—How much of the October issue did you read?

- read most articles . . . 4 percent
- read some articles . . . 13 percent
- glanced at . . . 19 percent
- did not read . . . 34 percent
- will read later . . . 11 percent
- no response . . . 19 percent

With readership questions for specific stories, we had 30 respondents (the ones who said they'd received the October issue). Highest readership score was for an article about overseas marketing activities entitled "U.S. Wheat Around the World." Of the 30 respondents, 13 percent said they *read most* and another 13 percent said they *read some*. Another 17 percent said they *glanced at* it, while 53 percent said they *didn't read* it (3 percent *no response*).

That isn't particularly high readership for a specialized farm publication. Did not read figures ranged from a low of 53 percent to a high of 73 percent for the publication's editorial.

The busy time of the year was an obvious reason why readership wasn't higher. Another reason is that although practically all farmers on the list grow wheat, it's a minor commodity to many of them. So although these farmers grow some wheat, their primary livelihood comes from a combination of corn, soybeans and livestock.

Among the recommendations I made to the Wheat Council was to wait a month before publishing their annual progress issue.

That's the issue that has the annual audit and other summary information on the council's activities. It's a larger issue (8 pages) compared to the usual 4-page edition.

Shortly after the study was completed, the Wheat Council voted to have the publication produced and printed by a different publishing company. Advertising will be carried in the publication. But I *hope* they don't print the annual progress edition again in October—unless we have an early fall harvest!

I suspect we're all alike in one respect. When we produce a radio spot, develop illustrations or edit a publication, we'd like as many people as possible to see the fruits of our labor. But if we have any choice in the matter, we should think twice before overloading farmers with information during busy field work periods.

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