

Reaching the Urban and Farm Press With Agricultural News-features

In January 1983 we surveyed Connecticut newspaper editors and U.S. farm newspaper editors on their preference and possible use of four news-features on various agricultural topics. This was done via a query letter containing a brief summary of each article and a return self-addressed, postage-paid postal card request for articles.

Articles described work done by the research, extension, and resident instruction faculty in our College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Articles varied from three to four pages in length when typewritten double spaced on one side of the paper.

We pointed out in a letter that these articles were written in nontechnical, popular style to be easily understood by the public.

A partial description of each article as it appeared in the letter was as follows:

. . . A pioneering study is being conducted by two researchers at the Storrs (Connecticut) Agricultural Experiment Station on growing lettuce successfully without soil.

. . . Connecticut dairy farmers prepare to survive the threatening effects of economic storm aimed at curbing Bossy's milk output this year.

. . . Entomologist Roger Adams writes on his significant work on getting the state's sweet corn growers to reduce insecticide use on their crop by up to 50 percent.

. . . And the Department of Plant Science is offering new academic programs in landscape design and landscape history for undergraduate and graduate students.

Response to our every other month news-features service can be described as a modest one. We received requests from editors of eight out of the 25 Connecticut daily newspapers including one from an editorial page editor. The majority of these editors requested to receive all of the four articles. Although we had hoped that more editors would respond, we, at least, could claim that the papers, when taken together, reach readers living in all of the state's eight counties. The combined circulation of these dailies in our highly urbanized state of 3.1 million people was 494,250, as reported by the Audit Bureau of Circulations of Chicago in the 1982 issue of "Editor and Publisher Yearbook."

Our queries to the weekly newspapers differed from that of the dailies in that we included one complete article with the query let-

ter and return card. We sent this mailing to 13 of the state's 66 weekly newspapers—excluding shopping-type papers—in both suburban and rural areas. The two weeklies which responded asked for copies of the other three articles.

Six farm newspaper editors from five states and one from Ontario, Canada, out of 20 surveyed asked to receive some of the articles.

Finally, we mailed articles to appropriate general monthly farm papers and trade publications. No attempt was made to query these editors ahead of time, as we did with the newspaper editors.

The tally showed that the lettuce story received the largest number of requests (15) and the landscape design story for students had the least number of requests (10).

After studying the responses, we plan to make the following changes in the production and distribution of our news-features service to the urban and farm press.

1. All articles will be kept to two and one-half to three pages long instead of three to four pages in length as were the current four news-features. This is in keeping with suggestions made by two Connecticut newspaper editors who prefer to have shorter stories because of space limitations in their papers.

2. Where feasible, we will offer the editors photographs to illustrate the stories. This offer will appear at the end of the article and will be filled either by a phone call or by written request from the editor. Only a line drawing of the lettuce-growing technique was included in the news-features set.

3. All future news-features will be sent to the state's 25 daily newspapers, plus a covering page summarizing the content for each article. This would at least give editors copies of the stories in case they wanted to feature them in their papers. Additionally, benefits to the readers would be emphasized in the story summaries on the covering page.

4. Editors will be asked to send tear sheets showing the use of our news features. Admittedly, this practice is frowned upon, but it might give an agricultural communicator like me an excuse to inquire how this service is being received and used.

Bud Gavitt
University of Connecticut