

Georgia Farmers' Listening Habits

Tom Hallman

I know you don't like long, tedious narratives. Neither do I. So, very simply, here's what this report is about:

Roland Brooks, Joe Courson and Bob Molleur, Georgia extension's broadcast news specialists, need to know more about their farm audience. When do Georgia farmers listen to the radio? Do they watch their local television news? What kind of agricultural information do they want from the broadcast media?

The boss asked me to help find out.

I had lots of help myself:

Dr. Chidambaram Sivasailam, Extension Computer Analyst, helped me develop a concise, computer-compatible questionnaire, then wrote the computer program which put all the results together. Without Chad's efforts, you wouldn't be reading this report.

Elaine Guess of the Rural Development Center staff entered more than 4,000 bits of data on the computer. And she did it with precision.

Joe Courson gave me invaluable direction every step of the way, and Rob Williams provided the administrative support to keep me going.

Dr. Doug Bachtel, Roland Brooks and Bob Molleur helped me figure out what I needed to ask farmers and how to go about asking them.

District directors, district ag agents and county extension directors responsible for these counties gave me the pool of farmers to work with: Appling, Ben Hill, Bleckley, Bulloch, Calhoun, Colquitt, Elbert, Emanuel, Hancock, Haralson, Jasper, Macon, Spalding, Terrell, Towns and Worth.

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And 109 Georgia farmers took time out to complete and return the survey questionnaires.

With all that going for me, my job was easy.

Purpose and Methods

The study aimed to do two things: Get a general idea of when farmers listen to radio and watch television news, and find out what kind of agricultural information they most want to receive from broadcast sources. Using the results of this study, we would strengthen our agricultural information services to farmers in the state.

After talking with Roland, Joe and Bob to find out what kind of information they needed, I wrote, revised and rewrote a brief questionnaire to mail to a sample of farmers. The questionnaire and accompanying cover letter follow this narrative.

Nowhere in the cover letter or questionnaire did I mention that the Georgia Extension Service was the source. I feared that by letting farmers know extension was behind it all, I might get biased results.

So I mailed the survey out under the name "Southeastern Research Bureau." That's a term Joe Courson created for an earlier research project, so I left the directorship to him. I called myself the associate director.

The questionnaires were color coded. I promised anonymity, but the color code still enabled me to tell whether each respondent lived in the southwest, southeast, central or north area of the state. (I combined the north and north central extension districts into one area for this study.)

Selecting the mailing list was not such a precise science. To begin with I decided to mail the questionnaires to fifteen farmers in each of five counties in the southwest district, three counties each in the central and southeast districts and two each in the north and north central districts. That placed the greater emphasis on the more heavily agricultural area of the state.

In all but the southwest district, I literally pulled sample counties out of a hat. I mixed slips of paper with the names on each county in a district on them in my Sunbelt Ag Expo cap, I looked up at the ceiling and pulled out the appropriate number of counties. For the southwest district I sat down with district ag agent Jimmy Savage and we pulled counties out of the air.

Counties in hand, I called county extension directors and asked them to help me pick 15 random names from their general farm mailing lists. In some cases they simply sent me whole lists and I picked random names — every fifth or fifteenth name, say, depending on the size of the list. Then I either applied the mailing labels myself or sent the questionnaires to the county Extension office, whichever the county extension director preferred.

In every case I tried to keep the list as random as possible, yet still as easy for the county staffs as I could. After all, the county folks were going out of their way to help me.

Now that's probably not the most scientific way to generate a mailing list. I suppose I could have used a random number program on some computer to select counties and names. But I consider this random enough for in-house, hip-pocket research. If you're not convinced, read the conclusions narrative.

About two weeks after the initial questionnaires were mailed, I saw that I was in for trouble. Responses trickled in. I decided that if I were to have numbers significant enough to work with, I'd have to increase my sample size.

The key thought on my mind now was not so much keeping the sample random as it was keeping it representative. I plucked one county out of the northern part of the state and one from the southwest and added 30 names from each. Then I asked Gary Lee in Bulloch County (southeast district) to help me increase the sample there from 15 to 30 names.

Final count: 300 surveys mailed. I received 109 in time to enter them on the computer. That's a response rate of more than 36 percent. Some surveys are, as of this writing date, still coming in.

Findings and Results

Question One: Where They Listen to Radio: Overwhelmingly, farmers tune in to the radio in their trucks (79.8 percent) and at home (78 percent). You'll find 66 percent listening in their cars. Following are barn (33 percent), tractor (30 percent) and harvesting equipment (9 percent).

The important thing to keep in mind is that farmers listen a lot while they're driving. If you give them a phone number to call while they're in the truck, they can't write it down. Better to keep messages brief, simple. You're probably doing that already.

At least for me, this dispels the myth that farmers spend their afternoons in the airconditioned luxury of a big combine cab with the FM stereo piping away. Maybe you'll find that in Kansas. In Georgia, only nine of 109 farmers who answered the survey indicated having a commercial radio unit in their combines.

This question might help you figure out, too, when the farmers listen. At the height of harvest when they're pulling down 14-hour days to beat the weather, they aren't listening. Likewise, you're not likely to find the radio on while they're out in the fields in mid-afternoon.

But the next question addresses that a little better.

Question Two: Times Preferred: When do farmers listen? What's the best time to get a message to farmers over the radio? Best chances are morning and lunchtime. Not at night.

At the risk of burdening you with statistics, I've added this chart to help explain the results:

TIME	CUMM. PERC., TOP 3	CUMM. PERC., BOTTOM 3
5-7	31	51
7-9	67	9
9-11	47	19
11-1	73	7
1-3	24	15
3-6	22	21
6-8	29	21
8-11	12	67
after 11	7	82

The chart shows how often farmers rated each time as one of their top three choices, and as one of the last three choices.

What that tells us is that a third of the farmers who answered the question list 5-7 a.m. as one of the top three times they listen to the radio. But half of them listed it as one of the least frequent times they tune in.

The old stereotype says that farmers get up at five in the morning (or earlier, if the rooster crows) to start their day. A third of them still get up early and cut the radio on. That's certainly significant. But a majority appears to have an aversion to listening to the early morning radio show.

The computer didn't run any cross-tabulations on this, but I did take the time to look through the questionnaires for it. I didn't see any evidence that age had anything to do with whether a farmer listed 5-7 a.m. as a top choice or a bottom choice. So it doesn't look like the young guys are sleeping in while the older farmers can't kick the up-with-the-sun habit.

I have an encouraging word for lunchtime farm news. A whopping 73 percent marked 11 a.m. to 1 p.m. as one of their top three choices. If you're not already trying to reach that time slot, you should be. The audience is there.

The 7-9 a.m. slot gets good marks, too. But I understand morning drivetime is a tough market to crack. Don't worry about afternoon drivetime. The numbers aren't very impressive for it. And you won't find many Georgia farmers listening at night.

Question Three: What Music? Farmers prefer country music. In distant second are easy listening and "a little of everything." Rock picked up less than 4 percent of the farmers responding.

I know this one is tough to gauge. I can't tell you where the dividing line is between country and easy listening. Maybe these farmers can't either. But most of them will tell you they prefer country music, even if what they're listening to is "easy listening" to you.

Question Four: Why Do They Listen to Radio? Music and news tied for the top spot in why farmers listen to the radio. The only comment I'll make here is that farmers who tune in mostly for news may be tuning in only at the specific times they know they can hear a news show. That's going out on a limb, but it's a possibility.

Still, there are lots of them whistling along with the music.

Question Five: How Often Do They Watch TV? Georgia farmers watch their local TV news programs. In droves. Of those responding, 73 percent said they watch regularly. Another 21 percent said they tune in occasionally. Only six of the 108 responding marked "seldom" or "never" to the question.

Local television news reaches farmers.

Question Six: Which Ones? If you want to reach Georgia farmers with TV news, do so in the evenings. That's when 76 percent tune in. Late news, morning shows and lunchtime shows draw 37 percent, 25 percent and 22 percent respectively.

Question Seven: What Do They Want? What do farmers want to hear in broadcast news? Mostly they want weather forecasts. Weather drew 89 percent high interest and another 8 percent mild interest.

Market reports come next, followed by news on farm legislation, crop production advice, disease/pest projections, yard and garden tips and information for homemakers.

Let's be fair. No doubt if we'd surveyed farmers' wives, homemaker information would have fared much better.

Frankly, I don't think you can go wrong with farm broadcasts. Everything listed got good marks. Farmers appear hungry for information. But like anyone else, they seem to prefer timely information to timeless features.

Question Eight: Are They Regular Viewers? Only 22 percent of the farmers surveyed watch a farm TV program regularly. Again, the computer didn't run cross-tabulations to find out who tuned in. I did that by hand.

Not surprisingly, the majority (67 percent) of those who do watch farm programs live in the central and southwest portions of the state. That's where the farm shows are broadcast, I understand.

Question Nine: How About Educational TV? Less than 10 percent of the farmers reported watching educational television regularly. But another 46 percent say they watch occasionally. That's enough to make me think that if there's something on ETV that pertains to them, a lot of farmers will tune in. A show on the price support program, say, or a peanut production telelecture.

Question Ten: On Information Sources: Where do Georgia farmers go for farm information? Check the next chart.

SOURCE	CUMM. PERC., TOP 3	CUMM. PERC., BOTTOM 3
consultants	14	46
farm press	81	0
seed, fert., chem.	35	6
county agent	82	3
local paper	14	18
workshops, seminars	14	21
equip. salesmen	1	41
radio	11	19
TV	9	24

other farmers	46	3
cooperatives	11	25
other	0	78

Again, the first column of figures shows what percentage of the farmers responding ranked each information source as their first, second or third choice. The other column shows what percentage ranked each source as one of the last three places they go for farm information.

The big winners: county extension agents first, farm press second, other farmers third, and then the man at the local farm center who supplies seed, fertilizer and chemicals.

The losers in this poll: private consultants, equipment salesmen, farm cooperatives and TV.

Remember, the questionnaire was in no way linked to extension. When it arrived at farmers' mailboxes there was no hint that an extension editor mailed it to them. We didn't even send it in franked envelopes. We bought stamps.

So I'm especially happy to see county agents rank first as the source for farm information. Happy, but not really surprised.

Admittedly, I used county extension mailing lists to create the audience. So all the farmers who got the questionnaire have had some contact with extension. But I'm happy anyway.

Kudos, too, for farm press. Not one farmer ranked farm newspapers and magazines in the bottom three. In fact, no one ranked it lower than sixth on the information shopping list. Farm press gets the message out.

And we ought to keep those "other farmers" in mind. Word of mouth is the most effective means of communication. It's especially important to farmers.

As for radio, TV and local newspapers — let's just say we've got room to grow.

Question Eleven: Size of Farm: Fairly even distribution in the number of acres these folks farm. In the 100 acres or less category, 22 percent; 300 or less, 27 percent; 600 or less, 19 percent; more than 600, 25 percent. Another 7 percent said they don't farm. No list is perfect.

Here's what my hand cross-tab has to say about where they live. Understandably, nearly two-thirds of those who farm more

than 600 acres live in the central and southwest areas of the state (62 percent, to be precise). However, some of the big farmers live in the north and southeast areas. In the north, they're livestock farmers.

Question Twelve: What Kind of Farmers? What do they farm? More than half (53 percent) farm row crops. Another 22 percent run livestock. Vegetables and orchards claim less than 10 percent combined, and another 19 percent mix two or more of the above.

No need to tell you that livestock reigns in the northern part of the state, claiming 49 percent of the surveys we received from that section, according to my hand cross-tab.

Question Thirteen: Level of Education: I've heard someone — I think it was Tal DuVall — say that farmers generally have more education than the average citizen. Bingo.

In this study, 44 percent report having some college education. For 23 percent that means a four-year degree or more. Less than 20 percent reported not finishing high school.

Your farm audience is educated — at least those on my extension lists were.

Question Fourteen: Age? FYI, half of the farmers in this survey fall in the 35-55 age bracket. Another 32 percent are over 55, and 19 percent are 34 or younger.

Highest participation in this study came from the northern part of the state (33 percent), followed by central (24 percent), southwest (23 percent) and southeast (19 percent). The percentage of returns based on the number I mailed were: north (40 percent), central (58 percent), southeast (35 percent) and southwest (24 percent). Wish I knew what got into those central district farmers.

Some Quick Conclusions

Label this hip-pocket research.

You won't find any ".05 confidence interval" here. I can't say assuredly that my findings are 95 percent correct. What I can say is they give you a good idea about our farmers' broadcast listening habits.

If I ever have this to do over again — and I hope I do — there are some things I'd do differently. For one, I'd spend a little more time building a random mailing list. And I'd send out more than 300 surveys.

But the biggest change I'd make can be credited to Doug Bachtel. It's not so much a change as an addition: adding *qualitative* research to this quantitative data.

After all, what are a writer's strengths? Asking questions. Organizing and writing the answers. That's qualitative research in a nutshell.

So when we repeat this process some years down the road, let's remember that. I will.

In the meantime I hope there's something in these results to help you communicate with farmers.

That's the name of the game.

