

A Survey of Viewers Across the Fence

Lyn Jarvis

"The Extension Service and Experiment Station of the University of Vermont present your daily farm and home program, ACROSS THE FENCE."

Those words have become familiar to thousands of viewers who watch the program Monday through Friday afternoons on WCAX-TV, Vermont's only UHF television station.

On February 14, 1980, the program celebrated its 25th birthday. It is the longest running daily farm and home television series in the nation. Three Extension specialists have been responsible for the quarter century of programming.¹

The 17-minute program features extension staff and specialists who present information of current and topical interest. All programs are scripted with heavy emphasis on visual support, such as studio props, slides, films and on-location video sequences.

The latest Nielsen ratings indicate that ACROSS THE FENCE is viewed by 90,000 people each day. The coverage pattern of the program includes virtually all of Vermont, northwestern New Hampshire, northeastern New York, and as far north as Montreal, Canada. The rating figure does not include Canadian viewers, but mail response from across the border indicates another 40,000 daily viewers.

Knowing the audience, their needs and interests is an im-

¹Lloyd Williams guided the program through its initial year; Karin Kristiansson produced the show for 19 years until 1975; and Lyn Jarvis has produced the show since 1975.

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portant factor in planning program topics. In 1962, a survey of ACROSS THE FENCE viewers was conducted to determine their interests and backgrounds.

The survey was designed to provide viewer statistics such as age, sex, education, income, children at home, occupation and place of residence. Along with this demographic information, those surveyed were asked to list ACROSS THE FENCE program topics that were of most interest to them and how often they watched. The survey concluded with a request for comments regarding the program.

To get a representative sampling, letters sent to the ACROSS THE FENCE program were saved from October 1976 through February 1977. During the five month period, 10,366 letters were received. Of those letters, 6,081 were sorted by county, state and country of origin. The remaining letters were not included for a number of reasons—some were discarded by mistake, some had no return address and on others the handwriting was illegible.

The survey sample consisted of 1,000 people. To get the sample, results of the sorting were prorated by 1,000, and letters were selected at random—682 from Vermont, 97 from New Hampshire, 128 from New York, 3 from other states and 90 from Canada. A three-page questionnaire along with a return self-addressed, stamped envelope were sent to the sample in October 1977.

Of the 1,000 people who received the questionnaire, 632 responded. No follow-up letters were used; however, two appeals were made on the ACROSS THE FENCE program asking recipients to return their questionnaires. Thirty-seven questionnaires were unacceptable, leaving 595 to be tabulated.

Some of the findings supported existing opinions of the audience, such areas as age, sex and most popular program subjects. At mid-day, most viewers are female (90 percent) and over 50 years of age (66 percent).

Comparison of demographic characteristics between the two survey groups, 1962 and 1977, is presented in Table 1.

Mail response on most popular program topics coincided with topics selected. Respondents listed the most popular topics.

<i>Food Gardening</i>	72%
<i>Food and Nutrition</i>	68%
<i>Flower Gardening</i>	53%
<i>Consumer Information</i>	52%
<i>Clothing</i>	42%

Of particular interest was the list of topics of interest not being covered on ACROSS THE FENCE. Most mentioned were health, senior citizen activities, home renovation, adolescent problems and nature. Many viewers requested more programs dealing with sewing and nutrition, particularly programs featuring low-cost menus.

Since the survey was completed in 1977, viewer suggestions have been incorporated into the program schedule. A monthly series called Nature Notes was started, featuring an author-naturalist. Programs on drug and alcohol abuse in Vermont schools have been presented. The Vermont extension wood utilization specialist is doing a monthly telecast on do-it-yourself home repairs. The University cooperated with the Vermont Office on Aging for a series of 12 programs called "Aging in Vermont." The series was well received, and additional programs are planned for Vermont seniors during the 1980-81 season. Although Vermont has no extension health specialists, physicians from the University of Vermont Health Center are happy to cooperate in presenting such topics as hypertension, lupus disease, cervical cancer and epilepsy.

Currently, plans call for more in-depth programming in sewing and nutrition. A clothing and design specialist developed a series of six lessons to teach basic sewing techniques. More than 1,000 viewers ordered the lesson packet that accompanied the sewing course.

The success of the sewing minicourse prompted plans for a similar series in low-cost nutrition. Ten lessons in March and April, 1980 featured Extension nutritionists and the director of the Dairy Council of Vermont.

The 595 viewer responses provided information on the strengths and weaknesses of ACROSS THE FENCE programs. Since completing the 1977 survey, programming changes have been made to incorporate viewer suggestions. Changing ideas and concepts demands time, considerable effort and planning are required.

Response to viewer interests has brought results. In 1975, ratings indicated a viewing audience of more than 50,000 daily viewers; that figure has now increased to 90,000.

Unsolicited comments from viewers include appreciation for keeping them informed of ways to save money and make their lives easier. The management at WCAX-TV is supportive and pleased that ACROSS THE FENCE is one of the most popular local productions.

Because of positive feedback and support from all asso-

ciated with the telecast, the television specialist will continue to ask the viewing audience how the program can best assist in their daily needs and endeavors. Viewers have made it clear they wish practical ideas and suggestions that can be converted into positive results. The University of Vermont Extension Service specialists and county agents welcome this challenge and the opportunity to reach Vermonters through television.

TABLE 1. Viewer response to questions about ACROSS THE FENCE program.

Age	1962	1977
Viewers over 65	11%	32%
Viewers 30-64	76%	58%
Viewers 0-29	13%	10%
Yearly Income		
Below \$2,999	30%	9%
\$3,000-\$4,999	33%	15%
\$5,000-\$6,999	21%	13%
\$7,000-\$9,999	11%	19%
Over \$10,000	5%	44%
Residence		
In a town	34%	31%
In a rural area	20%	39%
On a farm	20%	11%
In a city	26%	19%
Highest Education Level Attained		
Elementary	27%	10%
High School	52%	51%
College	21%	39%