

Are Quarterly Magazines Worthwhile?

GRANT I. JOHNSON

WHEN WE HAD TO CLEAN our mailing list for the University of Nebraska Experiment Station Quarterly last fall, I took the opportunity to survey readership.

The response was gratifying.

Of 10,025 cards mailed, 8,694, or 87 per cent, were returned by the time the mail had gotten so light we decided to stop counting them and summarize our data.

The cards are still dribbling in at the rate of a few a day (in February) and probably will continue at a slower rate until most of the cards mailed out have been returned.

The survey, of course, was intended to find out if the Quarterly is serving a useful purpose.

Many of the 4,777 farmers and ranchers who returned their cards said that they got much useful information from the magazine. Some said they filed it for future reference.

More than 1,000 readers took time to write comments, some simply complimentary, some suggesting subjects about which they would like to see articles, and many saying, "I like it the way it is. Don't change it."

Here are some of the more complimentary remarks:

● "My wife is a school librarian, and when I'm done with the Quarterly she takes it to the school library." This is a farmer's explanation of more than seven persons reading each issue. He said he read 100 per cent of each issue.

● "Would be hard to improve on this informative magazine." Another farmer.

● "Helps me do a better job of managing farms." A retired farmer.

● "It is one of the most read papers we receive at our farm." A farmer and aerial sprayer.

● "The Quarterly is holding a mirror up to Nebraska—very valuable." A feed manufacturer and good friend of the University.

● "Best publication of its type in the country." An Ohio farmer aerial applicator.

● "I want it because it is one of the top three in the U.S." A college teacher and editor.

● "We consider the Quarterly to be one of the best experiment station publications that we get." Editor of a national farm publication.

Many more comments were of the same tenor and, throughout, the words informative, easily read, interesting, beautiful color, and nice layout occurred.

A doctor's wife wrote, "I am sorry to admit we seldom read this magazine—My husband just corrected me—He has made use of many ideas from the magazine."

I hope too many other wives did not make the same mistake without its being caught. We lost 160 doctors and dentists from the mailing list.

This hurts a little. We had added all doctors and dentists in the state to our mailing list with the idea that they would put the Quarterly in their waiting rooms.

However, a majority of them do use it for a waiting room publication.

One dentist wrote, "This magazine is a waiting room 'must.' Many of our patients ask to take it home to read and return it."

One bit of fallout that arrived in the middle of our survey was from a woman in Omaha. She had read the fall Quarterly in her dentist's office, found it interesting and asked to be added to the mailing list so her husband could read it.

"I hated to run off with the dentist's copy," she said.

In addition to the doctors and dentists, we lost 66 farmers and ranchers, 38 retired farmers and ranchers, 36 through deaths, and 220 unclassifiable. This was a total of 520, or 5.9 per cent of those responding.

This percentage will be higher for the entire mailing, since those not returning cards are automatically off the list.

This loss has been partially regained, however, from people

who asked us to add friends, relatives, tenants, etc., to the mailing list.

One thing I have learned from this experience is that no matter how carefully you phrase your questions, some will misinterpret them.

In weighing both statistics and comments, we have decided to change the Quarterly very little—simply try to include more on home economics and seek out articles from our economists on marketing in its various phases.

The accompanying table indicates a reader preference for “how to do it” and “research results” articles, but the comments are more revealing.

One professional man wrote, “The above ratings are hardly a fair evaluation of the Quarterly. We think it is tops and find all types of articles valuable.”

Another reader indicated some confusion as to how to use the rating system. We listed Ongoing Research, How to Do It, Personalities, Research Results, Simply Informative, and Home Economics. We asked readers to rank them from 1 to 5 with 1 most preferred and 5 least preferred.

I believe our success with the Quarterly can be attributed to a number of factors.

- It has solid backing from the administration—to the extent that they do not flinch at a cost of around \$2,500 per issue.

- Quality of articles is generally high because over the years the administrators, Rollie Graham, and Phil Holman have convinced the faculty that the Quarterly is a good vehicle.

- Rollie and Phil convinced the administration a number of years ago that color is worth the extra cost. It is. Color was mentioned in many comments from readers.

Primary readers of the Quarterly are identified in the following table:

Occupations of people involved in the study

Farmer.....	4,023 (f)	45.6 (%)
Rancher.....	754 (f)	8.5 (%)
Professional.....	1,083 (f)	12.3 (%)
Agr. business.....	990 (f)	11.2 (%)
Teacher.....	472 (f)	5.3 (%)
Editor.....	187 (f)	2.1 (%)
Other.....	947 (f)	10.7 (%)
No response.....	370 (f)	4.2 (%)
TOTAL.....	8,826 (f)	99.9 (%)

READER PREFERENCE FOR DIFFERENT TYPE ARTICLES

Article classification	Ranking given to each										Ranked score		
	Superior		Excellent		Average		Good		Fair			No response	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%		f	%
Ongoing research.....	4042	42.4	1295	13.6	881	9.2	960	10.1	360	3.8	1995	20.9	26867
How to do it.....	1106	17.1	1283	19.8	1139	17.6	394	6.1	337	3.7	2212	34.2	23622
Personalities.....	1050	12.6	758	9.1	1261	15.2	815	9.8	1698	20.4	2736	32.9	34515
Research results.....	4805	52.1	1027	11.1	1078	11.7	283	3.1	247	2.7	1783	19.3	23158
Simply informative.....	2728	31.8	1202	14.0	1284	15.0	499	5.8	491	5.7	2378	27.7	27303
Home economics.....	2316	26.2	654	7.4	869	9.8	570	6.5	1509	17.1	2906	32.9	33492

Who reads it besides those listed in the table?

Housewives read it, obviously. Also, their children read it and use some of the articles for schoolwork. Club leaders use it in club work. Teachers use the Quarterly in school.

The ESSA Weather Bureau in Kansas City, Missouri, uses it "in conjunction with the Weather Bureau's Ag/Weather programs." How they use it, I don't know, but I plan to find out when in Kansas City.

Nearly three-fourths of the copies are read by more than two persons, as indicated below:

Number of other people reading the Quarterly

1.....	2,536 (f)	27.0 (%)
2.....	2,743 (f)	29.2 (%)
3.....	1,224 (f)	13.0 (%)
4.....	630 (f)	6.7 (%)
5.....	234 (f)	2.5 (%)
6.....	293 (f)	3.1 (%)
More.....	530 (f)	5.6 (%)
No response.....	1,208 (f)	12.9 (%)
TOTAL.....	9,398 (f)	100.0 (%)

Content readership also is pleasing with 34.5 per cent indicating 100 per cent readership and 31.8 per cent indicating 75 per cent readership. Only 4.2 per cent said they read only 25 per cent of the magazine, as indicated below:

Per cent of Quarterly read

100%.....	3,177 (f)	34.5 (%)
75%.....	2,926 (f)	31.8 (%)
50%.....	1,828 (f)	19.8 (%)
25%.....	383 (f)	4.2 (%)
0%.....	39 (f)	.4 (%)
No response.....	853 (f)	9.3 (%)
TOTAL.....	9,206 (f)	100.0 (%)

We can assume from the results of this survey that a good quarterly magazine is an excellent public relations tool.

One farmer wrote that our Quarterly is "one of the best contributions of the College to Nebraska agriculture."

Another wrote, "Very informative bulletin—lets us know where our tax dollars go."

I try to make certain that each issue covers as many areas as possible, including the different research disciplines, extension, home economics, and resident instruction.

I have also been trying to include an article either by or about a county agent in each issue to try to overcome the image some people have of him as the fellow who runs the 4-H program.

In addition to influential citizens, we have made sure that each state senator and others in state government are on the mailing list.

In conclusion, if you are wondering if you are on the mark with your periodical, you might consider running a reader survey next time you have to clean your list.

The results may be as pleasant a surprise to you as ours were to me.

Summary of written comments

- 418 Enjoy the Quarterly very much.
- 145 The Quarterly is informative in my work.
- 99 Patients enjoy the Quarterly in my waiting room.
- 82 This magazine is great.
- 74 Expressed appreciation for the publication.
- 72 The articles are well written and informative.
- 37 It is a good publication with excellent photos.
- 36 I would like to see more information on home economics.
- 33 It keeps us informed on university research.
- 23 I use it as a teaching tool.
- 23 Would like to see more articles on soybeans and sorghum.
- 23 Would like to see more articles on management of cattle.
- 6 The Quarterly closes the communication gap.
- 6 The magazine is too small.
- 5 Would prefer more articles on weed control.
- 2 It helps me as a graduate student.
- 1 Would prefer more articles by Dr. Evans on farm economics.
- 1 Would prefer more on fecundity.