# Effectiveness Of Automated Radio News Services

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This study was designed to examine an automated call-in radio news service versus an operator-answered system. It examined how the tapes were being used and attempted to determine the effectiveness of promotional items for the service.

It was clear the numbers of callers using the automated service increased significantly (nearly three times) over an operator-answered system. The study suggested that a toll-free telephone number was *not* a significant factor in whether the service was used and also found that the order in which the stories were available was not important.

The results also suggest that for call-in kinds of news services to work, regular promotions to remind the users of the system must be done.

## Introduction

The purpose of this study was to measure the effectiveness of an automated, telephone delivery system for radio news stories; to learn how the reports were being used by Louisiana radio stations; and to measure the effectiveness of items used to promote the service. Declining budgets and lack of staff ruled out the mass mailing of tapes to radio stations each week and led us to explore other, more cost-effective methods of distributing broadcast news stories, just as Powell (1983) reported.

A previous study (Brooks, 1988) reported results of a pilot project involving a telephone distribution system and discussed the subjects that interested broadcasters most. Not only were farm broadcasters interested in the stories—so were general news broadcasters. The study confirmed Marks' (1968) finding for television: that agricultural stories can be of interest to most broadcasters, if presented in a way that interests them. For example, a news reporter may be interested in a story about the impact of storms on crops, if an estimate of damage, in dollars, is included.

As a result of that research (Brooks, 1988), broadcasters in Louisiana can now access agriculturally-

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oriented news stories, 24 hours a day, by simply calling a phone number and recording stories that are automatically played when the phone is answered by an electronic device that starts a cartridge machine. The service, known as the LSU Ag Center Newsline, is headquartered in Baton Rouge. This report focuses on that service.

**Method**

A two-step method was used. The first part involved a careful recording of the numbers of calls received on specific days during the same six-month period (except one year later) as was used in the pilot project.

During this most recent study, communications personnel were able to record the exact number of calls received because the automated device called "Telecart," (made by Henry Engineering, Sierra Madre, Ca., sells for about $200) has a counter that records the number of calls received.

A second part of the study was the use of a follow-up survey, sent to known users of the call-in service, asking for the following information:

- The kinds of programs in which the stories were used.
- The time of day Extension Service stories were usually used.
- The preferred story lengths.
- How often the LSU Ag Center Newsline was called.
- Day of the week the LSU Ag Center Newsline was called.
- The time of the day the service was called.
- Use of promotional items for the service.
- The need for a toll-free number for out-of-town users.
- The length of time callers stayed on the phone for reports.
- Future plans to continue using the service.

In addition, the six stations that continue to receive tapes through the mail were asked for the following information:

- Subjects that were more interesting than others.
- The kinds of programs in which the stories were used.
- The time of day the stories were usually used.
- The preferred story lengths.
- Use of the LSU Ag Center Newsline: had these broadcasters ever called, in spite of receiving the same tapes through the mail?
- Preference in receiving tapes by mail or using the telephone system.

The survey form contained a number of choices for each question and the respondents were given a chance to explain their answers.

**Results: Number of Calls Received**

A side-by-side comparison of calls received shows the number of calls received on the automated system were nearly three times greater than they were during the pilot period, when the system was answered manually.

A great effort was made to duplicate the conditions for this study period, as were used when the system was answered by us: the same phone number was used, the same methods of publicity were used, the same narrator and writer was used, the same recording conditions existed, the same six-month time of year was used, the story types (agricultural and consumer) were the same, and the same long-and-short versions of each story were available.

Findings from this portion of the study suggest that a call-in service such as this one will be used more frequently when it is automated. Occassionally, callers were *unable*

to get audio tapes during the earlier period because no one was available to feed them. Making the tapes available 24 hours a day made access much easier.

Second, while nearly 80 percent of the calls were received during the daytime period (8 a.m.-4:30 p.m., M-F) with the automated service, there was a significant percentage of callers during "off" periods (weekends and weeknights).

Third, the numbers from both studies clearly show the greatest number of calls were received early in the week, at a time when news tends to be slow and broadcasters are looking for stories with actualities. The broadcast news stories provided by the Extension Service can serve that need. Many broadcasters have said so.

Fourth, the average number of calls per week was more consistent during the automated study (11.6) than during the pilot period (4). At times during the initial study, only one call was received in a week; the lowest number of calls received during the automated period was 8.

**Results: Follow-up Survey**

A total of 19 surveys were sent to broadcasters who either received tapes by mail (6) or who were known to use the LSU Ag Center Newsline (13). There were 13 responses for a 68 percent return rate. (While the numbers using the tapes may seem small, it should be noted that frequent users who responded are *two* state radio networks; between them they serve about 95 stations in Louisiana.)

Results from the mail survey suggest:

- That Extension Service audio news stories are used most often as a supplement to improve regular newscasts (7 responses) and are used in farm programs (7).
- That the radio news stories are used most often in programs that air from 6 a.m. to noon (12).
- That broadcasters prefer radio news stories that are 60 seconds in length or less (9).

For those broadcasters who regularly use the LSU Ag Center Newsline, most reported:

**Table 1: Results**

| Day | Pilot Period Calls | Automated Period Calls |
|---|---|---|
| Weekend* | N/A | 32 |
| Monday | 56 | 84 |
| Monday PM** | N/A | 9 |
| Tuesday | 25 | 59 |
| Tuesday PM | N/A | 10 |
| Wednesday | 11 | 39 |
| Wednesday PM | N/A | 6 |
| Thursday | 12 | 24 |
| Thursday PM | N/A | 10 |
| Friday | 8 | 42 |
| Total calls | 112 | 315 |

*"Weekend" refers to the time period from 4:30 p.m. Friday to 8 a.m. Monday. Tapes were not available during this period for the pilot project.

** "PM" refers to the time period from 4:30 p.m. to 8 a.m. the following day. Tapes were not available during this period for the pilot project.

- Calling the service at least once a week (5) versus a few times a month, once a month or less.
- Calling after receiving weekly billboards of stories available in the weekly packet of news stories (5) or the postcard (4). Three users said they called every week regardless of when the mailings were received.
- That an 800 number, available during limited times, was not an important factor in calling the service (6).
- Staying on the line through all six cuts (6).
- An intention to continue using the service (8).

Of those who continue to receive tapes through the mail (this list is slowly being phased out), four of five reported trying the Ag Center Newsline; four of five said they still preferred receiving the tapes through the mail because the quality of the product was better.

### Discussion of Promotional Items

The four methods of promotion include placing a page in a weekly news packet (Brooks, 1987) with the complete rundown of tapes available; mailing a postcard each week to news packet recipients with the complete rundown of tapes; and quarterly mailings of a letter with basic information about how to use the service, and a telephone sticker, with the phone numbers.

While the survey responses show a split as to how the stations learn about the tapes, a few of the respondents noted that the postcard is a good reminder; one said he tacks the card to the wall above the phone to remind him to call. (In fact, we recently stopped sending the postcards for a few weeks and the number of calls dropped noticeably. We started sending the cards again and the numbers went up.) The card probably gets noticed because it is green, so it will be seen in a stack of white-colored mail. The card is also inexpensive to mail and may get read more because the news packet is contained in a large manila envelope that must be opened first. Through experience, we know this kind of mail tends to be opened last, at a later time, or not at all. That's why the postcards continue to be sent each week.

Nothing definitive could be determined about the use of the basic introductory letter and the phone sticker, though these items will continue to be used.

### Conclusions

The results of both methods of study suggest that broadcasters will use an automated system that is reliable. Unexpected results were found in the use (or non-use) of the 800 number and the days of the week when most calls were received.

We thought the toll-free number would be an essential for out-of-town stations to call the service. Apparently this just isn't the case for many users of the service. Perhaps most are in a position to pay for a 10-minute call to Baton Rouge (to get at least six stories) each week; long-distance phone rates are less for the 20 percent who called during non-business hours and there are many persons in radio who work during the early morning hours when rates are less.

From conversations with broadcasters, Monday seems to be the day when many calls are made to the system. Many said they were looking for "tape" after the weekend, when many of them aren't working. There were a significant number of calls (13 percent) received on Friday, nearly twice the number received during

the pilot period. It appears there are some broadcasters who use the service that prefer to record and use the tapes on weekends as news features, rather than in regular weekday newscasts.

It was surprising to find that most callers stay on the line for the entire 10-minute feed. Stories are purposely positioned so that the ones expected to draw the most attention are heard early. Nearly all of the respondents were complimentary of the quality of the story content and timeliness. As Boutwell (1980) found, timely, well-produced features, regardless of subject, will draw the interest of broadcasters.

As a result of the study, we shortened all news stories to 60 seconds or less. Already, the numbers of callers are up since the change was made. The present format of offering long and short versions of each story was probably too much.

Another way to maximize the service would be to shift from a weekly to a daily feed. In our present situation, this is not possible because staff size is inadequate.

To encourage those receiving tapes by mail to switch to the LSU Ag Center Newsline, a highly-quality telephone line must be provided to ensure near-studio quality. This may be possible at a later time, though it will raise the cost of providing the service.

Finally, the results of two years of studying the telephone delivery service suggest there is a place for this kind of technology for those who deliver radio news. The savings in mailing costs are considerable; we were spending as much as three dollars per tape each week to send and receive it back to be used again (Brooks, 1988). Initial costs may be high (Telecart, $200; cart machine, $1,500-$2,000, plus telephone installation and monthly charges) but if the proper equipment is already on hand, costs are small to get started (Brooks, 1988).

Some broadcasters like the convenience of having a ready source of actualities, 24 hours a day, by simply dialing a telephone number and recording the phone call. But as the results also show, the tapes must be worth calling for: timeliness, relevance, local in nature and quality of the story are important factors that will determine the success or failure of such a project.

(One additional note: we recently began a call-in message service, using the same equipment, to answer the public's questions about our livestock shows. This service is intended for a much larger audience; from Jan. 1-July 31, 1990, this service has generated 1,746 calls—routine calls that *did not* have to be answered by own personnel).

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