A Readership Study Of An Agricultural Outlook Insert In A Farm Newspaper

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A sample of 78 subscribers to a weekly agricultural newspaper was surveyed by telephone to determine readership and usefulness of an Ag Outlook insert. Seventy-eight percent either read most (17 percent), read some (35 percent), or skimmed (28 percent) some of the articles. Fourteen percent said the information was very useful, 56 percent somewhat useful, 20 percent a little useful, and 10 percent said of no use. Five percent said they used the information to make business decisions, 56 percent to help them understand the market situation and 39 percent found the information useful in other ways. The low-cost insert has considerable utility for many Minnesota farm families.

Introduction

For several years, the University of Minnesota's Extension Service has cooperated with agricultural magazines and newspapers to publish a yearly insert on the next year's agricultural outlook. Publication coincides with a yearly agricultural outlook conference held on the University's St. Paul Campus in September. The publication is used in conjunction with that conference, plus county and area outlook and marketing meetings.

While coordinators of the outlook program received significant feedback from outlook and marketing meetings, they received little feedback on the benefits of the outlook publication. In other words, were Minnesota farm families reading the publication and using the information?

To help answer the question, a readership/utility study was conducted to ascertain readership and perceived utility of the information by Minnesota farm families.

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Purpose and Objectives

Research (Fett & Mundy, 1990) has shown that publishing annual crop practice recommendation information in agricultural newspaper supplements is a cost-effective way to quickly reach farmers.

Likewise, putting agricultural outlook information in farm magazine or newspaper inserts is also a low-cost method of reaching large numbers of readers (Carlson, 1986, Sperbeck, 1982). That's particularly true when the publication absorbs printing and distribution costs.

But do people read and use the information? In fall, 1981, a study showed that 75 percent of subscribers who "noticed" an ag outlook supplement in *THE FARMER* magazine said it was either very useful or somewhat useful (Sperbeck, 1982). That was good news at the time, and the Minnesota Extension Service has continued to publish agricultural outlook inserts.

Farmers—and information channels—have changed dramatically in 10 years. There are fewer farmers, and they have more ways to get outlook information. On-line market data services, satellite technology and video tapes were in their infancy in 1981.

Research on other inserts in agricultural publications has shown lower levels of readership and utility. A study of a "research results" insert in a commodity newspaper revealed low readership and recognition of the insert, and the publication itself (Sperbeck, 1984). That was in large part due to the publication reaching farm homes during the busy harvest season, when time for reading was extremely limited.

A study of a special drought insert in a state farm magazine (Sperbeck, 1988) showed that only 37 percent of the respondents recalled seeing the special insert. Lack of significant contrast between the insert and the magazine itself was a contributing factor.

Methods and Procedures

A random sample of 200 subscribers was furnished by *AGRI NEWS*, a weekly agricultural newspaper serving 21,500** farm and agribusiness subscribers in Minnesota and northeastern Iowa.

Of the 200 potential respondents to the telephone survey, 26 were deleted since their addresses indicated non-farm family status. Another 78 subscribers could not be reached by telephone during two evenings of calling with at least one repeat try (callback). That leaves 96 respondents, although 10 said they had not received the publication. There were no refusals.

A total of 86 respondents reported receiving the Sept. 12, 1991 edition of *AGRI NEWS*. Dillman (1974) and Frey (1983) outline procedures for calculating response rates based on the percentage of contacts with eligible respondents that result in completed interviews. Unmade contacts are excluded from consideration. Response rate equals number of completed interviews, divided by the number in the sample (minus noneligible plus nonreachable), times 100.

Using this method, 78 respondents who recalled seeing the insert divided by 96 respondents reached by telephone equals an 80 percent response rate.

Results

Of 78 respondents, 58 (74 percent) said they recalled seeing the Ag Outlook insert. Tabulated responses to specific questions were as follows:

**AGRI MARKETING, 1992 Marketing Services Guide

How much of the Ag Outlook insert did you read?

	N	%
read most of it	11	17%
read some of it	23	35%
skimmed some articles	18	28%
did not read	11	17%
don't know/recall	2	3%
TOTALS	65	100%

How useful did you find the information?

	N	%
very useful	7	14%
somewhat useful	28	56%
a little useful	10	20%
of no use	5	10%
TOTALS	50	100%

How was the information useful to you? (More than one response is possible). Did the information help you...

	N	%
make decisions?	2	5%
understand the markets?	22	56%
in other ways?	15	39%

Which commodities do you produce? More than one response is possible.

	N
corn	37
oilseeds	25
dairy	17
beef	15
hogs	14
wheat	3

As one might expect, farmers were more apt to read the articles on commodities they produced. Combined "read most" and "read some" scores were as follows:

Commodity	%
coarse grains	60%
beef	49%
oilseed	47%
dairy	45%
hogs	39%
wheat	11%

Which articles did you find most useful?

	N
dairy	18
oilseeds	14
coarse grains	13
beef	12
hogs	10
wheat	2

How did you use the information?

	N	%
background information	18	39%
to help make marketing decisions	9	20%
reinforce marketing strategy	3	7%
other	16	35%

Are you in your:

	N	%
teens	0	0
20s	7	8%
30s	16	21%
40s	23	30%
50s	12	16%
60s	11	15%
70s or over	7	9%

Summary and Conclusions

Agricultural newspapers are still a cost-effective, efficient way to reach farmers with outlook information. Wisconsin data show that more farmers use agricultural newspapers and agricultural magazines for farm information than any other sources, and they give highest usefulness grades to these sources (Fett & Mundy, 1990).

In this study, of the 65 respondents to the question of how much of the insert they read, 78 percent either read most (17 percent), read some (35 percent), or skimmed some of the articles (28 percent).

In terms of how useful respondents found the information, 14 percent said very useful, 56 percent somewhat useful, 20 percent a little useful and 10 percent said of no use.

Five percent of the above respondents said they used the information to make decisions about the farming or business, 56 percent said the information helped them understand the ag outlook/market situation and 39 percent found it useful for a variety of other reasons.

Clearly, the Ag Outlook insert has considerable utility for a significant number of Minnesota farm families. Considering its "no cost" to the Minnesota Extension Service (printing and distribution costs paid for by the publisher), the publication represents a low cost delivery method. Its utility is enhanced since extra copies are printed for distribution at meetings and Extension offices throughout the state.

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Reviews

***Reporting Technical Information* (Seventh Edition). Kenneth W. Houp and Thomas E. Pearsall. New York: Macmillan, 1992. 685 pages.**

This book, in various editions, has been around for more than 20 years. Its longevity can be attributed in no small part to the fact that it is generally an excellent resource. It's a thick book because the authors keep adding new and useful information. Principal additions to the 7th edition include a chapter on document design that relates specifically to the use of word processing technology, a chapter on collaborative writing, and the inclusion of planning and revision checklists at the end of most chapters.

Other changes that may be less obvious include an expanded section on documentation and an expanded and better organized grammar "handbook." Documentation material is based on the Modern Language Association system, which the authors see as "the simplest of all the major systems and, therefore, the easiest to learn." The grammar "handbook" includes new sections on acronyms and non-sexist language. The latter, though straightforward and useful, is somewhat superficial. It would have been better to include this topic in the body of the text and treat it in greater depth.

A final important addition to the new version is a color insert on computer graphics. The authors recognize that the use of computer graphics, often in color, is becoming common in technical reports.

The book is organized in six parts. The first part covers the basics of technical writing, with chapters progressing from the beginning of the composing process in situational analysis through the gathering of information and the final polishing of the report. Part II deals with the techniques of technical writing. It covers organizing materials to inform, to define and describe, and to persuade. Part III treats document design and Part IV covers extended applications of technical writing (e.g., instructions, proposals, and progress reports). Oral reports are subject to separate treatment in Part V, which has an appropriate emphasis on presentation graphics. Part VI is the grammar "handbook."

Appendices include a sample report, an excellent guide to technical reference sources, and a bibliography. A comprehensive and useful index is included.

The success of this book begins with the authors' understanding of technical writing as a problem-solving process. They treat this process as a means to an end that may range in size and complexity from a simple memo to a series of books. Their approach makes the book, designed as a classroom text, a worthwhile addition to the professional writer's reference shelf. For example, each of us would do well to review Chapter 6, "Achieving a Readable Style," from time to time. It reminds us to use active verbs, to avoid noun strings and empty words, and to care about good sentence and paragraph structure. But it also warns against being too concerned about following the rules. Writing, the authors recognize, is a craft, not a science. I am inclined to compare *Reporting Technical Information* with Paul Anderson's *Technical Writing* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 2nd edition 1991). I prefer Anderson,