Evaluating Alumni Publications: A Readership Survey of the Graduates of an Agricultural College

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Abstract

Faced with budget cuts, schools and colleges of agriculture find it difficult to sustain their quality of service. Well-designed and interesting alumni publications can project a positive image for the school and help attract alumni support. This mail survey sought to evaluate *ANR*, the alumni publication of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources of Michigan State University. Overall, ANR readers seem happy with their magazine. Alumni are most interested in research updates, Cooperative Extension updates, the concerns of commodity groups and industries, and outstanding alumni profiles. There is potential for improvement. Two reader groups that warrant special attention emerge from this study: the surprising number of nonalumni ANR readers, and advertisers. Advertising is acceptable to help defray publication costs.

Introduction

When faced with successive cuts in agriculture spending at the national and state levels, schools and colleges of agriculture find it difficult to balance their budgets and sustain the quality of their service. To continue attracting quality students and increase fundraising, agricultural schools need to project a positive image. One of the most appropriate groups to support this image is the alumni. Alumni simply know the school best. Effective

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communication between a school and its alumni is thus very important. The communication medium that regularly reaches alumni is the alumni publication (magazine, newspaper or newsletter).

It is obvious that an effective publication must be interesting. Few studies have researched the interests of the alumni of an agricultural college. Wink (1979) surveyed readers of *ANR*, the magazine of the alumni association of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources of Michigan State University. The target population was limited to members of the Alumni Association. She found that ANR readers were particularly interested in alumni news, opinion pieces, and agricultural research updates. Tucker (1987) surveyed the readers of *OHIO 21*, a publication mailed to the alumni of The Ohio State University College of Agriculture. The target population was only alumni with Ohio addresses. Alumni were most interested in agricultural research conducted at the university, economics, and farm management. Lack of interest and time were cited as reasons for not reading some feature articles.

This study was part of a plan to re-evaluate *ANR*, the alumni publication of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (CANR) of Michigan State University. *ANR* is a 16x11- inch tabloid, of approximately 16 pages, with many monochrome photographs and illustrations. Frequently, color accents text, photographs, and illustrations. The content of *ANR* is a mix of agriculture-related research, student and faculty news, alumni news and letters, sports, events, and outreach. The magazine is mailed quarterly, at no charge, to approximately 26,000 alumni with U.S. addresses.

Faced with increasing readership but limited resources the magazine must learn from its readership how to be more effective. The main objectives were (a) to find out how readers perceive current content and format, and (b) to gauge reader reaction to changes in format and the addition of advertisements.

Method

The study was a mail survey. Mail surveys offer low-cost access to geographically remote subjects. Dillman (1978) was the basic reference for the research design.

The target population was all the CANR alumni in the U.S., approximately 26,000. A sample of 173 was extracted from *ANR*'s mailing list. The sample size was estimated according to Cochran (1977):

$$n_o = t^2 s^2 / d^2$$

where n_o = sample size, d = degree of desired precision, t = risk that the actual margin of error may exceed d, s = estimated standard deviation of the population (pp. 72-86). The value of t was set to 2. This means that the risk that the actual margin of error will exceed d is 1 in 20. The value of d was set to 1/10 of a point of the Likert-type scale used in this survey. The value of s was estimated by dividing the range of the Likert-type scale by 6. This is only a rule of thumb (Cochran, 1977), as there was no way to know the standard deviation of the population beforehand. The Likert-type scale had four points; thus s was about 0.66.

Sampling error was avoided by systematic random sampling. Starting at the 13th name (an arbitrary point), every 150th name was selected from the mailing list. Selection error was avoided because every subject had an equal chance of being selected. There was frame error because two subjects in the sample were deceased. The response rate was adjusted accordingly. The subject search was executed on a computer to print the output directly on self-adhesive mailing labels.

The questionnaire was to be self-administered and short enough to complete in 15 minutes. Face and content validity were established by submitting the instrument to a panel of experts from the Department of Outreach Communications of CANR. Due to time constraints, there was no pilot testing. Instrument reliability was calculated *ex post facto*. For the group of questions that was answered on a Likert-type scale (rating of content and style elements), Cronbach's alpha was 0.75.

The mail-out package contained the questionnaire, a cover letter emphasizing the significance of the study, a pre-addressed, postage-paid return envelope, and a complimentary campus map as a response incentive. Confidentiality was emphasized in the cover letter: Names were not to be connected to the information provided. Measures were taken to maximize the response rate. A week after the first mailing, postcard reminders were sent. About four weeks after the first mailing, a second complete mail-out package was sent to nonrespondents. All cover letters and reminders were hand-signed to personalize the survey. Respondents were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

A procedure for nonresponse was established. Late respondents often respond like nonrespondents (Miller & Smith, 1983). Thus, late respondents were compared to early respondents on all study variables using the t-test or the Mann-Whitney test. The level of

Future Directions

The results in this section concern proposed changes. Table 4 shows reader interest in various topics. Topics of greatest interest were research updates, Cooperative Extension updates, concerns of commodity groups and industries, and outstanding alumni profiles. Letters to the editor and faculty news were rated less popular than in the Wink (1979) survey.

Table 4

Reader Interest in Various Topics

Topic	Mean[a]	SD[b]	Valid Count	Don't Know/No Response
Research updates	1.67	0.70	72	10
Cooperative Extension updates	1.85	0.73	71	11
Concerns of commodity groups/industry	1.88	0.74	68	14
Outstanding alumni profiles	1.90	0.63	73	9
Lifelong education offerings	1.99	0.69	66	16
Alumni news (class notes)	2.00	0.65	69	13
Letters to the editor	2.10	0.60	69	13
Faculty news (grants, awards)	2.26	0.62	73	9
Message from the dean	2.28	0.55	64	18
CANR[c] Alumni Association activities	2.29	0.62	69	13
Student news (honors, clubs)	2.40	0.66	64	18

[a]Scale: 1 = Very Interested, 2 = Interested, 3 = Not Interested.
[b]Standard deviation.
[c]College of Agriculture and Natural Resources.

Respondents then rated possible alternative formats for the magazine. The four options were:

1. Retain this type of tabloid.
2. Replace with new college-wide magazine (the current publication also is college-wide) featuring stories about innovative work being done by the Agricultural Experiment Station, the Cooperative Extension Service, Academic Programs, and International Agriculture.

3. Option (2) plus a department newsletter once a year.
4. Option (1) twice a year and option (2) twice a year.

Respondents favored proposal (1) (29.6%) though there was considerable support for the other options.

The next two questions related to advertising. *ANR* does not accept advertisements. Wink (1979) had found that readers would favor advertising in *ANR* if it was used to defray part of the publication cost. Table 5 shows that current readers object even less to the use of advertisements.

Table 5

Reader Objection to the Use of Advertisements

Category	Frequency		Percentage	
	1979*	1991	1979*	1991
Objection	47	4	18.7	5.1
No objection	176	68	69.8	86.1
No opinion	29	7	11.5	8.9
Total	252	79	100.0	100.0

*Data from Wink (1979).

The final question asked if readers would actually place an advertisement in *ANR*, either as an individual or as a company. The results are given in Table 6. Though only 5.4% of the respondents intended to place an advertisement, this proportion represents approximately 1400 readers, a significant potential source of revenue. Of course, readers and advertisers may be separate groups, and the potential number of advertisers may be higher.

Table 6

Willingness to Place an Advertisement in ANR

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Willing	4	5.4
Not willing	38	51.4
No opinion	32	43.2
Total	74	100.0

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the lessons learned in this survey is that it is hard to obtain satisfactory response rates. Despite the measures taken to maximize response, one in two alumni did not respond. Other studies also faced this problem (Denton, 1987; Tucker, 1987; Wilbur, 1988). Yet nonresponse must be dealt with somehow. Increasing the sample size would not, of course, alter the proportion of nonrespondents. A better remedy is to compare the scores of early to late respondents and weight the scores (Miller & Smith, 1983). Better yet, the author suggests following up nonrespondents with phone calls. In this survey, time constraints did not permit follow-up. The study had to be completed between two successive magazine issues (fall and winter issues), otherwise the instrument content would not be valid. Much of this "time window" was lost while waiting for the Christmas mail rush to taper off.

If saving the magazine is a measure of reader approval, then *ANR* is well-received. The majority of readers save *ANR* for at least a few days. The range of topics, quality of photos and illustrations, coverage of alumni news, and general appearance were rated between "good" and "fair." The quality of writing was rated between "good" and "excellent." It is hoped that the positive opinions about *ANR* translate into a positive image for the school.

ANR can and should attract a wider readership. It was surprising that one in three copies of *ANR* is read by someone else close to the alumnus. Future research should identify this potential readership in order to serve it better. Do the alumni share the magazine with their family, colleagues, or students? Are those readers involved in agriculture and natural resource conservation? If not, then *ANR* can be used to convey the relevance and importance of agricultural and natural resources research to a more urban public. Topics that would appeal to an urban readership are nutrition, food safety, conservation, urban wildlife, and waste management.

The main reasons cited for not reading every article were lack of time and lack of interest, just as in the Tucker (1987) study. Many alumni are busy professionals who receive a lot of mail and are selective in what they read. Therefore the magazine should emphasize what appeals most: research updates, Cooperative Extension updates, concerns of commodity groups and industries, and outstanding alumni profiles. In particular, research news is a perennial alumni favorite, as Wink (1979) and Tucker (1987) also have found. Alumni also want to maintain contact with old

acquaintances or perhaps hope to read their name in print someday: alumni news was a high priority in the Wink (1979) study.

Finally, advertising is acceptable to help defray publication costs. Most readers do not object to advertisements in *ANR*, and many would be willing to advertise. Because readers and advertisers may be separate groups, future research should identify prospective buyers of advertising space.

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