

Report

Report on the *Journal of Applied Communications* 1996 Readership Survey

This survey was prepared under the direction of the 1995-96 Editorial Board of the *Journal of Applied Communications*. John R. Brooks, broadcast news specialist with the Louisiana State University Agricultural Center/Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, prepared the text for this article. He chairs the Journal Editorial Board.

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Background

The Editorial Board of the *Journal of Applied Communications* initiated a mail survey in an attempt to learn more about the readers of the *Journal*, how they use the *Journal* and how best to improve the publication. The board chose 100 members of the Agricultural Communicators in Education (ACE) at random, and sent the 2-page (4 sides) survey to them, inviting their responses. Thirty-one surveys were returned (31 percent). The survey was divided into five sections:

1. The first section asked for personal information including age, gender, academic rank, degrees, if the reader wrote a thesis or dissertation, the ACE region where the reader was from, years of communications experience and primary area of expertise.
2. The second set of questions asked if the range of subjects met the reader's needs, if an electronic version of the *Journal* is valuable, if the reader finds the reviews helpful,

how much of an issue the respondent reads and what determines how much is read.

3. The third set of questions asked the reader to determine if he/she agrees, disagrees or is undecided about a series of statements. These statements addressed the *Journal's* editing, article mix, design, overall quality, photos, uniqueness of information, writing style and the regularity with which the *Journal* is received by the respondent.
4. Fourth, a set of "half-statements" were given, and the respondent was asked to complete them. These included what "the respondent liked best about the *Journal*, what was least liked, how the reader would change it, and the overall efforts of the editorial board and editors.
5. The final set of examples included a list of 13 recent articles that appeared in the *Journal*. The respondent was asked to indicate which article he/she had read and which wasn't read.

Findings

The respondents believe overwhelmingly that the Editorial Board and the editors do a good job of producing the *Journal*. Nearly all responded to a question about the overall efforts of the editors and the Editorial Board as being good or excellent.

Results of a question about the value of an electronic version of the *Journal* were more divided. Some respondents really liked the idea and some did not. Eighteen (58 percent) said the electronic version of the *Journal* would be valuable to them and 10 (32 percent) said it wouldn't. Three had no answer for this question. One person said, "I can read a journal in electronic form," and another said it would be "easier to store material for later retrieval." Two others responded differently. One said he "hates reading on a computer," while another said an electronic version of the *Journal* would not be valuable to her. "Absolutely not!" she said. "I am a BIG consumer of electronic information, but I refuse to deal with electronic journals!"

Of those who responded, there was no particular amount of a *Journal* issue that the respondents read. Results were evenly divided between 0-20 percent, 21-40 percent, 40-60 percent and 61-80 percent. Fewer said they read more than 80 percent. Time and interest in the articles were the biggest factors cited that relate to

the amount of the *Journal* that respondents read. One reader said "Diversity in ACE members' responsibilities (print, non-print, management, etc.) means we each have, and are attracted to, a specific interest area."

When asked if the range of subjects covered in the *Journal* met the needs of the respondent, 19 (61 percent) said yes and seven (23 percent) said no.

The series of "agree," "disagree" and "undecided" statements resulted in strong and favorable responses, except for questions related to graphic design, photos and receiving or not receiving an issue of the *Journal*.

On graphic design, 11 (35 percent) liked the *Journal's* design, while seven (23 percent) didn't. But 13 others (42 percent) who responded had no answer or didn't know. A similar result occurred with responses to a statement about whether the respondent enjoyed the photos.

Another statement said, "If I didn't receive an issue, I wouldn't miss it." Ten (32 percent) agreed, 11 (35 percent) disagreed and 10 (32 percent) had no response or didn't know.

Other statements asked about the *Journal's* writing style, editing, article mix, overall quality, uniqueness of information, and timeliness in receiving the *Journal*. In all of these cases, 60 percent or more of the respondents rated the *Journal* favorably.

In a set of partial statements, respondents were asked to complete the remainder of each sentence. One statement read: "What I like best about the *Journal* is...." There were many responses to this statement, but most often cited was the issue of relevancy of articles to the person's area of interest.

Typical comments included: * "... diversity of content, focus(ed) on applications of communication theory and technology."

* "...that I get some of the latest findings of the field."

* "...it helps me to maintain contact with some contemporary developments in Extension in the USA."

* "...that it provides a forum for presentation of communication research and discussion that is often very specific to our needs and interest in ag and related disciplines."

* "...articles I can use in my work."

* "...the specialized nature of the content. It is appropriate to our field!"

* "...practical information from people in the trenches. What they've done, what worked, what didn't work."

* "...it's targeted specifically to my field and is extremely relevant."

* "...efforts to combine the practical with the scholarly."

* "...applied research findings that relate to decisions we are considering."

Respondents were also asked to complete the opposite statement: "What I like least about the *Journal* is...." Again, there were many responses, but the one issue that was addressed by the most people was the technical content of the articles. Typical responses included:

* "...too much master's/Ph.D. reporting."

* "...sometimes a preponderance of quantitative articles can be a bit overwhelming...too researchy at times."

* "...the research articles are laborious to go through— usually read the problem and conclusions."

* "...some articles seem to be written for P/T (promotion/tenure) purposes."

* "...combining practical with the scholarly— this is very difficult, requires extra effort by contributing authors to be sufficiently scholarly."

Finally, respondents were asked to complete this sentence: "If there was one thing I could change about the *Journal*, it would be...." The responses were many, but two themes emerged: design elements of the *Journal* and the desire for "practical" information. Some of the responses included:

* "...logo page format."

* "...add more design elements/modernize."

* "...update image/presentation."

- * "...more visual aids."

- * "...more illustrations or visuals."

- * "...I'd like the *Journal* to remain very practical. The occasional article seems a bit esoteric."

- * "...add more variety in article approaches (other than quantitative, encourage a broader spectrum of article types."

- * "...more in depth."

- * "...short research articles important. Are we trying to be like all other scientists?"

- * "...more good, pragmatic articles."

- * "...more practical articles."

A final question on the survey asked the respondent to examine a list of 13 recent *Journal* articles and indicate which he or she read or planned to read. Results showed 68 percent or more of the respondents said they read or would read three articles. One was "Influences on Professional Behavior of Agricultural Communications Staff," by Tom D. Diel; "Science-Based TV Spots: Educating the Public About Forestry," by Jeffrey C. Hino and Edward C. Jensen; and the greatest number (71 percent) said they read or would read "Why Haven't You Published That Research (And Your Other Ideas)?" by Florita S. Montgomery, LaRae M. Donnellan and Larry R. Whiting.

Discussion

The results of the survey point to some interesting and useful information that can help guide the *Journal's* editors and the Editorial Board.

First, it is quite clear the respondents believe overwhelmingly that the editorial board and the editors are doing a good or excellent job in producing the *Journal*.

Second, the results suggest that those who read the *Journal* tend to be very experienced in communications. Overwhelmingly, the respondents said they had several years' (more than 15) experience in the communications field.

Those who responded seem to have a relatively narrow focus in communications, meaning they don't read much research outside their own area of interest. We observe that the greater the variety of articles in each issue, the better. There may be occasions to have several similar articles in one issue, but in most cases, a mix of subjects covered by the articles is probably best.

Clearly, the respondents do not like "heavy" research articles with lots of numbers and tables. They want practical, easy-to-read information that can help them in their work. That doesn't mean the *Journal* should not have such articles, but we must remember that the readers of the *Journal* are busy people and they need some articles that are easy to read and provide useful information.

We think the title of an article is critical to whether readers will look at it. If it sounds like "heavy" research, it may not attract many readers. If it has a more general audience sound to it ("Why Haven't You Published That Research?"), it may be read more often.

We learned that electronic distribution of the *Journal* has a place for some people, no place at all for others. Perhaps offering both formats accommodates more needs.

Respondents say the graphics in the *Journal* are better than before, but they seem to want something more visually attractive. This is an area in which the *Journal* continues to evolve and, as equipment gets better, the visual appeal of the *Journal* is improved.

We also learned the *Journal* provides information to its readers that they cannot get elsewhere. It fills a void that exists in the communications literature, so it continues to have value for those who receive it and read it.

Future Research on the Journal

Finally, the results suggest the Editorial Board should continue its efforts to develop and maintain a program to promote the *Journal* to all ACE members. The *Journal* is a part of each member's dues, and it may not have realized its potential as a resource for information that may be useful to agricultural communicators.