

Action Line: blessing or curse?

David A. Zarkin

AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE editors should consider the proposition that they may have a role in “action line,” “action post,” and similar columns that seek to provide newspaper readers with solutions to the complexities of life in 20th Century America.

This is a sobering proposition—dealing with microscopic issues by the bushel basketful. Yet in many cases there is a crying need for a communication link between the campus expert and the *action line* editor.

The extension specialist has a full schedule of educational chores. Oftentimes he hasn't the time to pen an answer to an *action line* reader's inquiry that will satisfy the reader, the newspaper, the specialist's educational objectives and yet be *correct*.

So what happens? The specialist, if he has time, will send the troubled soul who queried *action line* a letter answering his question. The newspaper may or may not get a copy of this letter, depending on how the specialist feels about the editing practices of the *action line* editors.

Action line editors in many cases get copies of letters sent by experts to inquirers. The editor attempts to sort out an answer from the letter. Here's where communication is most likely to break down—in rewriting the answer, the *action line* editor may misinterpret the information resulting in an incorrect answer.

Assuming that the specialist hasn't the time to prepare an answer that the column can use verbatim, the college agricultural editor can facilitate communication by rewriting the specialist's answer to suit the needs of the column.

Sound like a lot of work? It may be, particularly during lawn and garden season when horticulturists are flooded with requests

for information and resent having to write the action column for the local paper.

But the college editor can ease the load by rewriting and submitting to the column questions of more or less broad interest, giving the heave-ho to the oddball ones. Also, university experts may become established through the column as a source for information, encouraging readers to bypass the column and go directly to the source. Hopefully this would result in reducing the number of answers the college editor has to rewrite for the action column.

For college editors who fret about not getting enough exposure in metropolitan papers, *action line* columns may be the answer. Although often they appear to be inconspicuously placed in the paper, they are faithfully and well read.

For those who are still leary about getting involved in these reader service columns, consider that the members of the working press may be sick of the column and eager for assistance from any quarter. In the early days of the *Chicago American's* action column, that paper's managing editor, Luke Carroll, commented that, "It could become a Frankenstein."

Carroll was somewhat prophetic. E. George Killenbring, managing editor of the St. Louis *Globe-Democrat* said, "It got to be a matter of the same trees being trimmed and the same holes in the streets being filled."

Gary Collins, a former editor of an action column in the Paterson, New Jersey, *Morning Call* has charged that, "few publishers and editors really grasp what sort of commitment these features demand. . . . The reporters are preoccupied with other assignments. They are overworked already. They resent the difficulty of the problems."

This may be small comfort to the college agricultural editor who has to rewrite the reader service column answers from the college specialists, but he may take solace in the fact that he is not rewriting all the answers that the action column receives.