

# Farmers' Voices: Concerns within the Agricultural Advertiser-Media-Reader Triad

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## Abstract

This study continues an examination of power relationships within the agricultural publishing triad: advertisers, periodicals, and producer readers. It focuses on the views of farmers about the farm periodicals they read and the agricultural marketers that advertise in those periodicals. A mail survey was used to learn the opinions and observations of farmers in a nationwide sample. The sample of 497 was randomly drawn from a government database by a commercial data supply service. Three waves of letters were used along with a \$1 incentive. The 198 completed responses came from 29 states. Results indicate that producers are quite discerning and insightful in what they read. Furthermore, a majority expressed concern about advertiser-editorial relationships. Most said they see evidence of advertiser influence in the form of editorial trade-offs and bias in what stories are covered (or not covered) and how topics are handled. Results of a credibility index indicate there is much room for improvement. Authors suggest that farm publishers and advertisers should reconsider their relationships if they wish to address readers' concerns and improve their credibility. In a highly competitive environment, increased credibility has positive bottom-line implications for all partners in the triad.

## Introduction

One of the most enduring and important partnerships for agricultural and rural development in the United States involves a triad of farmers, farm periodicals, and agricultural marketers. In this study, commercial farm periodicals are those directed to farmers and supported financially by subscription income from readers and the sale of advertising space.

Origins of the partnership trace back nearly 200 years when commercial farm periodicals first appeared. Farmers were reluctant partners at first.

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Throughout most of the 1800s, rural residents held an “almost pathological aversion” (Bardolph, 1948, p. 13) to farming by the book.

This perspective among farmers changed rapidly after 1870, especially as public education, rural organizations, agricultural colleges, farm periodicals, and other sources of agricultural information became more available. Commercial farm magazines and newspapers were key factors in this process in two ways. They became major channels through which rural families tapped into a growing body of agricultural information. Also, these periodicals vigorously urged farmers to read the literature available to them.

Agricultural marketers were relatively minor partners during the early years of farm publishing. In 1860, advertising space took up only 10% to 20% of the total space. Readers described advertising as “foreign matter” (Sorenson, 1967, p. 4), and editors were cautious about expanding the space that advertising occupied. However, marketers became more active in the late 1800s and accelerated their efforts during the prosperity of the early 1900s. They developed a broadening selection of new products and services to improve farming practices and farm living. Increasingly, they used advertising in farm periodicals to inform and persuade.

By the 1960s, farmers’ distrust of “book farming” and “foreign matter” had eased greatly. On the whole, they viewed the farm publication as “an old friend, or if not an old friend, at least an old and familiar enemy” (Murphy, 1962, p. 191). By then, agricultural publishers and marketers assumed that most farmers wanted to be scientific in their approach to farming. Farmers ranked farm periodicals as their main source of agricultural information. Evans and Salcedo noted: “Dozens of surveys during the 1950s and 1960s produced evidence to that effect, almost without exception” (p. 87).

The farm publishing triad remains vigorous today, even in the face of drastic changes in media, farming, and publishing. For example, a survey by the Gallup Organization in 2000 revealed that large U.S. producers considered farm publications their dominant source of information about farming and ranching. Sixty-five percent of respondents identified farm publications as an important major source of such information, more than 20% above the second-ranked source, which was meetings (Gallup, 2000).

A 2002 national study among U.S. producers identified agricultural magazines and newspapers as their first-ranked medium. Eighty-two percent rated agricultural magazines and newspapers “very useful” or “useful” in keeping current with changes in farming and ranching. Looking ahead, 92% said their agricultural publications will be “just as important” (34%) or

“more/much more important” (58%) in the next three to four years (Custer, 2003, pp. 8, 10).

### Signs of Stress in the Partnership

The past 15 years, in particular, have revealed a growing concern about the influence of agricultural advertisers on the editorial content of farm periodicals. More than 50 research studies, articles, and other analyses have addressed that concern. Some have examined potential and evidence of advertiser influence, direct and indirect (e.g., Reisner, 1992). Some have explored the implications of advertiser influence on readers' trust and on the credibility they assign to periodicals and advertisers (e.g., Boone, Meisenbach & Tucker, 2000, p. 55; Evans, 1976).

Some have assessed the kinds and levels of advertiser pressure felt by agricultural journalists who write for farm periodicals (e.g., Hays & Reisner, 1999; Banning & Evans, 2001) and confirmed the high value those journalists place on journalistic ethics (e.g., Wargo, 1993). Some have argued that the partners are interlinked in such a way that the survival of each influences the survival of all.

The reader should note that this concern is not unique to agricultural publishing. It parallels a broader body of analysis and debate about journalism ethics and advertiser pressures on consumer, business, and other kinds of commercial periodicals. Also, the concern is international in scope (Tallentire, 1999; Frohlich & Holtz-Bacha, 2003).

### The Study

This study involves the second application of a contractualist approach to examining power relationships within the advertiser-media-reader triad. Various models of the triad have been used to describe the ethics-related pressures that journalists and publishers experience. The model used in this study is one in which “power requires mutual agreement by all parties—like players in a game, everyone must agree to the rules” (Cunningham, 1999). A previous application (Banning & Evans, 2001) involved the views of agricultural journalists about the levels, kinds, and effects of advertiser influence they were observing or experiencing.

This study examines views of farmers—the reader partners in this triad. Do they see evidence of advertiser influence in the editorial content of farm periodicals they read? If so, what kind of evidence do they notice? Does it concern them?

Previous research and discussion indicate that answers to such questions have been mixed. At one end of the spectrum, some observers have

concluded that producers are not aware of advertiser influence, and perhaps not interested in it. In examining the relationship between agricultural magazines and farm chemical advertisers, Van den Bosch (1978) concluded that the farm reader public “doesn’t seem to realize, or perhaps more accurately, doesn’t want to realize that it is being conned” (p. 134).

However, a survey among Michigan corn farmers indicated that editorial efforts to encourage them to use safer chemicals were less effective among farmers reliant on magazines financed heavily by pesticide advertisers. Owens stated: “In contrast, reliance on more independent information from Michigan State University and newspapers favored the adoption of the non-carcinogenic formulation” (p. 13).

In an analysis of how the farm press has covered the animal rights movement, the farm press has not taken advantage of its ability to help agriculture question itself and its current farming practices (Reisner, 1992). Animal welfare is an example of topics sensitive to some advertisers in the triad.

Logsdon identified another possible factor involved in farmers’ awareness of this matter. He observed that “finding the truth takes work, and very few people, let alone farmers, are willing to work hard at reading” (Logsdon, 1992, p. 58).

Other studies and reports indicate that farmers are aware of advertiser pressures on editorial content and are concerned about them. A study involving Illinois farmers found they voiced criticism of farm magazines because of a perceived relationship between their articles and their advertising (Kerr, 1970). In a later analysis of pesticide advertising in farm journals, Sommer and Pilisuk (1982) also concluded that farmers perceive a connection between the content of the articles and the advertisements.

Farmer awareness is also implied in a farm editor’s recent observation: “Without fail, farmers tell me new products are among their favorite things to read in a farm magazine. But the farmers also say they like editorial content that isn’t an ad” (Wenzel, 2003, p. 8).

Most farmers (85%) in a 1985 Indiana survey said they wanted to see farm magazines continue to carry advertising. However, only 40% considered farm magazine advertisements as important to them as editorials and articles in magazines. A longitudinal analysis of similar surveys revealed that farmers continued to maintain a strong positive position in their views about advertising. However, the intensity of that position diminished significantly over a 28-year period. The study did not directly examine farmers’

views about possible advertiser influence on editorial content (Sandage & Lancaster, 1986).

A study among rural journalists in Australia indicated that readers “know how stud stock reporting works.” The claim is that “readers have grown used to reading flattering reports about livestock studs—adjacent to advertisements from the same stud—and that they are able to interpret the true essence of the story” (Tallentire, 1999, p. 41).

Other researchers have reported criticism of commercial sources for failing to provide information relevant to the needs of small farmers, an audience not high on the priority list of most farm advertisers (Hepp & Olson, 1980, p. 38).

Some individual farmers and representatives of farmer organizations have been vocal and articulate in expressing concern about farm periodicals “selling out” to advertisers. Note that the farmers are pointing at their fellow partners in the triad.

“The farm press should be in the information business, not used as a public relations tool for the chemical industry and other companies with agricultural business interests” argued a representative of one farmer organization (Burnett, 1985, p. 4).

At another level, farmer-writer-editor Gene Logsdon argued: “What is happening is that a seething cauldron of thoughtful exchange about where the food will come from in the next century is going on *outside* the farm press. This is a travesty and is, to my way of thinking, extremely unethical on the part of farm magazine owners” (Logsdon, 1992, p. 59).

As can be seen, there is anecdotal evidence and commentary indicating that farm producers are aware of and concerned about advertising influence in the agricultural press. However, no recent study has examined this important area. The following are research questions for this study among U.S. farmers:

RQ1: Are producers aware of potential or actual effects of advertising upon the editorial content of commercial farm periodicals?

RQ2: Are producers concerned about the potential or actual effects of advertising upon the editorial content of commercial farm periodicals?

RQ3: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with size of farm operation?

RQ4: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with the age of the producers?

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RQ5: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with the gender of the producers?

### Methods

#### *The Sample*

A base sample of 497 producers was selected by probability methods from a universe of all U.S. producers who applied for government programs for covered commodities in 2003 and who farm 500 acres or more. Nearly all farmers are eligible for and take part in some government commodity programs. An exception is those philosophically opposed to accepting help from the government. This is a limitation of the sampling universe.

Producers farming 500 acres or more were selected for this study. Commercial farm publishers tend to be interested in such producers for their buying power. Farm Market ID/AccuData marketing data service consultant Dick Olmsted notes the larger-acreage producers are also more likely to be opinion leaders who set the trends for others (Olmsted, 2003). Furthermore, they may be more likely to see reading farm publications as essential. As well, they may be especially interested in editorial independence from advertiser influence. The list was purchased from Farm Market ID/AccuData, an established data service with over 150 data consultants.

#### *The Instrument*

The instrument was based on two previously published studies among agricultural editors in the agricultural advertiser-media-reader triad (Banning & Evans, 2001; Reisner & Hays, 1989). The instrument used was as close as possible to the one used in previous studies for reasons of comparability. Slight changes were made because the sample in this study involved readers of agricultural publications rather than writers and editors.

The first part of the instrument contained statements that could be answered with the responses "problem in some cases" or "not a problem." Examples of these statements included "attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear" and "biased reporting due to difficulty of getting both sides of the story."

The second bank of questions consisted of statements that could be answered with the terms "agree," "neutral," and "disagree." Examples of the statements included "It's hard to be pure and competitive in the agricultural publishing marketplace today" and "Agricultural reporters and editors are under no special obligation to please advertisers."

Several other questions from the previous study invited feedback about

the extent and kinds of advertiser influences seen. They also explored the respondents' level of concern about advertiser influences on the editorial content of commercial farm periodicals.

Finally, a bank of four questions constituted an established credibility scale (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; 2000; 2001). The questions were answerable by circling a number from zero to nine placed between bipolar opposite adjectives. The questions were: "How believable do you think commercial agricultural publications in general are?" "How accurate do you think commercial agricultural publications in general are?" "How in-depth do you think commercial agricultural publications in general are?" "How fair do you think commercial agricultural publications in general are?" Demographic questions involving size of operation, age, and gender were reserved for the end of the questionnaire.

The mailing was designed to achieve the maximum response rate (Dillman, 2000). Three waves of letters were sent. An incentive in the form of a crisp dollar bill was included in the second mailing. To increase the rate of response, all envelopes and letters used university letterhead and first-class stamps.

## Results

Of the 234 responses received, eight were found to be duplicates, and three were eliminated from the pool because of changes of address or the respondent was deceased. The adjusted response rate was thus 223 out of a pool of 497 for a response rate of 44.87%. Twenty-five persons returned surveys but did not respond out of the total sample pool of 497. Thus, the refusal rate was 5.03%, with 198 people responding for an acceptance rate of 39.84%. The "n" of 198 is adequate for even small effect sizes (Kraemer & Thiemann, 1987).

## Descriptive Statistics

Of those who responded, 190 (96%) were male and eight (4%) were female. The mean age was 54.12 ( $SD = 13.07$ ) with a range of 72 years, from a minimum age of 21 to a maximum of 93. The mean acreage farmed by the participants was 1,335.80 with a range of 14,328 (501 to 14,829) acres. Responses came from 29 states including Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Montana, North Carolina, North Dakota, Nebraska, New York, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

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RQ1 and RQ2: Are producers aware of and concerned about potential or actual effects of advertising upon the editorial content of commercial farm periodicals?

The first nine questions in the instrument contained statements followed by options the respondents could circle. The options were “problem in some cases” and “not a problem” (Table 1).

**Table 1.** *Descriptive Statistics Questions 1-9*

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Problem in Some Cases</b>	<b>Not a Problem</b>	<b>N</b>
	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>	
Q-1 Attempts by advertisers to influence what stories appear	58.6%	41.4%	198
Q-2 Biased reporting due to difficulty of getting both sides of the story	70.6%	29.4%	197
Q-3 Biased reporting due to reporters injecting own points of view	61.9%	38.1%	197
Q-4 Biased reporting due to inherent difficulties of being objective	59.8%	40.2%	189
Q-5 Biased reporting due to reporters and editors becoming too close to individuals of organizations they cover	65%	35%	197
Q-6 Biased reporting due to difficulty of getting information	49%	51%	192
Q-7 Pressures on reporters from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers	69.9%	30.1%	196
Q-8 Pressures on reporters from publishers or editors to slant stories to fit publications' point of view	63.8%	36.2%	196
Q-9 Pressures on reporters, editors and publishers from politicians or other sources to slant stories	63.1%	36.9%	195

In six of the first nine questions, 60% to 70% believed the stated kinds of bias and pressure were a “problem in some cases.” The mean response for all nine questions was 62.41%. This indicates a majority of respondents believed current pressures on agricultural reporters are a problem. Producers saw greatest bias due to (a) difficulty of getting both sides of the story, (b) pressures on reporters from publishers or editors to slant stories to please advertisers, and (c) reporters and editors becoming too close to individuals of organizations they cover.

The next set of seven questions focused on farmers’ perceptions of the press and used a scale of “agree,” “neutral,” and “disagree” (Table 2). The overall “agreement” mean was 34.3%, the overall “neutral” mean was 41.33%, and the overall “disagreed” mean was 24.34%. Respondents agreed most (46.5%) with the statement, “Some agricultural publications seem to bend over backwards to some commercial outfits to butter up sponsors and

**Table 2.** *Perceptions of the Press*

Statements	Agree %	Neutral %	Disagree %	N
Q-10 The agricultural press is the most controlled media in America	17.7%	41.9%	40.4%	198
Q-11 The agricultural press is completely beholden to the agri-business industry	35%	38.1%	26.9%	197
Q-12 It’s hard to be pure and competitive in the agricultural publishing marketplace today	45.4%	34.7%	19.9%	196
Q-13 Agricultural reporters and editors are under no special obligation to please advertisers	19.9%	32.1%	48%	196
Q-14 Some agricultural publications seem to bend over backwards to some commercial outfits to butter up sponsors and the like	46.5%	39.4%	14.1%	198
Q-15 Some agricultural publications’ efforts to please advertisers make it more difficult for reporters and editors of other agricultural publications to operate at arm’s length without any kind of vested interest	39.1%	50.3%	10.7%	197
Q-16 Advertising people use other media’s willingness to mention their products to put pressure on agricultural reporters and editors	36.5%	52.8%	10.7%	197

the like." They agreed least (17.7%) with the statement, "The agricultural press is the most controlled media in America."

The next set of three questions focused on farmers' perceptions of advertising influence on the press. The first question of this set was: "In general, to what extent, if any, are you concerned about advertiser influences on the editorial content of commercial agricultural publications?" The possible responses were "not concerned," "moderately concerned," and "very concerned." The breakdown was 31.3% for "not concerned," 53% for "moderately concerned," and 15.7% for "very concerned." This means 68.7% of the farmers said they were moderately or very concerned about advertiser influences on the editorial content of commercial agricultural publications ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = .67$ ).

The second question of this set was: "How often, if ever, have you suspected editorial copy was inserted as a trade-off for advertising in commercial agricultural publications?" The possible responses were "never," "seen occasionally," and "seen often." The breakdown was 31.8% for "never," 61.1% for "seen occasionally," and 7.1% for "seen often." The overall mean was 1.75 ( $SD = .57$ ). More than 68% of the farmers said they have occasionally or often suspected editorial copy trade-offs for advertising.

The final question of this set was: "To what extent, if any, do you think some agricultural topics and issues are not being covered by agricultural publications out of their fear of offending advertisers?" The possible responses were "no influence on topics covered," "moderate influence," and "much influence." The breakdown was 15.9% for "no influence on topics covered," 66.7% for "moderate influence," and 17.4% for "much influence." In other words, 84.1% of farmers said they see moderate or greater advertiser influence on what topics farm publications cover ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = .58$ ).

The overall mean of the three summed items in the credibility index was 5.61 ( $SD = 1.43$ ). This indicates that the farmers tended to believe agricultural publications are slightly above the middle of the index scale in terms of credibility.

RQ3: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with size of farm operation?

A regression was run with the credibility index sum as the dependent variable and size of farm as the independent variable. Size of farm was represented by number of acres. The result showed no significance, indicating size of farm did not predict level of credibility [ $R = .067$ ,  $R^2 = .004$ ,  $F(1, 154) = .685$ ,  $p = .409$ ].

RQ4: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with the age of the producers?

A regression was run with the credibility index sum as the dependent variable and age of the producers as the independent variable. The result showed no significance, indicating age of the producer did not predict level of credibility [ $R = .062$ ,  $R^2 = .004$ ,  $F(1, 151) = .583$ ,  $p = .447$ ].

RQ5: Are awareness of and concern about such effects associated with the gender of the producers?

No test was run on this research question because of the small number of women (eight, or 4%) who responded.

## Discussion

Findings of this study suggest that producers are quite discerning and insightful in their reading. They are looking at more than the content and presentation of specific articles in the farm periodicals they receive. Most are also seeing signs of advertiser influence, editorial trade-offs, and pressures from advertisers and other sources that influence what topics are covered or not covered. And they are concerned about how this influence affects the information they receive. They see dangers in editors and publishers becoming too close not only to advertisers, but also to various sources of information. This kind of insight is echoed in farmers' responses in the credibility index.

Results of the credibility index indicate there is much room for improvement. Unlike readers of fashion magazines who see low credibility but do not mind (Cunningham, 1999), readers of agricultural periodicals see a need for great credibility and are concerned about it. People may not feel a need to have high credibility in fashion magazines, because they use fashion magazines for entertainment. However, agricultural producers depend on agricultural information as part of their livelihood. This could account for the increased concern.

No significance was found in responses to questions that asked if age or size of farming operation might contribute to how a person responded to questions about the credibility of farm periodicals. This finding suggests that farmers across all age groups and farm sizes feel similarly. The fact that respondents represented a wide dispersion of ages and farm sizes lends validity to the finding.

## Implications within the Triad

From a practical standpoint, the farmers' responses seem to be a wake-up call. Publishers and advertisers should reconsider their relationships with each other, and with readers, if they wish to raise their credibility. They may wish to examine and update their policies on how they relate to each other, then articulate those policies to their farmer readers. In a highly competitive environment, readers' lack of trust can easily play out into lower readership of farm periodicals, less responsiveness to editorial content, less respect for agricultural marketers, more buying resistance, and more pursuit of other information sources. Increased credibility among readers can, on the other hand, have positive bottom-line implications for farm publishers. Additionally, because credibility in a publication may lead to a halo effect in which the credibility is transferred to advertisers, all partners in the advertiser-publisher-reader triad can benefit.

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