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Abstract

Because of intense competition for readers' attention, communicators at colleges of agriculture must understand readers' interests.

Assessing Reader Interest: An Ohio Study

by Mark Tucker, Barbara Cooper

Because of intense competition for readers' attention, communicators at colleges of agriculture must understand readers' interests. The researchers surveyed readers of the pilot issue of OHIO 21, a new semi-annual magazine published by Ohio State University College of Agriculture (OSU). The objectives: (1) to determine the personal background and interests of readers; (2) to determine readers' attitudes about the writing style of feature articles; (3) to assess the reactions of former OHIO REPORT readers to the use of color and popular magazine writing style in OHIO 21; and (4) to assess readers' overall opinions of OHIO 21 as an agricultural research magazine. A questionnaire asked in-state OSU agriculture alumni about their interest in and evaluations of the magazine. Most respondents were males between ages 25 and 44. Current research and new agricultural products were the subjects most interesting to respondents. The majority thought the writing level was satisfactory. Of respondents who had both OHIO 21 and OHIO REPORT, most said color graphics and popular magazine writing style strengthened the new publication, and 94 percent said it presented an informative picture of agricultural research.

Ubell (1963) identified several issues that affect the dissemination of science news. Among them were the need for writers and editors to know the audience, its level of understanding of science topics, and subjects of most interest. According to Redding (1982), audience surveys can help maintain or open feedback channels so that a publication may remain sensitive to its audience. These surveys enable editors and communications' managers to gather information about their audience so that they can match the reader with the text (Dreyer, 1984; Redding, 1982). Gastel (1983) recommended that science writers use this information about their readers' background and interests as a scaffolding for news stories. Knowledge of readers' background is necessary to create publications that are appealing, readable, and properly designed.

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Purpose And Objectives

The purpose of this study was to survey the readers of the pilot issue of *OHIO 21*, a new semi-annual magazine published by the Ohio State University College of Agriculture. It was created to replace *OHIO REPORT*, an agricultural research magazine published since 1964 by the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. The new publication is mailed at no charge to state government and university officials and to resident and out-of-state alumni of OSU's College of Agriculture and the Agricultural Technical Institute (ATI) in Wooster.

The objectives of the study were: to determine the personal background, occupations, interests, and reading habits of target readers; to determine readers' attitudes about the writing style of the feature articles in *OHIO 21*; to assess the reactions of former *OHIO REPORT* readers to the use of color and popular magazine writing style in the new magazine; to assess readers' overall opinion of *OHIO 21* as an agricultural research magazine.

Methodology

We mailed a descriptive survey to in-state alumni with OSU bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees and to two-year graduates from the Agricultural Technical Institute at Wooster. The sample consisted of 374 randomly selected from the 12,568 agricultural alumni on the *OHIO 21* mailing list.

The survey contained questions about readers' interests and their evaluations of different aspects of the magazine, including particular feature articles, length of feature articles, the level of writing, and amount of information provided. Demographic questions asked for age, sex, and occupation. Content validity of the survey was established by a panel of experts from the Section of Information and Applied Communication and the Department of Agricultural Education at The Ohio State University. Reliability of the instrument was established by pilot testing a random sample of 37 College of Agriculture and Extension faculty. A packet containing the cover letter, questionnaire, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope was mailed on April 13, 1987, and a follow-up packet was mailed to non-respondents 17 days later. The cover letters explained the purpose of the study and urged subjects to respond promptly. A total of 126 usable questionnaires was returned for a response rate of 35%, a typical response rate for mailed readership surveys, according to Wimmer and Dominick (1987).

Findings

The findings provide a reader profile of *OHIO 21*, describe reader interests, assess readers' attitudes about the writing style and use of color graphics, assess readers' opinions of *OHIO 21* as an agricultural research magazine, and determine the number of agricultural magazines respondents receive.

Reader Profile

The majority of the respondents were

- between ages 25 and 44 (62%);
- male (83%); and
- employed in farming (16%), part-time farming (16%), or agribusiness (31%).

Number of Agricultural Magazines Which Respondents Receive

Of survey respondents, 56% receive one to four agricultural magazines regularly; 28% receive five or more. More than half, who marked full-time farming as an occupation receive five or more agricultural magazines.

Readers' Interests

Readers were asked to indicate their level of interest in 10 subjects. Current research and new agricultural products were the subjects of most interest to respondents. They ranked these subjects as follows:

1. Current Ohio State agricultural research
2. New agricultural products
3. Agricultural economics
4. Alternative crops for Ohio
5. Crop management
6. Livestock management
7. Ohio State educational programs
8. Forestry
9. Farm machinery management
10. Dairy management

Respondents also were asked to identify general subject categories that they would most like to see in future editions of *OHIO 21*. Again, agricultural research was chosen by respondents most frequently. Respondents ranked the items as follows:

1. Agricultural science and research news
2. Economics and farm management
3. Natural resources and environmental news
4. Information on Ohio State educational activities

Writing Style And Color Graphics

Respondents were asked to rate the level of writing (readability of text) of feature articles. Most (87%) thought the level of writing was satisfactory.

They also were asked to evaluate the feature articles in terms of detailed information. Nearly three-fourths (73%) believed that the stories provided about the right amount of information.

Respondents were asked to rate the length of six feature articles in the first issue of *OHIO 21*. Between 84% and 90% thought the length of each feature story was about right.

More than one-third (36%) of the respondents had read both *OHIO 21* and *OHIO REPORT*. Former *OHIO REPORT* readers were asked to judge the pilot issue of *OHIO 21* on two variables: use of color photographs and graphics and popular magazine writing style. (*OHIO REPORT* was a black-and-white publication written by scientists in the form of technical reports.) Former *OHIO REPORT* readers were asked to evaluate these two variables on a three-point scale: 1=no; 2=somewhat; and 3=yes. The majority said that, yes, the color graphics and popular writing style strengthened *OHIO 21*.

Reader Perceptions of OHIO 21 As An Agricultural Research Publication

Respondents were asked if they believed that the first issue of *OHIO 21* presented an informative picture of agricultural research at Ohio State University. Ninety-four percent said yes.

Of the 36% of the respondents who read both *OHIO 21* and *OHIO REPORT*, 71% thought *OHIO 21* was clearly, or somewhat, more interesting than *OHIO REPORT*.

Conclusions

In keeping with the mission of the magazine and the suggestions of readers, *OHIO 21* should continue to focus intently on agricultural research. Research was chosen to be the subject of most interest to respondents on two separate questions.

Also in keeping with readers' interests, editors should consider starting regular sections on new agricultural products, agricultural economics, and alternative crops for Ohio. These subjects were popular as future story ideas and as general subjects of interest.

Given the number of agricultural magazines received by readers and the trend toward specialized publications in private-sector agricultural publishing, readers may be better served by a diversity of subjects in *OHIO 21* rather than by depth in any single area. This approach, also, would illustrate the diversity of agricultural research at The Ohio State University.

Editors should continue using the current writing style with regard to language and amount of detail. Respondents, generally, thought stories were understandable and contained the right amount of information. Also, editors should continue use of illustrations as an aid to readability.

Ideas for Additional Research

Additional research might trace *OHIO 21* readers' subject interests and attitudes over time. Research also can better identify the types of information readers want from *OHIO 21*. For instance, it is possible that readers believe that *OHIO 21* is a reliable source of information for agricultural research but not for information on economic trends. Data are needed to determine what role readers believe *OHIO 21* should serve as an agricultural news source.

Further research might establish guidelines for story length based on subject interest. Because a wide variety of subjects is recommended for future issues of *OHIO 21*, editors need a more systematic method of allocating space.

Research also is needed to determine how readers feel about popularizing science topics. Further, it is not known whether the agricultural alumni in this study are frequent readers of science publications, or if their writing and format preferences would vary from those of general audiences.

The information collected from this research project and others will keep *OHIO 21* a well-read, usable publication. More important, research projects like these can help colleges of agriculture at land-grant universities fulfill their mission of effectively disseminating agricultural information.

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