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Communicating Through Florida Newspapers

Abstract

Communication is a vital function of every organization, and particularly so if the organization is in the communications field.

Communicating Through Florida Newspapers

Michael Ruffner

COMMUNICATION IS A VITAL FUNCTION of every organization, and particularly so if the organization is in the communications field. The purpose of any communication is to satisfy a need of the audience and to accomplish a purpose of the sender. However, communication must be geared toward a specific audience for a specific purpose. David Berlo, the noted communication authority, warns that an effective communication effort must incorporate a specific purpose and a specific response.¹

Thus, sender-receiver harmony is the key factor in communicating successfully through any of the media. This harmony between sender and receiver becomes particularly elusive when more than one receiver has to be considered. This is the problem confronting agricultural news writers. An agricultural writer must structure his message for a specific purpose, but he must direct it toward both the newspaper editor and the newspaper reader if it is to meet with success.

Problems of Science Communication

Agricultural writing often involves the preparation of highly technical and complex information. This is a problem with all types of science writing. Articles of a scientific nature can produce great ambiguity in the reader's mind, possibly more than with any other type of article.²

¹Berlo, David K., *The Process of Communication*, New York; Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, p. 14.

²Tichenor, Phillip J.; Olien, Clarice N.; Harrison, Annette; and Donohue, George, "Mass Communications Systems and Communication Accuracy in Science News Reporting," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 47 (Winter, 1970), pp. 673-83.

Friction often exists between scientists and media communicators.³ This suggests differences in goals, purposes, and dimensions of judgment regarding the purpose of the technical communication.

Then newspaper medium provides very little space in the news columns for scientific writing with an agricultural theme. Agricultural news will rarely receive more than 5 percent of available space in a newspaper, so this material must be highly accurate and concise to offset the dearth of newspaper space available.⁴

Newspapers also face problems in the area of science writing. Today, more than ever before, newspapers cannot afford to rely solely on their own staff for the generation of highly scientific news material. They must rely on news services specializing in scientific communications for adequate national, regional, and local coverage if their readers are to be adequately informed.⁵

Any agricultural writer who attempts to fill this need of newspapers for scientific information must provide specific, purposive communications which contribute to the accuracy and intelligibility of technical messages. This is easier said than done since the writer must inform and educate both the newspaper editor, if the story is to reach the news column, and the reader, if the purpose of the communication is to be met.

The newspaper editor and reader can be as different as night and day. If their needs, goals, and dimensions of judgment regarding technical communications are dissonant, the science writer has a very tough nut to crack. The science writer can take comfort in that newspaper editors have been found to be the best predictors of reader preferences for news articles.⁶

This leaves quite a bit to chance. What if the newspaper editor, for any reason whatever, fails to accurately predict his readers'

³Johnson, Kenneth G., "Dimensions of Judgment of Science News Stories," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 40 (Summer, 1963), pp. 315-22.

⁴Ward, William B., *Reporting Agriculture Through Newspapers, Magazines, Radio, and Television* (2nd ed., Ithaca, N.Y.: Comstock Publishing Associates, 1959), p. 43.

⁵Traves, Edward J., "News/Feature Services by Circulation Group Uses," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 49 (Spring, 1972), pp. 133-37.

⁶Atwood, Erwin L., "How Newsmen and Readers Perceive Each Others' Story Preferences," *Journalism Quarterly*, vol. 47 (Summer, 1970), pp. 296-303.

preferences for certain kinds of science articles? Neither the newspaper editor nor the science writer will accomplish his communication function, simply because the writer did not predict the editor's predictive ability accurately. Is it quite that simple, however? There seems to be a lot of guesswork involved with informing the reader of scientific and technical advances.

The most obvious remedy for all of this guesswork would be to ascertain what types of information the reader wants and what types of information the editor wants. Through such an analysis the science writer can then prepare his material to satisfy both of these audiences or an editor can see tangible evidence of what his reader wants to see in the newspaper columns regarding technical articles.

This type of analysis was conducted at the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences.⁷ The study surveyed 235 newspaper editors and 400 selected newspaper readers by mail questionnaire. A content analysis also was performed on agricultural news stories appearing in all Florida newspapers from September 1974 through November 1974.

The Reader

Nearly all of the readers who responded to the questionnaire (66 percent) indicated that they subscribed to a daily newspaper and that they read a newspaper every day. This is a good indicator of the exposure of a news article appearing in the newspaper media. Most of the readers normally read one of the larger daily publications with a circulation size over 50,000.

Since the larger newspapers do not emphasize local news, this would seem to indicate that the readers' preference for local news and events is minimal. The results supported this notion with nearly 7 out of 10 of the readers stating no particular preference for local news in favor of state or national news. Similarly, no particular preference was indicated for stories accompanied by

⁷Ruffner, Michael R., *Analysis of Agricultural News Content Preferences of Florida Newspaper Editors and Selected Florida Readers*, Master's thesis, Univ. of Florida, March, 1975.

pictures. The readers did, however, indicate that they preferred news stories which were relatively short in length, approximately 5 to 10 paragraphs.

The readers indicated that research stories were the most desirable, with how-to-do-it and gardening stories ranking behind research. Table 1 shows the stated preferences for specific types of agricultural news stories.

Table 1. Reader Preferences for Specific Types of Agricultural News Stories in Florida Newspapers

	<i>More</i>	<i>Fewer</i>	<i>About Right</i>
Research	72	2	26
Marketing	42	8	50
Production	45	3	52
Gardening	51	6	43
Family	33	7	60
Advance	50	4	46
How-to-do-it	58	8	34
Success	36	9	55

Note: N=263

The Newspaper Editor

Of the 127 editors responding to the questionnaire, 36 represented daily newspapers and 91 represented weekly newspapers. The newspaper breakdown in Florida at the time of the study was 52 daily publications and 183 weekly publications.

Most of the editors also stated a preference for shorter news articles, or those under ten column inches in length. Nearly all of the editors indicated that they preferred local news stories and news stories accompanied by pictures.

The stated editor preference for specific types of news stories was for how-to-do-it and family articles. Table 2 lists these editor preferences.

Over three quarters of the editors stated that they would use agricultural news fillers, pictures with cutlines only, and mug shots

Table 2. Editor Preferences for Specific Types of Agricultural News Stories

	<i>More</i>	<i>Fewer</i>	<i>About Right</i>
Research	32	28	40
Marketing	35	28	37
Production	31	30	39
Gardening	55	10	35
Family	61	8	31
Advance	31	17	52
How-to-do-it	68	8	24
Success	33	16	51

Note: N=127

of agricultural news sources. These are areas which are commonly overlooked in preparing agricultural news information.

What Was Published

The content analysis of all agricultural news stories appearing in Florida newspapers during the period of the study examined 170 articles. The types of agricultural news stories published showed little correlation with the stated preferences of the newspaper editors.

Less than one quarter of the published stories were about local topics or had pictures accompanying the story. The most frequently published theme was about agricultural events or meetings.

The Writer's Recourse

This research project seems to indicate that Florida newspaper editors and Florida readers are not in complete agreement as to the desired types of science articles being published. This leaves the science writer in the middle of the old newspaper dilemma—do you give the reader what he wants to read or what he needs to read?

The writer can be sure of one thing. Both editor and reader prefer legitimate news articles which tend to be short and concise.

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This should be a cardinal rule in preparing any science article for Florida newspapers.

But what does the writer do for areas where editor and reader are not in agreement? The most obvious recourse is to prepare articles which meet both preferences. Pictures can be included with a manuscript and left to the editor's discretion. More articles concerning research, how-to-do-it, family, and gardening will be sure to meet the needs and wishes of all concerned. Finally, the writer can prepare two versions of the same story with very little additional effort. One version can be prepared for general consumption and the other can feature a local theme. The onus of responsibility then falls on the editor for determining the reader appeal of a particular article.

The first step in taking the guesswork out of science reporting is to have legitimate facts at the disposal of the writer. The writer must know what the reader wants and what the particular newspaper editor wants. Without this information science reporting is a hit-and-miss operation. Before a science writer puts paper in his typewriter, he should get these facts—any way he can.