

Disseminating News Releases by Clip Sheets: Sometimes the Old Ways Still Work

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Abstract

In an era of electronic information delivery, this article examines the effectiveness of a low cost clip sheet produced since 1920 as a way of providing Missouri-based media news and feature stories about the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources.

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In an era of electronic information delivery, this article examines the effectiveness of a low cost clip sheet produced since 1920 as a way of providing Missouri-based media news and feature stories about the University of Missouri College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. A one-time mail survey provided data indicating this simple, low-tech approach still is an effective means to place story material in daily and weekly newspapers as well as in electronic media and magazines.

In the age of information super highways, I must admit to some surprise on this one. After all, it is disconcerting when your data do not back up what you know perfectly well to be the truth.

I am referring to what we call the Missouri Farm News Service—or MFNS. Technically, you could call it a clip sheet. My term was more like a relic. It is a twice-monthly, one-color, nine-by-14 inch self-mailer sent to print and electronic media, campus faculty and administrators, retired faculty, government agencies, and assorted friends of the University of Missouri-Columbia's College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources.

It has quite a history, dating back to 1920 and as of this writing is in Vol. 92, No. 15. The agricultural editor of the

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time, Mr. A.A. Jeffrey, wrote in the department's annual report that in 1928 "resort was made this year to a clipping service to check up on the use made of the clip-sheet, revealing that this service was used in a single six-week period by 241 Missouri newspapers. The News Service was also distributed to all extension agents in the state, supplying them material for their own service to their local newspapers as well as serving as an object lesson in the best ways of handling extension material to make it acceptable news copy."

Printed on both sides, MFNS today, as it did then, contains news and feature stories on the college's research and extension programs. Overall appearance is one of a mini-newspaper, four columns, headlines, an occasional black and white photograph or perhaps a simple line drawing.

It certainly is not very high tech. It is produced by desktop publishing and mailed second class to 754 addresses. Cost of printing is 18 cents per copy and postage is 17 cents for a total of 35 cents per copy.

In addition, each week some of these same stories are provided media through a press packet with standard format news releases, by fax to wire services and major media outlets when the story rates it, through transfer by the Missouri LINK service, by an electronic bulletin board providing an 800 number to media for downloading and through contacts resulting from PROFNET, query letters and phone calls.

In light of all these delivery methods, how effective is this oldster? Pretty effective, we found. A one-time readership survey was conducted using a stamped, self-addressed post card attached to MFNS. It asked the respondent if he/she wanted to continue receiving the publication and also what purpose was found for it:

- as a source for stories
- as camera-ready material
- as a means of keeping up with CAFNR research and extension activities.

The respondent's name and address were placed on each so we could identify him/her as a person in the media, on-campus faculty, etc.

We experienced a 51% overall response. Data indicate that 86% of all those responding wanted to continue receiving

TABLE 1:
MFNS Responses from Missouri Media

	Continue Service?		Source for Stories	Camera-Ready Material
	YES	NO		
Weekly newspaper responses 36	32 89%	4 11%	25 69%	14 39%
Daily newspaper responses 30	25 83%	5 17%	20 67%	10 33%
Radio/TV responses 15	12 80%	3 20%	12 80%	1 7%
Other publication responses 16	14 87%	2 13%	11 69%	1 6%
TOTAL RESPONSES 97	83 85%	14 15%	68 70%	26 27%

MFNS. Of particular interest to us were responses from the media. Their responses are indicated in Table 1.

Of the 97 media respondents to our survey, 83, or 85%, indicated a desire to have the service continued. This percentage remained rather consistent with the various media listed. Seventy percent of media respondents indicated they use MFNS as a source for stories. Twenty-seven percent indicated they still use MFNS as camera-ready material.

No attempt was made to provide a second survey or to identify nonrespondents. Assuming that all nonrespondents (49% — N=93) in addition to acknowledged "NOs" (N=14), do not want to continue to receive the MFNS, the data indicate at least a 41% usage. So in an era of "gee whiz" technology, this 75-year-old service not only survives but seems to be doing quite well. It is economical and easy to produce. Prior to the survey mailing, we had informal input from faculty and administrators about its effectiveness which left us with doubts about media usage. Perhaps there are lessons here and need for more study. Media editors tell us they still like paper in

hand. Stories included in MFNS at times show up in newspapers six months after they have been mailed. It seems recognizable and reliable.

What used to be intended almost solely as paste-up or camera ready material may seem an anomaly. But for now we will keep it. Like one of those cheap but sturdy watches, it keeps on ticking.