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Abstract

An article in the Sept. 12, 2002, issue of Media Insider reported PR Newswire’s media relations team visits hundreds of newsrooms each month where it has observed many different schemes for managing information. The author suggested peppering news releases with variations of keywords that journalists may use to search wire feeds, incoming news releases or archived information on Web sites. This paper reports an informal testing of search engines and words that might commonly appear in news releases and other documents written by land-grant university communicators. Searches for 54 words or phrases [Table 1] on Web sites maintained by two popular newspapers, two land-grant universities, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture corroborated the Media Insider author’s assertion that expanding use of keywords will increase prospects of being found by journalists who use search engines. Further, the study indicated that nomenclatures popular with educators may reduce prospects for media exposure.

Shakespeare asked, “What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” Gertrude Stein said, “A rose is a rose is a rose.” The implication is that it doesn’t much matter what we call a thing.

If that ever were true, the Digital Age is challenging the venerable tradition as journalists turn to technology to help them cope with a hurricane of information that overloads their computers and their brains.

Without mentioning the word, Jonathan Evans suggests in “Bust Out the Thesaurus,” which appeared in the Sept. 12, 2002, issue of Media Insider, that synonym success may be the key to capturing the attention of reporters and editors. Evans reports

About the Authors

Sharon Wood-Turley is an assistant professor of agricultural journalism at the University of Missouri-Columbia and an ACE member. Mark Tucker is an assistant professor of agricultural communications at Ohio State University and an ACE member.
that journalists approach the management of information in diverse ways. Computer search engines allow them to swiftly sort enormous amounts of data in their quest for items of interest. Whether they are searching wire feeds or a news release archive on company or organization Web sites, a document that contains more than one noun for a subject has an improved chance of attracting their attention.

In the old days when news releases were scanned by a human eye, exact search words weren’t so important because an alert journalist could correlate words in a nanosecond. Computers scan much faster, but they also are much dumber. They find exactly what they are told to look for and nothing but exactly what they are told to find.

While computers have in some respects made our work easier, they also give we who write in hope of gaining media exposure a new and difficult challenge. We must write with search words in mind (they tend to be nouns), and we must rethink our attitudes about redundancy, thinking of multiple ways of saying the same thing.

As Evans put it, “Success comes down to anticipating how a journalist might search and positioning as many potential keywords as possible in order to get snagged by their search agent. In short, it’s time to dust off that thesaurus . . . and re-visit those boilerplates.”

Those of us who write on agricultural subjects face a particularly daunting challenge as the faculty we work with abandon time-honored nomenclature for new names. This is problematic, not just because journalists often shorten the formal names, but because it introduces complexity in Web searching protocols and requires more sophistication on the part of journalists searching for information. The same problem exists with the renaming of academic units, such as departments. For example, the Washington State University Department of Agricultural Economics recently changed its name to Department of Agricultural and Resource Economics and the WSU Agricultural Engineering Department became the Biosystems Engineering Department. Thus a journalist who sets a search engine to seek “agricultural economics” or to find “agricultural engineering” may miss current documents, including news releases.

The problem also manifests itself in the names that institutions give their faculty. In news releases, they may be called faculty,
Another important consideration for instructors is the challenge of keeping students engaged and interested in the research process throughout the semester. This is especially true when the whole class is working on a single group project, such as the one reported in this paper. Group research projects can result in less student engagement, leading to a less satisfactory experience. An alternative for smaller classes (fewer than eight to 10 students) is to structure the course so that students may work individually or in pairs on research projects in which they have personal interests. Obviously, individual projects will require more faculty time, but the dividend is students’ higher level of participation and learning.

Regardless of the particular objectives or methodology used in a research project, we believe that agricultural communication students will benefit from exposure to the concepts and skills gained through the experience. A major benefit is the knowledge gained that research, like journalistic writing, is a subjective process in which the potential for error is always present. Such insights are best gained from direct experience rather than course lectures.

We strongly encourage other faculty to build a structured research component into their curricula. The experience strengthens students’ portfolios regardless of the specific career area they plan to enter and is particularly valuable for those considering graduate school (Woirhaye & Menkhaus, 1996). It also sends a clear message that professionalism in our discipline is based not only on applied skills, but also on the conduct and application of research to guide our editorial efforts and serve our clients and audiences.

Endnotes

1The term “research” is sometimes used in journalism literature to refer to reporters’ use of online databases, the Internet, and traditional sources to gather information for news stories (Bolding, 1996). However, as used in this paper, “research” refers to the use of social scientific methods and empirical observation to discover or generate new information about a particular issue or topic (Anderson, 1987).

2Additional results of analyses are available directly from the authors upon request.

3The absence of Discover&Enlighten from the list of publications we asked respondents to rank as sources of information about the
University nomenclature poses more than one challenge for communication specialists, but the only aspect germane to this paper involves the writing of news releases and other documents sent to the news media and posted on Web sites. The words used may determine whether or not a journalist’s search engine finds the reference, and that is an issue with which agricultural communicators in education must deal.

To validate Evans’ advice, I tested responses of search engines on six Web sites. I picked Media Insider’s archive of news releases distributed by PR Newswire because the idea for this investigation originated with an article in the Media Insider newsletter and because the Web site posts a large volume of news releases written by PR Newswire clients. I selected two major, general circulation newspapers for inclusion, the Seattle Times and the New York Times, in part because both have large archives and are available free to anyone with an Internet connection. To these, I added the news release archives of Washington State University College of Agriculture and Home Economics, Purdue University, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Purdue was selected because it has a high-volume operation and has been on-line since the early days of Web sites among land-grant universities. WSU was selected as a small-to-medium size land-grant university with a separate news operation for agriculture and home economics and because it archives all news releases issued since it launched its Web service to the news media in January 1996. The USDA site was selected because it is the largest and most complex Web news site for agricultural journalists.

A list of 54 words and phrases that might commonly appear in news releases written by land-grant communicators was run through all six search engines. No attempt was made to determine what agricultural terms journalists might put into search engines. That would be another study.

The search results are striking. A sample is included in Table 2. A copy of the complete results is available at http://cahenews.wsu.edu/tables.htm, or I will be happy to mail a copy of the complete results to the interested reader.
The large number of neutral responses for some items suggests that the audience may be too broad for the specialized information carried in the newsletter. Top administrators agreed that the list should be trimmed to focus on the target audience. First priority: state legislators, the Vice Chancellor’s Leadership Council, and MU administrators. Second priority: Opinion leaders within the agriculture community, and members of the MU Farms and Centers advisory groups. Third priority: Major donors, and current and former ag alumni board members. Based on this finding, the mailing list has been cut from 2,700 to fewer than 1,500.

Another adjustment made as a result of the research is that the editor and writers are focusing more heavily on stories that tell about the impact the college is having on the lives of Missourians and less on campus activities, guest speakers, and award winners. Administrative support for this move would have been difficult to secure without empirical findings from this research.

The theoretical model was only slightly successful in identifying factors thought to influence respondents’ preferences for receiving Discover&Enlighten. As shown in previous studies, reader interest in the subject matter was the single most powerful predictor of preference for receiving the publication. Neither positive perceptions of the publication nor alumni status were shown to predict a preference for receiving the newsletter. These findings were contrary to expectations. The R-square value of .167 means that the one-variable model was unable to account for about 83 percent of the variance in respondents’ preferences for receiving the publication. Additional work is needed to identify other factors that might account for this variance.

Agricultural and applied communicators should periodically conduct their own readership studies to determine what topics are of most importance to their audiences. There is much value in sharing research-based editorial information with administrators from time to time, particularly when there is evidence of changing reader interests or demographics.

The research also yielded valuable information to agricultural journalism instructors on the best way to integrate an applied research project into the undergraduate curriculum. Based on students’ evaluations of the course and faculty observations on the overall experience, we are convinced that this is not only a valid use of class time and student effort, but that it adds a unique dimension to students’ degree programs. In the MU...
marchs we increase our use of synonyms to improve the chances that journalists—or others—will find our works with computer search engines.

We need to study the publications of most interest and value to our institutions to determine what nouns journalists use when writing about the subjects we write about. If reporters write or say “farmer,” our news releases had better include the term, regardless of what terms our agents, specialists, scientists, or administrators prefer. If we don’t believe we can get away with changing their nouns, we at least need to find ways to work vernacular into our stories.

A word of caution, however. We must make these adjustments within the bounds of good journalistic practice. For instance, Evans recommends against abbreviating state names. “Make sure you include relevant state names, written out. If you’ve written Ariz. or AZ, your release will not show up if someone’s keyword searching for Arizona,” he wrote. In our news operation, we have adopted Associated Press style, and I wouldn’t deviate from it for this purpose. But Evans’ point is well made. Success comes down to anticipating how a journalist might search and positioning as many potential keywords as possible to get snagged by the search engines.

Table 2. Terms for pigs and for those who raise them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Hits</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hog</td>
<td>2,195</td>
<td>Hog producers</td>
<td>11,965</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pig</td>
<td>3,963</td>
<td>Pig producer</td>
<td>18,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pigs</td>
<td>3,632</td>
<td>Pig producers</td>
<td>1,673</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swine</td>
<td>1,447</td>
<td>Pork producer</td>
<td>21,794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hog farmer</td>
<td>5,423</td>
<td>Pork producers</td>
<td>15,710</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hog farmers</td>
<td>8,129</td>
<td>Swine producer</td>
<td>17,161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hog producer</td>
<td>17,548</td>
<td>Swine producers</td>
<td>11,192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL HITS</td>
<td>139,925</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table displays the results of 14 search words or phrases entered into selected newspaper, university and USDA search engines to test how variations affect the number of hits produced. They were extracted from a larger table, containing 54 search words or phrases, which were tested in search engines for six different archives.

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The resulting regression model is shown below. Coefficients are provided in standardized form and an asterisk (*) is used to denote the single variable significant beyond the .05 level.

\[ Y = 0.418x_1^* + 0.036x_2 + 0.029x_3 \]

Adjusted R-Square: .167

where Y is “Preference for receiving D&E,”

\( x_1 \) is “Interest in subject matter,”

\( x_2 \) is “Publication characteristics,” and

\( x_3 \) is MU alumni status.

As shown, only one variable, “Interest in subject matter,” was statistically significant. The adjusted R-square of .167 indicates that reader interest explains about 17 percent of the variance in respondents’ preferences for receiving the newsletter.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results reported here add to the existing literature on readership analysis in agricultural communication. Communication specialists from other universities can use elements of this research as a tool to assist in evaluating their own publications or in planning similar research.

Findings show that respondents are generally pleased with the Discover&Enlighten newsletter. Based on these results, MU administrators concluded that the newsletter is an effective means of communicating with their target audience. Another positive outcome of the study was that it helped clarify to administrators not only the importance of editorial research, but also the capability of agricultural journalism staff to conduct such studies and apply their findings in useful, practical ways. Administrators expressed a desire for readership information on every college publication to ensure that external communication is kept as cost-effective as possible, particularly during the current difficult budget environment. Research-based information for decision-making is particularly important in tempering some administrators’ perceptions that print publications should be discontinued in favor of Web publications. Additional research is planned to track readers’ preferences for electronic delivery of information.
agent. As Evans put it: “Somehow you need to anticipate possible variations of keywords relevant to your subject matter and pepper your release with these words.”

This informal study suggests that minor variations in search terms produce broadly different results in Web search engines. This includes both nouns and plural or singular forms. No attempt was made to determine what words journalists writing about agriculture actually use. A study of that subject would add information for ACE members who write news releases. Another study would be a comparison of agricultural terms published in general circulation newspapers, agricultural specialty publications, and in news releases from universities and U.S. Department of Agriculture agencies.

References


About the Author
Terence L. Day is a news writer for Washington State University and an ACE member.

### Table 4. How Respondents Read D&E, n = 150

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Readers (%)</th>
<th>MD (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a. Read entire articles of interest</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Look at all the photos</td>
<td>62.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. Look for people I know</td>
<td>57.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. Read only headlines and captions</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. Read first 2 or 3 sentences of each story</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f. Read the entire newsletter</td>
<td>22.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

MD = missing data.

Three independent variables were hypothesized to explain variance in the dependent variable. The first independent variable, termed “publication characteristics,” was a composite measure of perceived truthfulness, readability, credibility, and value in building awareness of college activities (see Items A, B, C, and D, Table 1). Items were scaled 1 to 5 and coded so that higher values corresponded to more positive evaluations of the characteristic assessed. Item analysis was used to assess reliability of the scale, resulting in an acceptable alpha coefficient of .80.

The second independent variable, termed “Interest in subject matter,” was a composite measure of respondents’ level of interest in nine topic areas regularly featured in the newsletter: natural resource programs, agricultural production research, international programs, innovative teachers, agricultural marketing/economics, food processing research, life science research, upcoming events, and student stories (see Table 2). Items were scaled 0 to 6, with higher values corresponding to greater levels of interest. Item analysis of the scale resulted in an acceptable alpha coefficient of .76.

The third independent variable was a single-item indicator used to assess whether respondents were MU graduates. Those who were not MU graduates received a value of 1, and those who were MU graduates received a value of 2.

To test for multicollinearity among the independent variables, a correlation matrix was generated and inspected for the presence