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Abstract

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This study surveyed readers of the FFA *New Horizons* magazine to determine reader opinions about magazine usefulness. A total of 1273 readers received questionnaires. The survey found that 78% of the FFA members and 81% of the FFA advisors read at least 50% of the magazine. Readers were most interested in articles of personal interest, photographs, and topics related to their state. Readers rated the magazine 7 on a 10-point scale compared to other magazines regularly read. The response rate was 68%.

Introduction

In the past several years, numerous changes have occurred within agricultural education and the FFA. The agricultural education profession has moved from being predominantly production oriented to more comprehensive in its agriscience focus; the Future Farmers of America is now named the National FFA Organization; the national headquarters has a new organizational structure and the *National Future Farmer* has become *FFA New Horizons*.

These changes and others underscore the importance of understanding the various publics served by the FFA, an integral component of agricultural education. Understanding its audience is particularly necessary for *FFA New Horizons* magazine, perhaps the most important public relations vehicle used by the National FFA Organi-

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zation. In order to ensure the long-term efficacy of *FFA New Horizons*, its writers and editors must continually monitor readers' perceptions, attitudes, and uses of the magazine. Editors of agricultural publications face a readership that is constantly changing. New advances in agricultural technology, business, and education methods require that magazine editors remain constantly aware of the opinions and needs of their readers.

The effectiveness of a publication greatly depends on how it reflects the interests of its readers. Unfortunately, the editor of a magazine has no easy way to obtain detailed and comprehensive feedback from the magazine's readers. A number of studies have shown that editors sometimes lack a clear perception of what their readers want (Wink, 1979). Letters to the editor are a common but unsystematic method of determining reader interest. They do not represent those readers who have strong opinions but do not care to write. Moreover, they tend to reflect attitudes and opinions about issues rather than perceptions about magazine form and content. Attempts to gather readership data with survey research are rare (Wink, 1979).

According to Redding (1982), audience surveys can help maintain or open feedback channels so that a publication can remain responsive to its readers. Surveys enable editors and communication managers to gather information about their audiences so they can more closely correlate editorial content to reader needs, expectations, and interests (Dreyer, 1984; Tucker & Cooper, 1987; Suvedi, Heinze & Ferris, 1991).

A survey is a valuable tool in analyzing reader opinion. A well designed readership survey, based on sound research principles, can yield more reliable information than occasional letters and reader comments and thus help editors make publications more effective.

Purpose and Objectives

This study was conducted to determine the appropriateness of *FFA New Horizons* to its readership. The specific objectives were to:

1. Determine demographic data on *FFA New Horizons* readers.
2. Ascertain readers' utilization of the magazine.
3. Identify the reading habits (kind and quantity of similar documents received) of *FFA New Horizons* clientele.
4. Determine readers' preferences for career development information in the *FFA New Horizons* magazine.
5. Determine *FFA New Horizons*' value to its readers.
6. Determine differences among demographic data and reader preferences, reading habits, and reader utilization.

Researchers used a descriptive survey design for this study. Four focus groups assisted in developing the research instrument and provided qualitative data about experiences, skills, or feelings of participants. A field test was conducted in October, 1991 with Michigan FFA members to assure the usability and validity of the technique. A month later four focus groups convened during the 1991 National FFA Convention. A final focus group of FFA members and advisors was nominated by agricultural education state supervisors. Researchers reviewed the focus group discussion and conferred with magazine editors concerning the questions to be asked in the final survey.

Validity of the survey instrument was established using a panel of experts that consisted of the *FFA New Horizons'* staff, the 1991-92 Michigan State FFA Officers, and faculty from the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Michigan State University. Reliability was established by a pilot test with a like group of FFA members and advisors not included in the sample. Cronbach's Alpha coefficients were calculated on five groups of Likert type scales. Reliability coefficients ranged from .65 to .94. Because of the high reliability, no changes were made to the instrument.

Systematic random sampling was used to select 881 FFA members and 392 FFA advisors from the *FFA New Horizons'* mailing list. The sample size was determined by selecting a .05 confidence interval and a .05 margin of error in a target population of over 400,000 members and 8,000 advisors (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). The number of members was then doubled to ensure valid results.

The Total Design Method (TDM) (Dillman, 1978) was utilized for the questionnaire. Questionnaires were mailed February 14, 1992. A follow-up postcard was mailed one week later, followed by a second mailing of the questionnaire on March 2, 1992. A third follow-up mailing was sent to non-respondents March 18, 1992. Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS/PC+)(Noru is, 1991). Alpha was set a priori at the .05 level of significance, and frequencies, means, standard deviations, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and t-tests were also used.

Early and late respondents were compared to ensure generalizability to the population. T-tests were calculated on demographic data. No significant differences were found. Late respondents were shown to be similar to non-respondents (Miller and Smith, 1983). Because there were no differences, results were generalizable to the population.

Findings

A total of 519 FFA members and 312 FFA advisors returned usable questionnaires for a combined response rate of 68% (61% FFA mem-

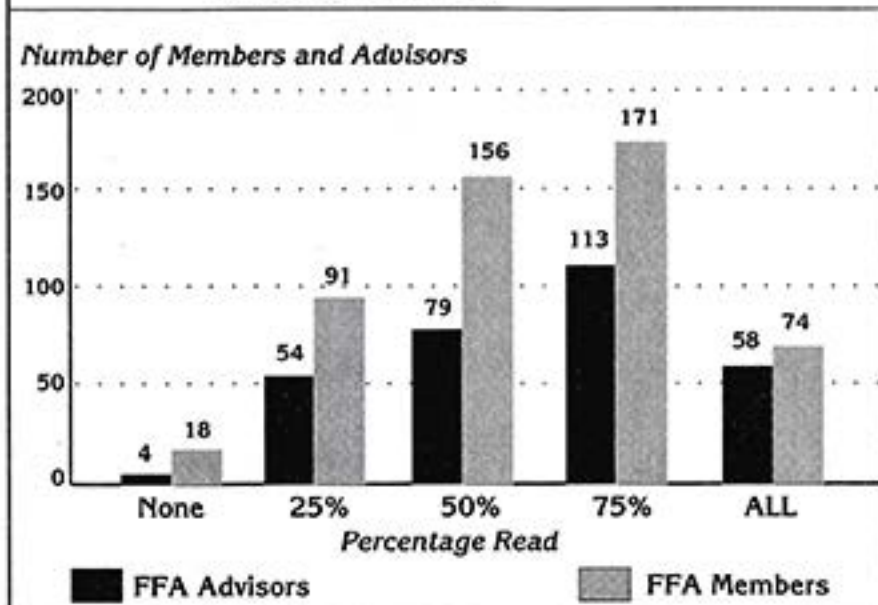
bers and 80% FFA advisors). Because of missing data, totals do not always equal the number of respondents. Over 70% of the FFA members and 90% of the FFA advisors who responded to the survey were male. Females comprised 29% of the FFA members and 8% of FFA advisors who responded. An overwhelming percentage (84%) of FFA members and advisors (90%) reported their race as white. The mean age was 16.5 years for FFA members and 38 years for FFA advisors.

Advisors had an average of 14-years teaching experience. Over 47% of the FFA members lived on a rural farm. Over 63% of advisors reported they taught in a rural school. The largest percentage of FFA members (25%) were sophomores in high school, followed by juniors, seniors, graduates, freshmen, and finally 7th-8th graders. Most of the FFA members (27%) had been members for three years.

Results showed that 78% of the members and 81% of the advisors read at least 50% of the magazine. Only 3.5% of the members and 1.3% of the advisors did not read *FFA New Horizons*. Figure 1 presents the percentage of *FFA New Horizons* that was read.

Both FFA members and advisors responded that topics of personal interest, photographs, state topics, and article titles were quite important in determining which articles they read. Article length,

FIGURE 1: Percentage Read by FFA Members (n=510) and Advisors (n=308)



photograph captions, and regional topics were also considered important when considering which articles to read.

When asked how often they read various sections, FFA members and advisors responded that they frequently read the cover story, features, FFA/career articles, "Chapter Scoop," and the joke page. FFA advisors indicated they frequently read "News in Brief," "Looking Ahead," "Front Line," "FFA in Action," and "My Turn." FFA members occasionally read these sections. Both FFA members and advisors occasionally read the "Mail Bag" and the advertisements.

The FFA members and advisors were asked to compare the *FFA New Horizons* magazine to other magazines they read. Respondents rated the magazine on a zero to 10 scale, with zero indicating no value and 10 indicating significant value. Both FFA members and advisors rated the *FFA New Horizons* a seven when compared to other magazines they regularly read. FFA members were asked to indicate what other magazines they read. Table 1 lists the types of magazines FFA members read.

FFA members and advisors both stated they would like more career information articles included in the magazine. Advisors also wanted more FFA success stories included in the magazine. Respondents were pleased with the amount of information on colleges/universities, urban articles, rural articles, national officer articles, and regional FFA information. FFA advisors were unsure whether more FFA alumni articles should be in the magazine.

TABLE 1: Other Magazines Read by FFA Members

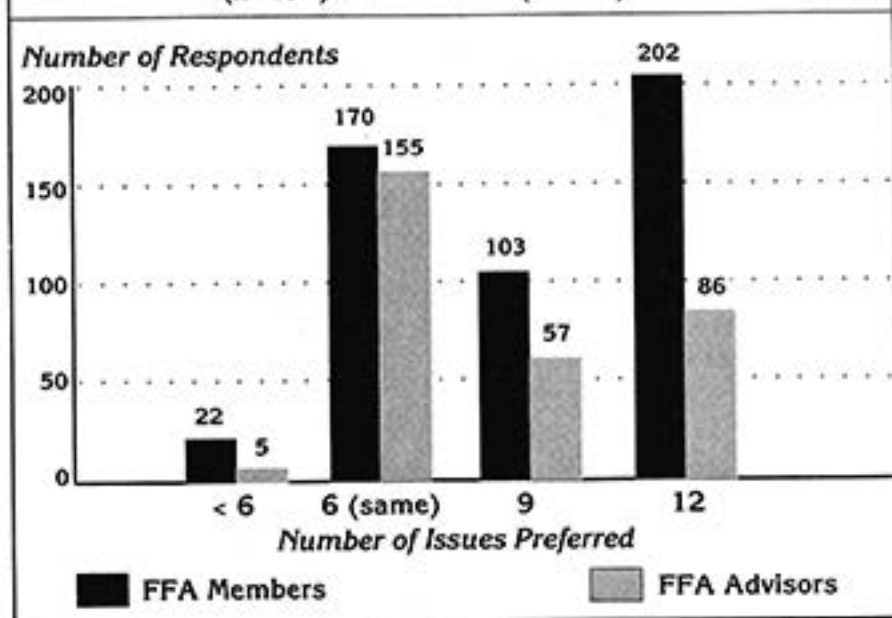
Type of Magazine	Number (N=519)
Sports	270
Wildlife and Natural Resources	269
Agricultural/country	219
Youth	161
Entertainment	80
News	74
Women's Magazine	19
Science	15
Family	10
Other Types	143

NOTE: Respondents may provide more than one type of magazine.

FFA members like the number of issues of the *FFA New Horizons* magazine increased. Over 61% of the FFA members and 47% of the FFA advisors indicated they would like more issues of the *FFA New Horizons* magazine than they are currently receiving. Figure 2 shows the percentage of FFA members and advisors and the number of issues they would like to receive.

Currently, \$1.75 of FFA members' dues are designated to support the *FFA New Horizons* magazine. When asked how much additional dues they would pay to support the magazine, 89% of FFA members indicated they would pay at least one dollar more dues. Over 59% of FFA advisors thought members would pay at least one dollar more dues to support the magazine.

FIGURE 2: Number of Issues Preferred by FFA Members (n=497) and Advisors (n=303)



The ANOVA found no statistically significant difference between readers' ages, years of teaching or years in school, years of FFA membership, or grade level and their rating of the magazine. A t-test suggests that there was a statistically significant difference in the amount of extra dues female FFA members would pay and the amount male FFA members would pay. Female FFA members indicated they were willing to pay more dues to support the *FFA New Horizons* magazine than male FFA members.

FFA members and advisors provided additional comments about the *FFA New Horizons* magazine. Comments were grouped into positive, negative, neutral, and other categories. Students commented that they really enjoyed reading the magazine and think it is very educational. Several respondents commented that the magazine should be published more than six times per year. Some of the negative responses commented on not receiving the magazine on a regular basis and the fact that too many articles relate to rural topics.

Some general comments suggested that the magazine should publish a Spanish language edition for FFA members of Hispanic decent. Many FFA advisors suggested offering package sets of 35 magazines for use in high school agricultural education classrooms.

Conclusions

The *FFA New Horizons* magazine is read extensively by both FFA members and advisors who prefer articles of personal, local, or state interest and would like to see more career information. The writing quality, photographs, and paper quality were the highest rated components of the magazine's layout and design. Headlines, story length, graphics, font size, page arrangement, and advertisements were rated slightly lower by respondents. FFA members and advisors were asked to rate the *FFA New Horizons* magazine on a 10-point scale ranging from 1=Low to 10=High. Members and advisors rated the magazine a 7 on a 10-point scale when compared to other magazines they usually read and would like to see the number of issues increase. A large majority of members indicated they would pay higher dues to support the magazine. A t-test found that female FFA members would pay more dues than their male counterparts.

Recommendations

The results of this study were surprising in many ways. Foremost among them, FFA members indicated that they were willing to pay more dues to support more issues of the magazine. This result conflicts with the general impression that high-school students do not want to spend their own money on educational materials such as magazines. It is clear that readers of the magazine, both youth and adults, value the *FFA New Horizons* as an important educational tool. FFA members and advisors should work with *FFA New Horizons* staff to develop articles pertaining to local, state, and regional interests and increase FFA dues to support more issues each year.

Implications

These research findings can have significant implications for other educational and informational publications. Readers place a great

deal of emphasis on the quality of writing, photographs, and printing. Graphics, font variety, and story length are seen as less important than the quality of the content. This research also found that readers are willing to pay for a quality magazine. Additional research could be conducted to determine readers' opinions about advertisements, editor's comments, and letters to the editor. More research could also help editors determine what articles to publish.

Regular input from readers is an important avenue for magazine editors when determining if their magazine is serving the readers' needs. Quality readership surveys are a good way of obtaining valid reader opinions. Agricultural communications will become more important as the agricultural literacy of the general public declines. More agricultural publications could benefit from conducting readership surveys similar to the one conducted in this research study.

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