

toward more effective newsletters

Robert F. Reisbeck

"I really don't care what a newsletter looks like. If it really would help me with my job, my business, my home, or my hobby, I'd read it."

Newsletter Study

That pretty well sums up what people of different pursuits—farmers, business men and women, and homemakers—reported in a study on newsletters conducted in 1979 by Oklahoma State University's Agricultural Education Department.

Variables

A research technique known as Q-Methodology was used to obtain opinions about six different selected variables relating to a newsletter. Those variables were: (1) importance of newsletter content, (2) brevity of writing style, (3) use of headlines or underlined key phrases to attract attention, (4) use of cartoons or drawings to enhance newsletter appearance, (5) length of line—one column or two—in a typed newsletter, and (6) regularity of issue.¹

Respondents

The respondents—10 male farmers, 10 businessmen, 10 businesswomen, and 10 full-time homemakers from a 2-county Northern Oklahoma area—were selected on the basis of their occupations, with a selected age spread of 25 to 65 years of age. They weren't randomly selected.

During an interview, each was asked to respond to 10 statements about each of the 6 variables, sorting all 10 statements into a continuum from most-agree to least-agree. The purpose was to determine if differences between the individual opinions of the newsletter variables could be attributed to the respondent's known characteristics of age or occupation.

Findings

Subsequent statistical analysis showed no real differences between the respondents' opinions about the six variables.

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All thought that newsletter content was most important. After that, they preferred a newsletter written in brief style, and one that was issued regularly. Headlines or underlined words or phrases to direct reader attention were considered desirable. Length of typed line or one- or two-column format wasn't as important. Cartoons, drawings, or "cute little pictures" were least important, if at all.

. . . A newsletter has to be worth reading to be read. Content must be related to the real needs, interests, and opportunities of the person receiving it. . . .

Although this project relied on the opinions of only 40, nonrandomly selected respondents, opinions of all were in agreement, regardless of the individual's occupation. And, too, the findings do tend to agree with the way in which many high-cost commercial newsletters are put together— heavy on factual subject matter, briefly written, underlined key words and phrases, and little emphasis on "attractiveness."²

The findings are important for Extension professionals. Informational newsletters from Extension that are read and used can be an effective and cost- and energy-efficient method of information dissemination. Newsletters that aren't read are too costly in any case.

Recommendations

Here are some recommendations for effective Extension newsletters:

1. The newsletter must be factual and pertinent to the needs of the reader. Articles should tell how to implement practices, and explain the reasons, benefits, or implications of doing so. Because specific subject information content is so important to a newsletter's readability, overall audiences may need to be divided into interest groupings, and a newsletter created for each group.
2. Articles that are short, complete, and to the point are preferred by the reader. But articles need complete information and can be longer, if necessary. All of the "fluff," however, should be removed.
3. Headlines over articles help attract attention and help locate an article in a previous issue.
4. Underlining key words, phrases, or sentences in an article serves as an attention getter or as an emphasis.

5. "Cute little pictures or cartoons" aren't considered essential—or even especially attractive—in any kind of newsletter.
6. An 8½ x 11 typewritten newsletter with 1 full page-width column is just as acceptable and readable as a page with 2 narrower columns.
7. If the newsletter is worth reading, regularity of issue (monthly or even weekly) is preferred.

Respondents' Reactions

During the interview, one farmer reported that he received a number of newsletters, most of them from various government agencies. He indicated that they weren't especially useful because they contained mostly things he had read or heard about elsewhere. Those newsletters also "seemed to have a lot of meeting announcements and election ballots, which didn't help much."

On the other hand, most business men and women take one or more subscription newsletters related to business, finance, selling, or management. These respondents were especially positive about newsletters that directly affected them and their business ventures, along with practical, usable tips and ideas for action.

Farmers, too, who received subscription farm newsletters had a high regard for them. Their reasons included, "the writer knows what's going on," "they're right to the point," and "they're accurate in their predictions." One farm respondent said that "making a decent living is what my farm is all about, and any newsletter that wouldn't help me do that isn't of much use; sort of like junk mail." He also thought a weekly commercial agricultural newsletter he subscribed to was the best he'd seen.

Urban homemakers in the study, for the most part, did not receive any regular newsletter. But their rural counterparts were most aware of or received newsletters from the county Extension home economist. The urban women thought a newsletter about the home and the family "might be helpful."

Comments by respondents who read newsletters and gained information from them, indicate strongly that newsletters can be effective ways of disseminating information. One banker, for example, reported that he couldn't keep up with everything if it weren't for his weekly commercial banking newsletter.

Important Implication

The most important implication in the findings of the study is this: A newsletter has to be worth reading to be

read. Content must be related to the real needs, interests, and opportunities of the person receiving it. No amount of clever writing or fancy illustration can make up for a newsletter that isn't worth reading.

Summary

All of this is basic. Yet an effective newsletter isn't whipped out in an hour or two. Creation of that product takes effort, thinking, and knowledge of the reader's situation. What can help that reader most? What does that reader need to know? What are some real problems? Opportunities? What's on the horizon for the reader to watch for? It's an effort that requires putting ourselves in the reader's shoes.

But it's worth it. Some of those really great newsletters that respondents of the Oklahoma study received were read before any other mail was opened. And that's what we'd like to have happen with our own newsletters.

Footnotes

1. Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of Behavioral Research* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1964).
2. Brian T. Sheehan, *How To Make \$25,000 a Year Publishing Newsletters* (West Nyach, New York: Parker Publishing Co., 1971) and Howard Penn Hudson, ed., *The Standard Directory of Newsletters* (New York: Oxford Publishing Co., 1972).