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Digital Versus Printed Publication: Results From an Agricultural Extension Readership Survey

Abstract

While research demonstrates that most agricultural producers prefer to receive research and other educational information in printed forms, such as newsletters and magazines, acceptance of the Internet is increasing.

Keywords

Digital Versus Printed Publication, Agricultural Extension

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Digital Versus Printed Publication: Results From an Agricultural Extension Readership Survey

Jacob E. McCarthy, David K. Beede, and Annie Edgecomb

While research demonstrates that most agricultural producers prefer to receive research and other educational information in printed forms, such as newsletters and magazines, acceptance of the Internet is increasing. As publishers of the *Michigan Dairy Review* (MDR) — a quarterly, peer-reviewed Extension publication targeting Michigan dairy producers — we continually evaluate our readers' access to online information sources and their preferences for receiving information.

MDR was started in 1996 by coauthor Beede and the Michigan State University Extension Dairy Team. The publication serves as the primary communications vehicle for research findings, Extension programming, and teaching between faculty and staff in MSU dairy programs and the dairy industry and its associated businesses and agencies. This research brief summarizes major findings from a 2006 readership survey with nearly 6,000 MDR subscribers.

Methods

Printed copies of MDR are mailed quarterly to 5,800 Michigan dairy producers and allied-industry professionals. Notifications are e-mailed on the same schedule to the 165 subscribers who have opted to receive MDR electronically rather than in printed form. In spring 2006, all print subscribers received a survey in the U.S. mail, while digital subscribers received an identical survey by e-mail. The survey of 5,965 readers yielded 756 responses for a 13% response rate. Descriptive statistics were calculated using SPSS software.

Findings

- Respondents did not favor the Internet over print sources for obtaining information about their dairy businesses. More than one third (36%) of respondents said they use the Internet for this purpose very often or often, compared with 88% who use magazines, newsletters, and bulletins with the same frequency.
- Respondents expressed the least favor with downloading PDF files to read — more than half said they never access PDF files and just 6% said they do so “very often.”

Research Brief

- When given the opportunity to opt out of the printed publication in favor of e-mail updates, nearly one fourth (23%) of respondents provided an e-mail address, more than doubling the previous e-mail subscriber list.

Discussion

The most immediate change we made in response to these findings was to reduce our reliance on PDF files. While converting documents to PDF for posting online is a common and convenient method for building Web content, we recognize this practice is likely not an effective way to communicate with our audience. Making more MDR content available in HTML in addition to PDF forms was followed by an increase in Web site traffic greater than 125%.

The survey findings also encouraged us to build e-mail subscriber recruitment into our communications strategy. Inviting respondents to switch from print to digital subscription immediately more than doubled our list of e-mail subscribers, but growth of the e-mail subscriber list has since been modest. This suggests that attempts to convert print subscribers to e-mail subscribers might require periodic contact with print subscribers to give them the opportunity to switch. We plan to make this contact semiannually and expect to see the e-mail subscriber list continue to grow.

Perhaps the greatest result of this research, however, is that it demonstrates that both the printed and digital versions of MDR are relied upon by our audience of dairy producers and allied-industry professionals. This survey provided us with audience data that we used not only to strengthen our Web presence, but also to demonstrate the necessity of communicating our message through traditional media. If we wish to further expand the MDR Web presence, we'll need to keep in touch with our readers' perceptions of digital versus printed communications and continue making informed upgrades to both versions of our publication. Doing so gradually, yet actively, will help us reach all of our subscribers without favoring one group over the other.

We welcome discussions with fellow communicators about their experiences managing print and digital Extension publications. We can be contacted at mdr@msu.edu, beede@msu.edu, and mccar244@msu.edu.

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Keywords

online, publishing, preference, readership