

A Study of Editorial Preferences of Six Vermont Newspapers

Lisa Halvorsen

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Abstract

The University of Vermont Office of Information is responsible for bringing practical, educational information from the Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station to the people of Vermont.

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The University of Vermont Office of Information is responsible for bringing practical, educational information from the Extension Service and the Agricultural Experiment Station to the people of Vermont. A six-month study of editorial preferences and practices in regard to use of agricultural information (both Extension and staff written) was conducted to test and strengthen the success of this mission.

A representative sample of six Vermont newspapers was selected on the basis of size, frequency of publication, circulation area, type of readership (urban or rural), and preconceived notions as to the amount of Extension material used. The papers ranged from a large daily circulated throughout half the state to a small weekly with very localized readership including only 20 farm families.

The study involved a variety of techniques, including the use of a controlled weekly news packet, individual interviews with managing editors or farm editors (often the same person), informal questionnaires, and daily analyses of editorial and advertising content for a four-week period.

Interviews with the editors were conducted after the papers were surveyed and initial conclusions as to editorial preferences were drawn. This scheduling was necessary to determine if what the editors requested was what they actually used in their papers during the control period.

A questionnaire given to each editor included general questions on the makeup and history of the paper (with specific reference to agriculture news), its facilities, and "operation" (e.g., deadlines, placement, photos, etc.). Editors also were asked their policies regarding assignment or selection of agricultural news stories and who makes these decisions.

The final part of the interview dealt with usage of the Office of Information weekly news packet: 1) What gets used and why? 2) What types of stories would editors like to receive? 3) How are the articles used (as regular news, for reference, as fillers, for rewrite)?

Editors also were asked for suggestions to help the Office of Information provide a news packet that would better serve their needs.

Although each paper and its editorial staff had its own unique characteristics, in many ways the six papers proved quite similar. First, local news always got top billing, and state or national news was often bumped to make room for it. Second, all carried agricultural news and all carried regular columns by Extension agents, county foresters, or staff writers. Third, use of Extension material generally was based on timeliness, uniqueness, service to the reader, and audience interest—although many editors said they filed stories for future use.

As expected, urban papers used less dairy and other “hard” ag news than papers with strong circulation in rural areas. Gardening and entomology stories tended to be more popular.

On the whole, however, editors requested more news in dairy, conservation, land use, back-to-nature trends, and gardening. Most preferred fewer articles on common sense household hints, since this information is generally covered in Extension home economists’ columns.

The study provided valuable information on what editors really wanted in terms of agricultural news and helped establish firmer media contacts. It has also been instrumental in persuading Extension and Experiment Station specialists to prepare news stories on general information topics as well as research results.

Lisa Halvorsen, University of Vermont

