

1978 Michigan Newspaper Survey

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Abstract

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This report is based on a questionnaire survey conducted at Michigan State University in 1978. We believe the report may be of interest in that it covers more than just the research/extension waterfront and therefore offers some comparisons.

MSU has a centralized information department that serves the entire university, so when our survey went out we were able to ask a wider range of questions. We thus get a more complete picture of the needs and wants of daily and weekly newspaper editors in Michigan.

The survey was conducted in the spring and summer of 1978. Questionnaires were sent along with regular mailings of releases to 53 daily newspapers and 264 weekly newspapers. One follow-up letter was sent to dailies with a subsequent mailing. Responses were received from 41 dailies and 174 weeklies for return rates of 77 percent and 66 percent, respectively.

A synopsis of results from the two surveys follows.

Daily Newspapers

Response to the question, "We would like more information from MSU about . . ." gave some interesting results. (The total adds up to well over 100 percent because editors weren't limited to one area.) Results showed:

— 81% wanted more information in the area of environment/ecology:

— 81% wanted more in family living (home economics):

— 76% wanted more in local students' activities:

— 76% wanted more in agriculture:

— 70% wanted more sports:

— 68% wanted more on medicine, health and medical research:

— 62% wanted more on business:

— 62% wanted more on general education:

— 54% wanted more on the fine arts (music, theatre and art).

Editors varied widely in their declared needs for receiving copy in advance of special events. Response ranged from 2 to 14 days in advance.

Monday was the preferred day for receiving releases, with 33 percent of the responding papers selecting this day. Twenty percent would prefer to receive releases on Wednesday. No other day was indicated as preferred.

By far, the majority of editors wanted us to continue the copy format of double spaced, print on only one side of the page. Almost half of those responding, however, said that they wouldn't mind closer spacing to fit a story on one page rather than carrying a short paragraph over to a second page.

In response to questions about their use of Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station news, 32 percent of the respondents wanted more family living news. Twenty-one percent wanted more agriculture news. Twenty-one percent wanted more in the natural resources and public policy area. Fifteen percent wanted more about youth programs. And, 11 percent wanted more about marketing.

The question about a potential media open house at the MSU campus brought a resounding "not interested" from daily newspaper editors and was a major factor in dropping plans for such an event that would have featured agricultural scientists.

Weekly Newspapers

Michigan, with its fairly high rural population density, has a large number of weekly newspapers. They range from tiny ones with circulations measured in hundreds to very large suburban operations.

One hundred seventy-four weeklies responded to the survey. In regard to content, they cited the following as areas in which they would like more information:

- 80% wanted more on activities of local students:
- 48% wanted more on agriculture:
- 47% wanted more feature stories:
- 42% wanted more on family living:
- 38% wanted more on the environment and ecology:
- 34% wanted more on health and medicine:
- 24% wanted more on research:
- 24% wanted more on general education:
- 21% wanted more on business:
- 17% wanted more on sports:
- 17% wanted more on major conferences on the campus:
- 16% wanted more on the arts:
- 13% wanted more on campus cultural events.

The majority (61.5%) of weekly editors wanted to receive these stories on Thursday or Friday, and approximately one week in advance if there were an element of timeliness involved.

The release format was acceptable to 78 percent of the editors responding. Of the 65 weeklies responding to the question of spacing to fit on one page rather than carry a few lines to the second, 74 percent preferred keeping it to one page.

Regarding releases from the Cooperative Extension Service and Agricultural Experiment Station, weekly editors responding to this section cited the following preferences:

- 57.2% wanted more on 4-H youth programs.
- 49.5% wanted more on agriculture:
- 47.0% wanted more on family living:
- 45.3% wanted more on natural resources/public policy:
- 22.2% wanted more on marketing.

Weekly editors, like their daily colleagues, also showed a distinct lack of desire to attend a media open house on campus -- only 15 percent thought they might attend such an event.

Conclusion

An often heard complaint in our business is how can "agricultural" news compete with news from other segments of the university? We think that the results discussed here show there is demand for the types of materials we generate, and that placement and use problems, at least in Michigan, are due to some factor other than lack of interest on the parts of our client editors.

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