

Reader Polls Show Farmer Concerns

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Abstract

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Reader Polls Show Farmer Concerns

Frank Hill

COLLEGE EDITORS and farm paper editors have the same basic concern. That is, communicating. To do this we have to know the audience.

At the *Wisconsin Agriculturist* we have four basic tools which we are using to know our audience better. None of them are perfect alone but used together they give us a strong feel of who our audience is, what they are thinking and what they are reading. Let's take a look at each of these four basic tools.

Talking with farmers. This is our basic tool for finding out what farmers are thinking. It gives us eyeball to eyeball contact and gives the farmer a chance to open up on problems which we may not be aware of. The limitations here are that we only talk to a relatively small percentage of our subscribers in the course of a year. And quite often we're visiting with the better than average farmers so probably aren't getting a good cross section.

Readership. Our readership studies are extremely valuable to us in telling what farmers read. They enable us to know what subjects are on target and are a valuable guide in planning issues since we have a fair idea of what the readership will be before the story goes into the magazine.

We use readership studies to also give us research information on how to do a better job of putting out the magazine. To do this we print A and B copies and send these different copies to about half our readers. We'll make various editorial changes between the A and B copies. For example, we may use a picture with a story in the A issue and run only copy in the B issue.

The our readership workers go out and survey a representative

sample of the subscribers in both the A and B issues. They sit down and go through the issue page by page, asking the reader "Do you remember seeing or reading anything on this page?" When their information is compiled we end up with readership scores for each story and picture in the magazine. By comparing the editorial changes in the A and B issues, we can determine which editorial techniques are getting us the best readership. The general readership scores from these twice yearly studies also show us the editorial mix through the magazine and how readers reacted to various stories.

We've found that the overriding factor in any story is subject matter. There's no way to make a high readership story on beekeeping for us. But we still look at beekeeping as an important subject area even though it won't get high readership. However, we want to be sure there are high readership stories in every issue.

As for writing, readership shows that we should stick to the basics of simple words, short sentences and short paragraphs. We have found that the art of writing doesn't appear to be extremely important if you have the facts and subject matter to go in a story.

For example, in a number of readership splits we have written a story doing the best job we can. We would run this in one part of the split and in the other we would number each paragraph of the story and draw the numbers out of a hat to select the order the paragraphs would go in. Then we would number each sentence within a paragraph and repeat the drawing procedure. We ended up with a story which jumped all over the place but still contained the same basic information. There was very little difference in readership between the two stories.

We found that big type and white space will pay off for us. We used 10 and 12 point body type. There seems to be no end to amount of white space which will continue to build readership.

Pictures aren't worth a thousand words to us. We just can't find that pictures will help readership. Comparing color and black and white pictures hasn't shown any real difference for us.

We have found that headlines are extremely important for the story. But we don't know what a good headline is. We know we can kill off a story with a bad headline, such as "Farm Group

Meets,” or “Calculate Ratio of Insulation Differential,” but we haven’t been able to separate average and outstanding heads.

Recently we’ve been working with special issues where we would run one split loaded with tax stories or stories on estate planning and the other split would be our more normal coverage of various subjects. While we’re still in the process of drawing conclusions on this, our present leaning is away from special issues since we haven’t been able to find any major advantages in running copy that way and there appear to be some disadvantages.

While readership studies are extremely valuable to us, they do have some limitations. The big ones are that they don’t tell us what is happening until after it has happened. And they don’t tell us what we haven’t put in the magazine which should be there.

Independent reports. Surveys taken by outside agencies are generally aimed at accomplishing one goal, such as comparing farm magazines with the competition. But there are side benefits which help us get to know our readers better. For example, in a recent study farmers were asked to rate various magazines by subject matter area, such as machinery, animal health, and crops. This helps give an overall look at what we’re doing and what readers think of it.

Pretesting. This is a tool which we will probably be using more in the future. Here we send out a list of headline ideas with a short description of the story and ask readers whether they would be interested in reading this story. The little bit of work that has been done in this area indicates that these responses correlate closely with readership figures. So this tool would give us a look at readership before the articles are actually in the paper.

Opinion polls. Our opinion polls are taken either once or twice a year. We have somewhere between 75 and 100 questions on each poll in our survey. Workers go out and interview a minimum of 250 men and 250 women.

We have often been asked about the accuracy of these polls. While there is no sure check, there is a number of indications that they are reasonably accurate.

In election polls we have checked back to specific townships to

see how they actually voted and found it was very close to how farmers said they would vote.

We have gotten high repeatability when we asked the same question several times and there haven't been any outside factors which we would believe would cause the answers to change.

Farmers do what they say they will in our polls. For example, in a recent dairy promotion, checkoff money was taken from all farmers' milk checks but they had an opportunity to ask for their money back. Our polls indicated that about 50 percent would ask for their money back. And that's about the percentage that did.

Comparing our poll figures against known statistics such as age, breakdowns by herd size, and similar figures show that we're getting about the same answers as the state Crop Reporting Service.

Our opinion polls tell us more than just opinions. They also tell us:

1. What farmers are planning to do. We know that if the metric system is approved there'll be strong opposition from Wisconsin farmers. Sixty-two percent are opposed to it.

In our opinion poll last fall we asked about the reaction to the high price of feed and found that 42 percent of the farmers were going to feed the same but that 37 percent were planning to cut back.

2. Test ideas. We've received quite a few complaints regarding veterinary service in the state and there has been a lot written about the shortage of veterinarians. However, when we asked our farmers about this, 85 percent said they generally didn't have a problem obtaining good veterinary service in their area. Only 2 percent said they always had a problem. So we don't look at the veterinary situation as a serious problem among our readers.

Rural crime, on the other hand, appears to be a serious concern among farmers. Seventy-four percent think crime is on the increase in their area. Eighteen percent had a theft in the past year. And 49 percent had taken precautions in the past year to guard against crime.

3. Provides story material. Many of our poll questions are asked with the idea of providing story material for the magazine. Our polls on elections get quite a bit of coverage from newspapers

around the state. In a recent poll, 63 percent said shortages were artificially created so companies could raise prices. This was picked up by the *New York Times* and a number of other newspapers. The polls provide good story material for us and help provide exposure for the magazine.

4. Polls tell us who the farmer is and allow us to watch for changes. The number of farmers over 50 years old hasn't changed much in the last ten years. But as expected, education has climbed. In 1964, 60 percent had some high school education and in 1974, 75 percent had some high school. The number of farmers with gross incomes over \$10,000 climbed from 27 percent to 63 percent over the 10 year period. Farm organizations held about the same with 55 percent of Wisconsin farmers not belonging to any farm organization.

Politically, farmers with Republican leanings stayed about the same at 35 percent. Those with Democratic leanings dropped from 40 percent to 27 percent during the 10 year period, while Independents climbed from 20 percent to 31 percent.

5. What the farmer is thinking. We ask a variety of questions. These range from abortions to daylight saving time. We know that women are in favor of abortions with limitations, and that 62 percent of the farmers are against daylight saving time.

In our September 1974 opinion poll, we found that 76 percent didn't think farmers had prosperity now. Twenty-five percent felt they had benefited financially from the upward movement in prices, while 65 percent said higher costs ate up the increase.

We found that 53 percent would probably borrow less because of the higher interest rates. Looking at the future in dairying, 30 percent thought it was promising, while 45 percent had misgivings.

Overall, farmers rated the job President Ford was doing with 42 percent approval, 38 percent undecided, and 17 percent disapproval. While this looks like a good rating at first glance, President Nixon received 57 percent approval, 21 percent undecided, and 22 percent disapproval in a 1971 poll. Governor Lucey and Secretary of Agriculture Butz both lost ground when we compared the 1974 poll to previous polls.

Looking at women's rights, 42 percent of the women said they

would vote for a qualified woman running for president. Fifty-three percent of the farmers said girls should be raised in a traditional way. A big majority of the farmers favored equal job opportunities for men and women.

As we would expect, farmers want lower taxes. But we get a big “undecided” answer when we ask where money should come from if taxes are reduced.

We asked, “Do you rely on the University of Wisconsin Extension Service to provide you with information about farming through the county agent, specialists, meetings, and other sources. Fifty-two percent said “rarely, or not at all,” 36 percent “sometimes,” 8 percent, “generally,” 4 percent “rely heavily on it.”

Then we asked, “Do you feel information from the extension service is as valuable to your farming operation now as it was 10 years ago?” Of those who were farming 10 years ago, 22 percent said it was more valuable, 35 percent said about the same, 9 percent said less valuable, and 19 percent have gotten very little information from them either time.

Generalizing the results of these questions, we would come up with conclusions that farmers aren’t too optimistic about the economic situation. That they are losing faith in government. That they believe in women’s rights. And that extension isn’t getting credit with the farmers for all the work it does.

I hope this gives you an idea of how we use polls, readership studies, and independent surveys to back up individual contact with farmers. They all work together toward the goal of better knowing our audience.