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Tabloids--A Tool for Public Issues Education

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Tabloids--A Tool for Public Issues Education

Abstract

An old-fashioned vehicle, the tabloid-format publication remains a cost-effective method for delivering public issues education. Since 1998, three high-profile public issues have been addressed in tabloids that were distributed as inserts in all the daily newspapers in Oregon. These publications, which have multiple purposes, also have multiple payoffs. Each tabloid's impact is determined by the level of public interest in the issue and by how well the publication carries out its educational objectives. A carefully managed review process allows heavily entrenched factions to be successfully engaged. Significant financial as well as human resources are required for production of a public issue tabloid.

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Introduction

Suppose you delivered a comprehensive educational package to a large cross-section of citizens in your state, hundreds of thousands, at an out-of-pocket cost of 20¢ per household? Suppose a random number dialing survey, conducted the week following that delivery, revealed that one of every four people who answered the telephone (25%) recalled receiving that information? Would you consider the effort a cost-effective method of delivering public issues education?

This has been our experience at the Oregon State University Extension Service. The delivery vehicle is an old-fashioned one—the tabloid-format publication. It appears to be efficient and effective in the rapidly changing modern world. We distributed our first tabloid-format publication in 1998. It focused on a single high-profile public issue. We called it *A Snapshot of Salmon in Oregon*. Since then, there have been two others, *A Portrait of Poverty in Oregon* and *Looking for Oregon's Future: What Is Sustainability?* Primary distribution of each has been by insertion in the daily newspapers of the state. Additional distribution has been through Extension and agency offices, and via the Web.

Of course, the impact of each of the tabloids was influenced only partly by the distribution methods. Other key factors were the level of public interest in the issues and how well the publications carried off their educational objectives, including appropriateness for the audience and attractiveness of presentation. Such publications must adhere to the principles of effective public issues education. In broadest terms, this means promoting informed dialogue and decision-making while avoiding advocacy.

Multiple Purposes, Multiple Payoffs

Each tabloid stated the desired outcome in its introductory article. For example, the desired outcome of *Looking for Oregon's Future: What Is Sustainability?* was identified as "dialogue among Oregonians concerning the future of our communities, industries, resources, and economy, and concerning the quality of life we want to make possible for our grandchildren." These publications serve other purposes, too. They:

- Demonstrate the full engagement of the university through its research and Extension programs.
- Bring an important public issue to the attention of the larger university community.
- Build positive working relationships with state and federal agencies and other organizations.
- Provide educational resources for use in formal classroom settings at the K-12, college, and university levels.
- "Turn the heads" of important stakeholders and resource providers.

"If we focus on issues that affect people, then the public, media, and politicians will sit up and take notice" (Boyle & Mulcahy, 1993). The Oregon State University Extension Service demonstrated its capability to produce objective and comprehensive educational publications on important and controversial public issues (salmon, poverty, and sustainability). Because of this, the organization's image changed—on the campus, in the state legislature, in the governor's office, and across the state. Here is how we approach the production of public issues education tabloids at Oregon State University.

Choosing the Issue

A successful tabloid issue must be of broad general interest to the citizens of the state. Because production of a tabloid, from concept to distribution, can require from 6 to 10 months, the public issue must be forward-looking and have staying power. While it is wise to avoid issues where factions are heavily entrenched, our experience with *A Snapshot of Salmon in Oregon* suggests that such factions can be successfully engaged through a carefully managed review process.

The issue should also be one about which the university has much to offer, preferably through all three missions of several university colleges. Finally, it's a big commitment. Production team members should be excited about the prospect of delving into the issue, and they must be afforded the freedom to practice their respective crafts.

Necessary Resources

A public issues education tabloid project is a major undertaking. Judging by our experience, participation by Extension and other university educators from various disciplines, and by citizens from around the state representing a wide range of interests, are essential to success. The skills of a production team of professional communicators also are essential. This team includes a group of writers who, through part of the process, work like investigative reporters. They are supported by photographers, editors, and graphic artists. In addition, an administrative champion is needed to:

- Support the roles of the production team.
- Assemble an advisory team and a larger review team.
- Manage/facilitate the review process.

Members of the advisory team should include faculty with both broad and detailed knowledge of, and experience with, the issue. Prior experience with complex public issues is helpful. Leaders from public and private agencies linked to the issue should be included. With each of the three Oregon State tabloid projects, the Governor appointed one or more members of his staff to our advisory teams. An advisory team of more than eight members would probably become unwieldy.

Bringing all perspectives of the issue to the table is the most important requirement of the review team. Members of the advisory team also act as reviewers. As the writers identify and interview sources, they also suggest individuals who could serve as reviewers. To cover all perspectives of an issue adequately, 20 or more reviewers may be necessary.

A public issues education tabloid requires significant financial as well as human resources. In addition to the salaries and expenses of the production team are the costs of printing and distribution. While unit costs are low, the volume is large. With large quantities, printing and insert costs for a 24-page tabloid will each run in the 7-10¢ per copy range. The costs for producing, printing, and inserting 800,000 copies of a tabloid have been about \$160,000, not counting the salaries of the production team.

Production and Review Process

- The process begins with the selection of the issue and assembling of production and advisory teams.
- The production and advisory teams meet to identify story lines and develop a list of source contacts.
- The production team develops an outline and makes writing assignments.

- The writers interview sources and prepare first drafts of articles, checking back with sources, as appropriate, to insure accuracy.
- The review team meets in a 1-day review session to review, mark-up, and discuss draft articles. (Members of the writing team attend so they can answer questions and listen to the discussion.)
- The writers use the review input to revise.
- The production team follows through with final edits, gathering of photographs and illustrations, and publication layout.
- Daily newspapers are contacted to negotiate insert fees, quantities, and delivery locations.
- The printing contract is let, including direct delivery to the newspapers.
- Additional quantities are distributed through Extension and agency offices.

Impact

What were the outcomes for the people who recalled receiving these publications in their newspapers? Random number dialing telephone surveys following distribution of the salmon and poverty tabloids revealed that 45% (salmon) and 37% (poverty) found the information useful. In addition, 26% (salmon) and 19% (poverty) had discussed the information with others.

What's Next?

Addition research is planned on the impact of our most recent tabloid, *Looking for Oregon's Future: What Is Sustainability?* One goal is to compare public perceptions of the effectiveness of printed and Web versions of the publication.

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