

READER PERCEPTIONS OF THE AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP NEWSLETTER AS A COMMUNICATIONS MEDIUM

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Newsletters or similar publications are often used by Departments of Agricultural Education to communicate with professionals working as vocational agriculture teachers or Extension agents. The Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Mississippi State University publishes the *Agricultural Education Leadership Newsletter* and issues it primarily to vocational agriculture teachers in Mississippi.

The Newsletter had been published bimonthly from the January-February 1979 issue through the November-December 1980 issue. Slight modification in the Newsletter format and style had been instituted over this two-year period. No attempt had been made to determine what opinions persons on the mailing list possessed regarding the Newsletter. Consequently, this investigation sought to answer the following question: What opinions do recipients hold regarding the *Agricultural Education Leadership Newsletter*?

Objectives of the Study

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of persons receiving the newsletter,
2. Determine the extent that the newsletter is read by persons on the mailing list, and
3. Determine relationships existing between newsletter characteristics and selected variables.

Methodology

The mailing list for the newsletter consisted of high school and junior college agriculture instructors, teacher educators in

agriculture, state supervisors of agricultural education, Mississippi State University administrators, and selected agribusiness professionals. For this investigation, the population was limited to the instructors, teacher educators, and state supervisors, and included 356 persons. The instructors were from Mississippi; the teacher educators and state supervisors were from other states. The head teacher educator at institutions and the head state supervisor in selected states were the persons on the out-of-state mailing list. A stratified random sample of 100 persons was selected for the study. Included in the sample were 70 high school vocational agriculture instructors, 15 teacher educators, eight state supervisors, and seven junior college agriculture instructors.

An instrument constructed by the investigator was used to assess selected demographic variables and perceptions the sample held about the newsletter. This instrument was field-tested with faculty and graduate students in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education at Mississippi State University to assess its content validity and had a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .71 (Hull and Nie, 1979). The instrument was mailed to the sample on November 12, 1980; after six weeks a 77 percent response rate had been achieved. To determine if the nonrespondents were different from the respondents, six of the 23 nonrespondents were contacted by telephone to determine what percent of each issue of the newsletter they read. These data were compared with that for individuals responding within the data collection period. A chi square of 7.15 (d.f.=4, $p > .05$) indicated that the respondents and nonrespondents were not significantly different.

Findings

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

More than 40 percent (42.7) of the respondents held masters as their highest degree while 24 percent held a bachelors. Eighteen percent held doctorates and 11 percent educational specialist degrees. Those respondents holding an associate degree or no degree totaled four percent.

The mean age for respondents was 42 years. One-fifth of the respondents were in the 36-41 age group while 19 percent were in the 54-59 category. The 24-29 age category contained 17 percent and the 30-35 category 16 percent of the respondents.

A positively skewed distribution was found for the years of high school vocational agriculture teaching experience. The mean was 3.4 years and the mode three years. Persons with zero

to five years of experience accounted for 28 percent of the respondents while another 28 percent were in the six to 11 years of experience category.

Newsletter Characteristics

The newsletter was well-read, as shown by 40 percent of the respondents indicating that they read all of each issue and 34 percent who read 75 percent of each issue. Respondents who read just half of each issue totaled 16 percent, those reading 25 percent equaled six percent, and only four percent of the respondents indicated that they did not read any of the newsletter.

A monthly newsletter was desired by 68 percent of the respondents, 11 percent wanted a bimonthly newsletter, and 16 percent preferred a quarterly newsletter. Only five percent preferred a semi-monthly newsletter.

More than 40 percent of the respondents indicated that they wanted each issue of the newsletter to contain four pages while 30 percent desired six pages. Just over eight percent desired an eight-page newsletter while 18 percent felt the newsletter should contain as many pages as needed to cover all worthy news.

Three of every four respondents felt the newsletter should be laid out with two columns per page and 15 percent desired three columns per page. Only three percent of the respondents desired a newsletter with a single column.

A list of authors the respondents desired for the newsletter is presented in Table 1. State supervisors of agricultural education, vocational agriculture teachers, and teacher educators were desired as authors by 87 percent of the respondents. Graduate students were preferred by 61 percent of the respondents. Almost 18 percent of the respondents desired articles from agribusiness professionals and persons with technical agriculture specializations.

Fourteen items were used to determine perceptions the readers held about the newsletter. Respondents who read 25 percent or more of each issue were used in the analysis (n=74) and divided into three groups. Group 1 was composed of respondents who read 25 or 50 percent of each issue, Group 2 of respondents reading 75 percent, and Group 3 of respondents reading 100 percent. A coefficient of concordance of .89 (Nunnally, 1975, p. 293) indicated that the three groups were in high agreement on the rank order for the 14 items. The two highest ranked items concerned the newsletter being easy to read and a Calendar of Activities section of the Newsletter which informs of major

Table 1

TYPES OF NEWSLETTER AUTHORS PREFERRED BY RESPONDENTS
(n=74)

Types of Authors	Number of Readers		Percent Yes
	Yes	No	
State supervisors	65	9	87.8
Vocational Agriculture teachers	64	10	86.5
Teacher educators	64	10	86.5
Graduate students	45	29	60.8
Others*	13	61	17.6

* Most frequently mentioned as authors were agribusiness professionals and persons with specializations in agriculture.

activities about which respondents need to know. The lower ranked items concerned the newsletter adequately covering technical agriculture subjects. A summary of this ranking is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

MEANS AND RANKS FOR SELECTED STATEMENTS ABOUT THE NEWSLETTER
BY GROUPS OF READERS

Statement	Group 1 ^a		Group 2		Group 3	
	x	Rank	x	Rank	x	Rank
1. The newsletter is easy to read.	3.35	3	3.62	1	3.58	1
2. The newsletter informs me about Agricultural Education in Mississippi.	3.18	5	3.42	3	3.32	3
3. Articles in the newsletter are the right length.	3.18	5	3.31	4	3.32	3
4. The newsletter contains the right number of pictures.	3.12	7	3.00	8	3.03	3

Table 2 (Continued)

Statement	Group 1 ^a		Group 2		Group 3	
	x	Rank	x	Rank	x	Rank
5. The Mississippi Ag Ed Calendar of Activities section of the newsletter contains the major activities about which I should know.	3.41	2	3.62	1	3.45	2
6. There should be a section in the newsletter showing an illustration or drawing of a project suitable for students to construct.	3.59	1	3.27	5	3.29	5
7. Each of the following subject matter areas is adequately covered in the newsletter:						
a. Agribusiness	2.88	9	2.92	10	3.00	9
b. Agricultural Mechanics	2.88	9	2.85	13	2.87	13
c. Horticulture	2.82	11	2.77	14	2.90	12
d. Production Agriculture	2.82	11	2.89	12	2.94	11
e. Natural Resources (Forestry and Wildlife)	2.71	13	2.92	10	2.71	14
8. Articles on the Supervisory Staff Page inform me about activities in the State Agricultural Education Office.	3.00	8	3.00	8	2.97	10
9. I would miss the newsletter if it were not issued.	2.53	14	3.15	7	3.19	7
10. Overall, I am very pleased with the newsletter.	3.24	4	3.27	5	3.26	6

Coefficient of Concordance (W)=.89

Mean Scores: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Strongly Agree

^aGroup 1 - Readers of 25 or 50 percent of each newsletter issue (n=17)

Group 2 - Readers of 75 percent of each newsletter issue (n=26)

Group 3 - Readers of 100 percent of each newsletter issue (n=31)

Factors Associated With Newsletter Style, Content, and Format

Frequency of Issue. Respondents with limited years of high school vocational agriculture teaching experience desired that the newsletter be issued more frequently than did respondents with more teaching experience ($r = -.30$, $n = 74$, $p < .01$). Also, how frequently the respondents wanted the newsletter issued was positively related to the type of degree held ($r_{\text{pbi}} = .38$, $n = 73$, $p < .01$), with persons holding higher degrees wanting more issues per year.

Newsletter Authors. Respondents desiring that teacher educators write articles also wanted the following as authors: (a) state supervisory staff ($\phi = .70$, $n = 74$), (b) vocational agriculture teachers ($\phi = .54$, $n = 74$), and (c) graduate students ($\phi = .33$, $n = 74$). Whether or not vocational agriculture teachers, state supervisory staff, teacher educators, and graduate students write articles was not related to the type of degree held.

Newsletter Readers. A low relationship was found between the amount of each issue that respondents read and whether or not high school vocational agriculture teachers wrote articles for the newsletter ($r_{\text{pbi}} = .27$, $n = 74$, $p < .01$). No other factor was found to correlate with the amount of each issue that the respondents read.

Informative Attributes. Whether the respondents felt the newsletter informed of agricultural education in Mississippi was positively related to (a) the newsletter containing the proper number of pictures ($r = .41$, $n = 73$, $p < .01$), (b) articles on the Supervisory Staff Page informing of activities in the State Agricultural Education Office ($r = .30$, $n = 70$; $p < .01$), (c) articles being the proper length ($r = .39$, $n = 74$, $p < .01$) and (d) the following subject matter areas being adequately covered: agricultural mechanics ($r = .42$, $n = 67$, $p < .01$), horticulture ($r = .32$, $n = 66$, $p < .01$), and natural resources ($r = .49$, $n = 64$, $p < .01$).

Artwork and Photographs. The higher the degree held, the less respondents wanted the newsletter to contain a drawing or illustration of a project suitable for students to construct (Kendall's Tau C = $-.31$, $n = 70$, $p < .01$). If the newsletter contained the proper number of pictures, the respondents tended to feel that articles were the right length ($r = .54$, $n = 73$, $p < .01$).

Summary and Conclusions

The major finding of this investigation was that the *Agricultural Education Leadership Newsletter* was easy to read and well-read by the respondents. Also, a monthly newsletter of four to six pages was preferred by the respondents. Newsletter authors desired included teacher educators, vocational agriculture

teachers, state supervisory staff, graduate students and other agricultural professionals.

Respondents tended to agree that the newsletter informed of agricultural education in Mississippi if it contained the proper number of pictures, had articles of the proper length, informed of activities in the state agricultural education office, and adequately covered technical agriculture. The findings of this investigation suggest that the newsletter is an effective method of communicating with agricultural professionals, principally vocational agriculture teachers in Mississippi.

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PLEASE NOTE

As announced in the March, 1982, issue of *The Journal* and on the inside front cover of this issue, authors should consult: *Publications Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2nd edition, 1974) and the *Publication Manual, Change Sheet 2, Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals*.