



How Can I Conduct an Evaluation of My Newspaper Column?

THE NEED

Extension educators who want to reach a large number of citizens at one time with important, timely information often write a weekly or periodic column for a local newspaper. These educators report that they dedicate a considerable amount of their programming time, perhaps one day a week, in this effort. The educators often perceive the newsletter column as a primary delivery method.

Given the time and effort dedicated to researching, writing, and proofing a newspaper column, extension educators have expressed dismay at the challenge of evaluating a newspaper column for its impact on the readers of the column.

THE CHALLENGE

The challenge is not in developing good questions for an evaluation. The challenge is not in deciding whether to use qualitative methods such as focus groups or quantitative methods such as a telephone interview, mail survey, or observation. The challenge is in reaching the people who *read the newspaper* and more specifically, *read the column*. Typically, there is no list of readers of a newspaper because different people buy newspapers at shops and stands in a non-systematic way.

Extension educators are not alone. Indeed, newspaper editors and publishers, and other media like radio and TV, find it very difficult to obtain feedback from a representative group of readers.

To evoke feedback from at least some readers, newspapers have offered some motivating stimuli such as a token gift, or a drawing. The result is clear. Those readers who respond are not likely to be representative of all readers and thus opinions or impact could be more positive or negative than for all readers in general. Research has shown that the people with strong opinions tend to respond in such circumstances (Schuman and Presser, 1996).

Random, or stratified random samples of a community could provide a good basis for generalization about the readership in the community, but such samples are prohibitively expensive unless several organizations, agencies, newspaper, and/or government in a community band together, allowing each group a certain number of questions in a needs assessment for example.

One solution for extension educators is to contact a particular group of readers who subscribe to the newspaper. They provide excellent scientific and political criteria for an evaluation. **First**, the newspaper has contact information on these readers: the newspaper knows where they live. **Second**, these readers receive the paper on a regular basis. **Third**, these readers are likely to comprise a sizable number from which you can sample. And **finally**, findings from a sample can be generalized to all the readers who are subscribers, an important group to the publisher! Subscribers form a critical economic base for a newspaper.

The above solution may not be feasible in some places in the state. Either the population may be so large, the newspaper may have no subscriber list, or previous relationships between Extension and the newspaper may not be cordial.



HOW TO IMPLEMENT

1. Discuss with the editor, your desire to evaluate your newspaper column. Indicate the benefits for you and *for the editor*.

Benefits could include information about the:

- PERCENT AND NUMBER WHO CURRENTLY READ THE COLUMN
 - IMPACT OR INFLUENCE OF THE COLUMN ON AN ISSUE IMPORTANT TO THE NEWSPAPER
 - THE PROFILE OF THE CURRENT READERSHIP (AGE, GENDER, RACE) COMPARED TO THE PEOPLE IN THE COMMUNITY
 - IDEAS FOR FUTURE COLUMNS
 - A NEW FORMAT AND STYLE FOR THE COLUMN
 - NEW DIRECTIONS FOR THE COLUMN SO AS TO REACH A BROADER/NARROWER AUDIENCE
 - THE LOCATION OF THE COLUMN IN THE PAPER
2. For the editor, bring out how a survey of the subscribers could help the paper as a whole:
 - REFLECT RESPECT FOR READERS' OPINIONS
 - REFLECT DEDICATION TO COMMUNITY
 - REFLECT PROFESSIONALISM IN WANTING TO EVALUATE
 3. Discuss with the editor, what questions the editor might want to include in the survey to elicit information about a local issue such as cancer screenings, or acid rain in the county.
 4. Communicate the cost of the survey to the editor and consider asking for a donation from the newspaper to subvene the evaluation. Even a small donation signifies buy-in and will spur greater interest by the newspaper in the findings.
 5. Consider making the editor a partner in this study or putting the editor on an advisory committee for the study.

PA EXAMPLE

In an effort to evaluate the profile of readers; the extent to which they read the column, and the impact on readers from her weekly column, one extension educator, Mary Ehret, M.S., R.D., L.D.N., from Luzerne County collaborated with the editor of the Pittston *Sunday Dispatch*. To learn more about her study, you can go to the PA Example #14 [Sunday Dispatch "Nutrition Corner."](#)

REFERENCE

Schuman, H. and S. Presser (1996). Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Content. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Nancy Ellen Kiernan, Ph.D., Program Evaluator, nekiernan@psu.edu

The reference citation for this Tipsheet is: Kiernan, Nancy Ellen (2004). How Can I Conduct an Evaluation of My Newspaper Column? Tipsheet #70, University Park, PA: Penn State Cooperative Extension.
Available at: <http://www.extension.psu.edu/evaluation/pdf/TS70.pdf>

This Web site is copyrighted by The Pennsylvania State University. The information may be used for educational purposes but not sold for profit.