

Grower Publications—the World's Window to Our Science

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Go to any farm or ranch home in the nation and somewhere there will be a broad assortment of publications tailored especially for those involved in food production. The magazines and newspapers will reflect a broad selection of topics, an enormous educational opportunity, and a continuing education program not for credit.

Farmers and ranchers wear many hats and must have a broad interest. Each producer must be a plant scientist, because all of agriculture begins with plants.

Some plants are harvested and marketed without much processing. Others are processed through animals, so some producers must be practical animal scientists. As plants are produced and animals raised, marketing enters the scene as another specialty. Hardly anything gets done any more without complex and varied machines, and thus each producer must be a mechanic, engineer, technician, and machine operator. When dealing with employees, he turns into a labor relations specialist. All year he must be an accountant and lawyer to satisfy government at tax time.

Probably no other industry has so many opportunities for community service and leadership. Farmers are organizers and cooperators. An individual producer can easily be a part-time participant in the soil conservation district, breed association, general farm organization, commodity organization, 4-H club, and water district. With so much going on, producers expect their publications to keep them informed. Although not so identified, producer publications represent a continuing education program. Each person chooses his "courses" as he scans and sorts.

A few years ago I visited a ranch in eastern Montana. Half the kitchen table was reserved for mealtime; the other half was piled high with 38 farm publications, coming from all over the country—some free, some at a price. This is the typical scene that discoverers of new information must face. Producers are always seeking another clue. Producers are busy, and for anything to be useful it must be condensed to a good point or two. There is no perfect formula to attract readers. The audience is too varied, too elusive.

Agricultural publications around the country are becoming increasingly concerned about the changing audience. Farm publications are tuned into a farm audience. But farm numbers continue to decline and so does the number of "genuine" subscribers. The number of producers is actually much smaller than figures would indicate, since something like 10% of the producers produce half the goods.

But this is only half the story. A new and different farm scene is appearing. The new producer has 10 acres, one horse, two cats, any number of dogs, a small garden, and a miscellaneous

assortment of machines to give the impression that it could be a farm, given half a chance. The new farm scene represents a new life-style, an effort to have all the benefits of farm life without the work, risk, and investment. Since the new style of farmer grew up in the city with only a lawn to mow and a dog to feed, educators and communicators will have to start at the beginning to attract this audience.

Getting the message of scientists to established farmers is a fairly well-established routine with hundreds of successful agricultural publications on the scene. The new farm scene is a market that is as yet untapped. It represents a different challenge that cannot be ignored. The 10-acre farmer is a noncommercial producer with all the questions of commercial producers.

The audience for agricultural information has been fairly well defined. When a new idea comes along, the innovator gets interested and takes a chance. The innovator represents only 1 or 2% of the farm population for any given idea. An innovator who will explore new plants probably will not also explore new machines with the same vigor. If the economic opportunity is only modest, fewer will be interested. Neighbors watch the innovator, who often fails but occasionally succeeds. As the idea becomes economically more sensible, early adopters appear. The early adopters spread the message, and soon the mid adopters feel it is their turn. Early adopters represent perhaps 10–15% of the farm population; mid adopters are that big group in the middle, 50–60%. At the far end are those who never adopt, those very few who resist change indefinitely.

Farm magazines with the greatest appeal must have a story for the early and mid adopters. A farm publication cannot survive by trying to appeal to only the top few percent of the potential audience. Furthermore, the flow of significant new technology is not that great.

Agricultural publications do not try to compete with daily newspapers. There are several fairly basic differences. Daily newspapers concentrate on the news of the moment, the kind of news that will satisfy a noncommercial type of appetite. Farm publications concentrate on what is new to make a dollar and on things closely related to that topic. Farm papers appeal to a specific audience, and newspapers appeal to a general audience. Newspapers can make quite a few mistakes without losing audience interest. Farm publications must be accurate and reliable to maintain reader interest.

During an 11-yr period beginning in 1952, I was county extension agent in Chouteau County, Montana. The 4,000-square-mile area was a gigantic food factory covering mostly plains, with some mountains. Each year in that county, food producers grew enough wheat to make 600 million loaves of bread. And each year, beef producers produced enough beef to supply 100,000 people for a year. The entire effort involved fewer than 1,000 families. During each of those 11 yr, I saw a new disease or ailment introduced to agriculture, eg, wheat streak mosaic, barley stripe mosaic, and *Cephalosporium* stripe.

Each ailment represents a threat to the food supply. And each ailment represents a challenge for discoverers of a better way. Research scientists are on the very front line of defense to help maintain an abundant food supply. Producer publications transport new ideas to where they can be used. So get on with your scouting, innovation, discovery . . . we need the copy!