

Drawing Reader Responses

READER PARTICIPATION in column promotions offers possibilities still to be discovered by many writers who have not tried this two-way pattern. It is partly a matter of personality; some columnists wish to work undisturbed by reader enthusiasm and demands. And possibly many others have lacked an appreciation of the possibilities.

The extent of reader participation can be controlled, but at the expense of some disappointment of contributors. However, in addition to coaxing contributions from local writers, columnists can think up promotions which either appeal because of their novelty or because of the public service rendered. The reader responses have a direct relation to circulation, advertising effectiveness, and newspaper influence.

Sometimes publishers' wives assist in handling communications from readers. Again, columnists have given extra hours of their time. Most writers worry not over the extra work, but for fear of not having the work-making responses.

Elaborate campaigns and devices are not needed.

There are all sorts of inspiring "three little words." For the "two-word" class we nominate "Hi, Dad!" — Wickenburg, (Ariz.) Sun.

We'd hate to have to shuffle off before we see how civilization wriggles out of this one. — Cottage Grove (Ore.) Sentinel.

Personal columns are able to touch the heart-strings of a community. Regular readers grow sensitive to the moods and emotions of the columnist. In time they come to think of themselves as an entity. Not infrequently a columnist forms a club which enlists many or all of the readers. The 75-Year Club, for example, was sponsored by Mrs. C. E. Greef's "Over the Back Fence" column in the Eldora (Iowa) *Herald-Ledger* for more than fifteen years. Civic clubs have joined in giving annual dinners for such groups. The idea has been used successfully in other states, with minor variations.

The high readership of a column enables it to carry appeals to most of the people in a warm, informal way. Many columnists, in letters to these authors, have reported instant and generous responses. A request that readers send picture-cards to a sick child brought more than 700 and quickened recovery. A farm family which lost everything in a fire soon had more worldly possessions than it had before. An appeal for residents to cut tree limbs hanging over sidewalks and to trim shrubbery obstructing views at street corners was unusually effective because the columnist announced the exact hour and minute he would cut his own. The mayor did likewise, and city trucks were sent out to pick up the trimmings.

If columns have wide readership, even minor dramatic touches may have stirring responses. Facts speak louder than preachments; columnists learn the deft stroke of the typewriter which expresses just the right amount of sentiment.

The objection is sometimes made that good citizenship is a duty, not a game. Right; but some things won't be done if appeals are not dramatized or brought alive in some new way. A columnist should be a first-rate idea man. Ideas sell advertising which moves goods. And news men of the editorial side, now in competition with radio, television, demon-

strations, give-away promotions, and many other forms of dramatics, cannot afford to do business in the same old way. Readers who enjoy their newspapers are . . . joyful. And the joyous respond.

But reactions to columns may develop slowly. People need time to become conditioned to a writer's personality and style. A writer may turn out passable stuff for years before he and the readers suddenly discover that they are capable of responses on a higher emotional and intellectual level. Then he and they form a team which feels power surging in its promotions.

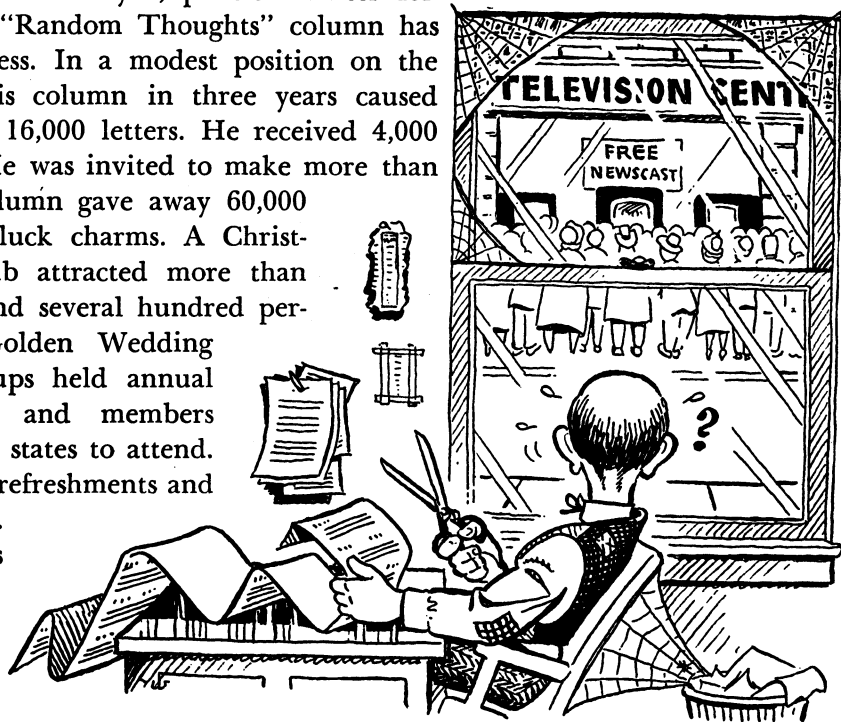
Success in one column may give an assist to others. Soon the home-grown columns are outpulling any syndicate matter carried in the paper.

Some columnists get mail by the sack. They are mentioned often wherever circulation men meet readers. It is sometimes enough just to sell a column.

As might be assumed, Amarillo, Tex., is a columnists' town, both as respects the *News-Globe* and the rival *Times*. There people were likely to be heard talking about Lewis Nordyke, political writer for the *News*, whose "Random Thoughts" column has had unusual success. In a modest position on the editorial page, this column in three years caused Nordyke to open 16,000 letters. He received 4,000 telephone calls. He was invited to make more than 200 talks. The column gave away 60,000 buckeyes as good-luck charms. A Christmas Birthday Club attracted more than 3,000 members, and several hundred persons joined a Golden Wedding Club. These groups held annual mid-year picnics and members came from several states to attend. The paper served refreshments and presented favors.

The Christmas

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club was open to all persons who were born between December 15 and January 3. Obviously, birthdays in this period are lost in the year-end festivities and one gift is likely to serve for both birthday and Christmas. The success of the promotion comes, in part, from the fact that a ready-made unit of the population is singled out for attention.

The demand for buckeyes grew out of a chance remark, but soon the columnist was filling his pockets before making any round for news, was carrying a bushel of buckeyes in his car, and the paper was helping mail out thousands in small sacks. Even with this success, however, Nordyke did not hesitate to prime the pump. He sent dollar bills to readers who reported somebody's good deed — if the story was worth printing.

Such a columnist is soon in debt to hundreds of readers. Nordyke occasionally had a "thanking day" in his department. Here is an example:

THANKS—to more than 16,000 persons who have written letters and cards to this column in the last three years. . . . To those who have sent thousands of letters and gifts in response to notices of shut-ins and ailing children, such as little Zoe at Dimmitt and Little Joe at McLeans. . . . To the many who have telephoned in items. . . . To those who sent trinkets and things to the Corncrib, my home workshop. . . . To Mrs. Vida Jansen of Amarillo for a wonderful pecan pie. . . . To Amarillo music teachers for a western-decorated feed trough. . . . To all who helped this column bring a mother and son from distressing circumstances in faraway Brooklyn. . . . To the more than 3,000 members of the Christmas Birthday Club . . . To the scores of members of the Golden Wedding Club . . . To Bob Stone for a guest register in the Corncrib, which now contains the names of thousands of guests. . . . To Mason King for helping put on the big Christmas parties in the middle of the year. . . . To the hundreds and hundreds who sent Christmas cards and Valentines. . . . To Mrs. Sears, Mrs. Warren, Nosey Joe, and a host of others who have contributed verse and anecdotes. . . . To Lindsay Nunn of Lexington, Ky., for growing buckeyes, and to Charles Fisk, who has had more than 20,000 buckeyes delivered

With some persons, no matter what you try works.—Springer (N. M.) Tribune.

to me for giving away. . . . To the scores who have sent selections from their scrapbooks. . . . To hundreds who have responded with information sought through the column's Service Department. . . . To all who have said good and bad things about the column or who have in any way helped with it or have read it regularly, occasionally, or just once. . . . To Wales Madden, Sr., for helping in the crusade against publication of wedding cake pictures. . . . To former Rep. Eugene Worley for trying to pass a law requiring ramps on federally-controlled public buildings for the good of those who find steps and stairs difficult. . . . With so much help, a column is an extremely pleasant and satisfying chore.

Nordyke later became co-publisher of the Stephenville *Empire-Tribune* and transferred his "Random Thoughts" column to that paper.

Such columnists belong to the class which we might refer to as "calculating." They think it helpful to father a brand new idea about once a month. This may be a Plump and Pretty Club for the stout, a One-Cup Club in protest against ten-cent coffee, or a personal campaign for dog-catcher. The resulting mail is likely to fill half the column, saving much time. But the main consideration is that readers are pleased. Indeed, if readers are not amused, promotions must be changed, or dropped. A good columnist knows his people.

Some reader responses are partly in the imagination of the columnist. He may create fictitious characters and make-believe situations which give him great freedom of expression. But there are real Alibi Clubs and Monday Morning Quarterbacks, some of which hold banquets and give coaches opportunities to explain victories and losses. There are societies for the prevention or promotion of this and that. There are Sidewalk Farmers Associations which have citified members who talk good agriculture but practice it little, or none. Consider the possibilities for fun and philosophy in a make-believe Society for the Suppression of After-Dinner Speaking. Debatable issues grow out of the name itself:

The first seat-covers were triangular. — Casper Nohner, Hayti (S. D.) *Herald-Enterprise*.

1. Are there too many societies already?
2. Is suppression worse than the thing suppressed?
3. Is speaking after dinner worse for speaker or hearer?
4. Should dinners also, perhaps, be suppressed?
5. Should after-dinner speaking be replaced by other forms of communication, such as music, dancing, or sign language?

Marriage might be described as an institution that entitles women to the protection of strong men who steady the stepladder for them while they wash the kitchen windows. — Holdredge (Neb.) Citizen.

Readers like to comment on a common topic. This may be a timely subject or an invitation to nominate a Good Neighbor, Best-Dressed Man, Good Deed of the Week, or Most Courteous Boy Scout. One sees mention of absurd weeks, such as Be Kind to Stray Penguins Week and Hang-nail Prevention Week.

It should be stressed, of course, that the columnist is only part prankster. Mixed in with his hare-brained stunts are subtle suggestions and obvious morals which have a powerful influence on readers' responses. Give a columnist room for a joke, anecdote, or light essay and he will find space to promote a blood bank or build a fire under peace officers who think people have lost interest in their laws.

Some consistency in column conducting is as worthwhile as dreaming up innovations. One columnist, who neglected to ask children of his town to send in Santa Claus letters, got a few anyway and realized, too late, that he had broken a long-standing newspaper custom in his town. He apologized and asked for letters to Santa for the following year — in advance.

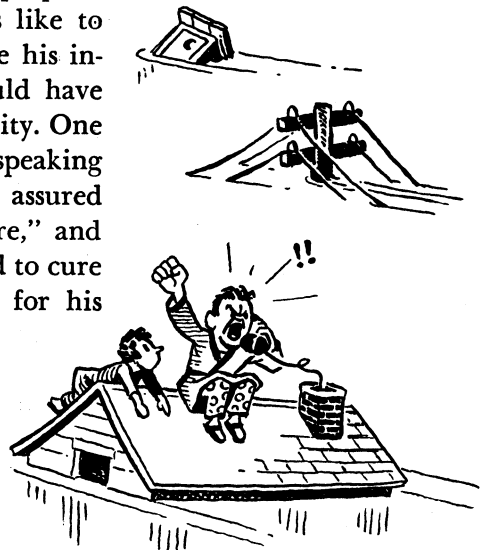
Opinions of newspaper philosophers differ on whether columns should take note of public issues usually treated in editorials. But if the columnist is also the editor — or even if he isn't — some attention to local affairs is inevitable. Citizens appreciate the

wide readership of the column and therefore call the writer when storm sewers won't drain, when a railroad proposes to diminish train service, when a national figure slurs a region in a radio talk, and when they have trouble reading a road map or timetable. When permitted, the column becomes a sounding board for readers, especially on matters resulting in minor irritations. Weighty matters require background articles for full discussion, of course. But when a columnist sounds off and gets results his following realizes his influence and remembers him when the next civic corns begin to ache.

When responses slow down, a columnist usually can stir up readers by denouncing himself in faked letters or telephone calls. Or he may make a deliberate error, knowing he will be corrected. To err is so human that his errors, if minor, will add to his popularity in some circles. The mail always spurts when a rival town is complimented for being clean, having courteous policemen, pretty girls, getting more rain, etc. When a new bride writes in for recipes, readers can be asked for proved recipes, advice, or even household gadgets. Whether to take gift offers from advertisers can be decided only by the columnist — and the advertising manager.

An old column device is to present some perplexing personal problem or dilemma. Readers like to work problems for a dumb columnist, figure his income tax, and think up comebacks he should have thought of when insulted by a visiting celebrity. One columnist feigned great hesitation about speaking before a state university audience, but was assured by readers that "you are as smart as they are," and given pep talks in scores of telegrams designed to cure his stage fright. Another columnist known for his flabbergasting stunts offered a \$100 reward for proof that a prairie fire can be started with a lighted cigaret tossed from

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a car. Win or lose, he gains reader interest and creates interest in a problem on which he has taken a somewhat dubious position.

Column techniques also have other applications. Columnists in growing numbers have radio programs. Some of these read excerpts from their own writing or from newspapers in nearby towns. Some become famed as speakers for special occasions. A few have assembled shows which they take into other communities for benefit performances.

Promotions through a column are a natural outgrowth of the writer's interest in and contacts with people. He reacts quickly to readers' stories. Poisoning of dogs brings him snorting to defense of people's pets, but a month later he may be found agreeing with irate gardeners that pets should be penned.

With an approving nod from his publisher — if he is not the publisher — he will next begin trumpeting for a county hospital or a road bond issue. Regular news columns can lay down the facts, and editorials can analyze the tax structure involved, but the columnist talks about the joys of smooth roads, the terrors of having a sick child when roads are impassable, of children boredly home-bound when they would like to be spending money in town. He sees and reacts sharply to what others grow accustomed to — mosquito breeding grounds in vacant lots, children running wild for want of planned recreation, men idle for lack of small industries. These things are presented not with heavy didactics, but in quotes from children, mating calls from mosquitoes, and descriptions of how it feels to be a father, out of work, and gnawed by pains of futility which hurt worse than hunger.

Columns which carry the weight of newspaper authority may take the form of one-subject essays which are really editorials in 12-em form under a heading. The open-letter type, addressed to re-

Shading "gimme" over to
"lemme" would be progress.—
Brookline (Mass.) Chronicle.

sponsible officials, is fairly rare. It carries a heavy wallop. The following example, addressed to a state highway department, is by Harry O'Brien in the Park River (N. D.) *Walsh County Press*:

This is to inform you, if you do not already know, that the condition of highway 17 between Park River and Adams is such that it is a definite menace to life and property. It has many holes that create hazards for everyone that travels the road. The damage was done during the spring and winter. Similar holes are to be found on other highways, including our main east-west highways, Nos. 2 and 10. Damages to these roads have long since been repaired. Are not the necks of those who use highway No. 17 as important as the necks of those who travel on Nos. 2 and 10?

Do unto others as though you were the others. — Ted Burges, Clear Lake (S. D.) *Courier*.

A column conducted with imagination and resourcefulness needs little promotion. If printed on the editorial page, however, it may be boosted by occasionally running the heading and an anecdote on Page 1. Promotion of a poor column is worse than futile, but anything which will add to its intrinsic worth and interest is defensible. Like the newspaper of which it is a part, the specialized department rests chiefly upon its current interest. About the only immortality it can hope for is inclusion of bits in readers' scrapbooks and possible fame through printing of excerpts by magazines and other newspapers. By inference it suggests its own worth by reprinting clever bits from other columns, with proper credits.

In general, it may be said that columns which merely entertain, or merely discuss an issue in a routine way, are not as effective, or as well read, as those which encourage readers to participate in activities. Genius is the greater gift, but ability to plan can be acquired. Moreover, the column is peculiarly adapted to promotion of community activities. Cumulative good will is an important result of helping people sell benefit tickets, obtain better public services, and rehabilitate stricken neighbors.

Say it with brakes and save the flowers.—Webster (S. D.)
Reporter and Farmer.

Yet the columnist must not promote too much, and too often. He must not become a bothersome busybody. He must strike a balance by selecting projects which have some popular and emotional appeals. Occasionally he may back a movement which, without him, has no chance for success. Always he remembers that nothing is better for his column than a record of successes; once committed, he goes all out for a cause or a project.