

10.

Opinion Polls and Readership

OPINION POLLS, conducted by *Wallaces Farmer* and *Wisconsin Agriculturist* since 1938, have one obvious value for a farm paper. They provide timely articles with a local angle — “This is what Iowa farmers think about issue X; this is what Wisconsin farmers think about issue Y.”

The polls can do much more than this. They give the editors insight into farm attitudes. They replace guesses on farm opinion with facts.

For instance, most of the editors on *Wallaces Farmer* assumed that Iowa farmers were “dry” in the sense of being opposed to state legislation for “liquor by the drink.” Actually two polls showed a slight edge for such legislation; a third poll, a slight edge against.

Many students of political science recommend that the governor, like the president, be permitted to name his cabinet instead of having them elected. The same students recommend a four-year term for state officers.

What do farmers think? To date, farm opposition to these measures is strong, as measured by the polls.

This does not mean that the editors should drop the subjects. But it does mean that editorial discussion designed to favor these projects will have to do more than say, "This reform is a good thing."

The most important editorial use of the polls may be to measure areas of ignorance and indifference. We often use a screening question which asks, "Have you ever heard about Issue X?" Then we ask of those who have, "Do you approve or disapprove Issue X?" (1)

The original purpose of the screening question was to get rid of those who obviously had no right to an opinion. As it has turned out, the screening question does something more important. It indicates the area of ignorance.

In every poll, there is an "undecided" group. We used to be impatient with this response and tried to cut it down. Now we are inclined to think it has great value.

For example, in February 1960, the *Wallaces Farmer* Poll asked: "In the election this fall, Iowans will have a chance to vote on holding a constitutional convention in 1961. Have you heard or read anything about this proposal?"

Only 31 per cent said "Yes." The same question in August got a "Yes" vote of 27 per cent.

Plainly this was an area of ignorance. The polls indicated that there was a gap to be filled. Actually, while *Wallaces Farmer* did discuss the question, the effective work was done by the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation which conducted a vigorous campaign against the convention and carried farm districts in the election.

Contract farming began to get into the news in a

big way in 1958. It has already gone far in the broiler districts of the South, but hadn't affected the Corn Belt. In 1958, however, the *Wallaces Farmer* Poll described contract (integrated) farming as follows: "This is where a farmer signs with some company or cooperative to get help on feed, equipment, marketing, etc. and agrees in return to produce and sell much as the company or cooperative directs."

In July, 1958, men answered as follows:

1. 43% had heard or read a great deal about it.
2. 30% had heard some talk about it.
3. 37% hadn't heard it discussed.

This gave some support to the policy of using several articles in this field. While the issue wasn't as red-hot as we had supposed, a sizable majority had some information on the subject (Figure 10.1)

A larger area of indifference showed up in an August, 1959 poll on respirators: "Some farmers are using respirators to keep dust, chaff, etc. out of their lungs on especially dirty jobs. Did you make use of a respirator during the past year?"

Only 11 per cent said "Yes." Plainly, if the use of respirators is a good thing for farm health, it would take a lot of educational work to increase their use.

Another question in the field of health in *Wallaces Farmer* (February, 1958) was: "Have you been vaccinated for tetanus (lockjaw)?"

Over half — 54.5 per cent — said, "No." But even this result looked better than it actually was. Of the less than half who said, "Yes," most were vaccinated in the armed services and half of the "Yes" group were

vaccinated 10 or more years ago. Apparently only about one-fourth or less of the total were effectively protected.

We run articles on fertilizer and get fairly good reader-interest scores. But how many farmers are prospects for such copy? In October 1958, we found that 37 per cent hadn't bought any commercial fertilizer that year. So an article on fertilizer, which assumed the use of fertilizer, was talking to only 63 per cent of our farmers. In 1958 some copy was still needed for farmers who hadn't bought fertilizer and who could only be reached by a different type of article.

In 1960 in Wisconsin milk quotas were being discussed. One of the issues was whether quotas could be transferred or had to stay with the farm. This was a fairly new and somewhat complicated issue. The poll asked:

"There has been some discussion of whether to make milk quotas transferable so that a farmer could sell his quotas to somebody else who wanted to keep a larger herd. Have you heard or read anything about this plan?"

Only 28 per cent said, "Yes, have heard something about it." The rest, 72 per cent said, "No, haven't heard."

Plainly the important news here (reported in *Wisconsin Agriculturist* February 4, 1961) was not how the informed farmers voted (almost half said quotas should stay with the farm) but that the majority hadn't heard about the proposal.

If transferable quotas were to be one of the farm policy issues, more discussion in the paper and elsewhere was needed before farmers could vote intelligently.

In 1958 in Wisconsin, there was much talk about dairymen changing over to the use of bulk tanks. Sometimes it seemed that everybody was changing over. To check, in October, 1958, the Poll asked: "How do you handle the milk pick up on your farm?"

Only 19.5 per cent said they used bulk tanks; 66.2 per cent still used milk cans. The rest (14.3 per cent) said they had no dairy cows.

Checkups of this kind show changes over time. On this bulk tank issue, a Starch survey in *Wisconsin Agriculturist* (November 5, 1960) found that 40.9 per cent had bulk tanks then. This can be contrasted with 7 per cent in September, 1955.

Somewhat the same question arose concerning the number of farms with milking parlors. Only 3.8 per cent of the sample reported using them in 1958. Apparently the popularity of this device had been overestimated at that time.

Integrated farming was also the theme of a Wisconsin question. In August, 1958, the poll reported 21 per cent had heard or read a good deal about it; 42 per cent had heard some talk about it; 37 per cent hadn't heard it discussed.

Apparently Wisconsin farmers were less interested in the subject than those in Iowa.

Trends were shown in political affairs. In July, 1953, 72 per cent of the Wisconsin sample said that Ezra Taft Benson was doing a good or fair job as Secretary of Agriculture. In August, 1958, 23 per cent voted this way. Iowa farmers showed a similar shift in the same years.

Questions on knowledge of foreign affairs were asked from time to time. Quemoy and Matsu were the

subject of queries in both states before the 1960 presidential campaign. In 1958, 26 per cent of Iowa farmers "had been following the news closely"; Wisconsin had 33 per cent in this class.

Lebanon was a sore spot overseas in late 1958. *Wisconsin Agriculturist* asked: "Have you paid any attention to what's been going on in Lebanon, Jordan, and the Middle East?"

"Yes, keeping up closely" pulled 35 per cent; and 18 per cent said, "Haven't had time to keep up with it at all." The rest (47 per cent) were in the class: "Have followed it somewhat but have been too busy to keep up closely."

These examples show what editors can learn from the polls about the state of information of their readers. The surveys usually underline the old saying, "Never overestimate the information of your reader; never underestimate his intelligence."

The pre-test of subject matter also has a place in the editor's kit of tools. This is a device which uses a mail questionnaire to try to find out in advance how readers will respond to a given type of article.

This permits an editor to try off-beat subjects on a sample. Perhaps he has been timid about subjects in which people are really interested. At little expense, he can give such subjects a dry run and then — if the response is good — check further by an actual article printed in a survey issue.

We use a sample of 1,000 names. Returns run around 50 per cent. A white ballot "For the man of the house"; a pink ballot (same questions) "For the woman of the house."

Plainly, the 50 per cent who didn't answer were less

interested than the 50 per cent who did reply. We expected and usually got, higher scores on the pre-test than we could expect on a reader-interest survey.

As a rule of thumb, we said that the pre-test usually ran 20 per cent higher than the survey article. To be specific, when 80 per cent checked, "I'm sure I'd read this article," we expected a Read Most of 60 per cent.

This was a rough estimate and didn't always work out. Yet the pre-test did give some indication of probable results, and was helpful.

Sometimes it looked as if changes in the head (from pre-test to reader-interest) made a substantial difference. Here was a 1960 pre-test question:

"Hazards of going steady. Are young people who start dating early and settle down to going steady in high school more apt to get into trouble and find themselves pushed into marriage at 17 or less? Here are some case histories."

This had a pre-test score of 41 for men and 56 for women.

This subject was approached again, in the same pre-test as follows:

"Should we have 'shot-gun' marriages? When an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, often the family insists on getting her married in a hurry. But sometimes this merely loads the girl up with two or three more children and a bad marriage. What family experts say."

This, in essence like the first, pulled 44 for men and 76 for women. No change with men but a much higher score for women. The hotter head of the two pre-tests apparently made a difference.

An article in January, 1960, with the head, "High School Marriages" pulled 56 Read Some for men and

74 per cent for women. Read Most scores were 50 and 68. In this case, the pre-test came close to an accurate prediction of the readership score.

Since we have found that choice of subject matter is more important than any other factor, it seems that the pre-test might well be used more often. It gives insights as to reader response that can open up new fields to the editor.

Layout, style, illustrations and all the rest of the editor's tools mean little compared to picking the right subject. The reader-interest survey helps on this. So does the opinion poll. One rough test in the opinion poll is to see how many comments were volunteered by respondents on a given subject. If a question brings out 30 or 40 comments, as reported by interviewers, the chances are that the subject has more reader appeal than one that only brings out a dozen comments.

But the pre-test still does the best job in helping the editor check on the interests of his subscribers that he might otherwise ignore. Often he will find that a subject to which he hadn't given much thought will rank high.

What the pre-test can't show is what will interest farmers five or 10 years from now. This is the subject of Chapter 13.

The opinion poll and the pre-test, of course, should not be used to scare editors away from subjects in which only a few farmers are interested. The paper should always be a few jumps ahead of its readers — but not too many.

In 1918, *Wallaces Farmer* ran a good deal of copy on hybrid corn. Probably only a few farmers were interested. But the hybrid corn copy — continued until hy-

brid corn was on the market — undoubtedly played a part in preparing for the boom in hybrid corn in the 'thirties.

Again, in 1922, *Wallaces Farmer* began to pound hard on the theme that overproduction was hurting farm income. Suggestions were made on ways to adjust production to demand. Again the editor was considerably ahead of farm opinion and of farm organization leaders. But the early discussion of the issue made for more general acceptance of the AAA later.

One great editorial danger is that the editor, up to his ears in a subject, may think everybody has the same interest and the same background he has. This is rarely true and this assumption may lead to articles and editorials that leave out data important to the understanding of the issue by the average subscriber.

The opinion poll helps to keep the editor conscious of this hazard.

Advertisers run into the same problem. An ad may play up a theme that a farmer has heard too often. It may play up a theme of which he has never heard. Both kinds of ads may lose.

* * *

Here are some points to keep in mind:

1. An opinion poll tells the editor what farmers think about current issues.
2. It also tells him which issues they haven't heard about or in which they aren't interested.
3. The pre-test of subject matter helps the editor on his most important job, the selection of subjects that interest his subscribers.

Figure 10.1



Farmers vote NO

on plans for contract
(integrated) farming

HAVE YOU heard about contract (integrated) farming? And what do you think of the idea?

Iowa farmers gave quick answers on these questions to the Wallaces Farmer Poll. Yes, farmers had heard of integrated farming plans. And most of them hadn't liked what they had heard.

Broiler business in the north has been largely taken over by farmers signed up on contracts. The factor contributes his labor and land, the company does the rest.

Now somewhat similar plans are being advanced in the cornbelt. To find out whether Iowa farmers had heard much about the subject, the Wallaces Farmer Poll asked:

"Have you heard about or discussed contract (integrated) farming? This is where a farmer signs up with some company or cooperator to get help on feed, equipment, marketing, etc., and agrees in return to produce and sell much as the company or cooperator directs." Iowa farm operators answered like this:

1. Have heard or read a good deal about it 43%
2. Have heard some talk about it. 30%
3. Haven't heard it discussed 27%

Upper income farmers had heard more about the subject than farmers with low incomes. And young farmers had heard more about integrated plans than older ones.

Only farmers who had heard about contract integrated farming plans were asked further questions. This group made

up 73 percent of the men interviewed.

The next question dealt with poultry producers. The Poll asked:

"One kind of contract (integrated) farming deals with laying hens. The farmer signs up with a company or cooperator, agrees to follow their production rules, buy their feed and chicks and to sell eggs thru the company or cooperator. How does a plan of this kind strike you?"

A young farmer in Black Hawk county commented: "I'd like to try it a year with my chickens. Nothing else, ha."

"The farmer might get a better price for eggs," said the man in Humboldt county, "but he's tied up too much with feed, chicks and everything."

Farmers voted like this:

1. Good idea, should improve income from eggs 35%
2. Might work, but I'm not sure 15%
3. Poor idea 65%
4. Undecided 15%

Low income farmers were a little more

What farmers say about contract farming

- 43% of Iowa farm operators have heard or read a good deal about it.
- 30% have heard some talk about it.
- 20% think contract farming with hens is a GOOD idea, or might work.
- 65% think it is a POOR idea.
- 18% think contract farming with pigs is a GOOD idea or might work.
- 72% think it is a POOR idea.

"I wouldn't go for some of these contracts," says Don McVicker of Franklin county, Iowa. "I don't go for housing around either."

friendly to the idea than farmers in the middle and upper income groups. But only a few in any group voted "good idea."

"Too much like Russia," said a farmer in Bremer county. "Contract farming does away with free enterprise."

A young reader in Story county added: "When the big companies get this all set up, then they'll tell us how much profit we'll have and it won't be much."

The Poll went on to ask about contract farming with hogs. "Another kind of contract (integrated) farming deals with hogs. From what you've heard of these plans, how do they strike you?"

A Humboldt county man said: "It's a large group of farmers form a group and have their own meat packing plant and then produce meat type hogs. It would be fine. But not unless farmers run the whole thing."

Farmers voted as follows on integrated farming plans for hogs:

1. Good idea, should improve income from hogs 35%
2. Might work, but I'm not sure 15%
3. Poor idea 65%
4. Undecided 15%

Younger farmers reacted a little more friendly to the idea than older ones. A Jasper county man explained it this way:

"The farmer who hasn't any hoxing will grab at a chance to get started. At present the idea of contract farming is unpopular in Iowa. But some farmers are going to try it out. Wallaces Farmer will check back later and see if farm plans change."

Photo, Box, Article

Did readers look at the box, ignore the photograph and the article and turn to the next page? Or did they look at the photograph only and ignore the box and the article?

Men	No.	Per cent
Saw picture only	8	4.0
Saw picture and article	102	51.0
Saw box only	2	1.0
Saw box and article	104	52.0

At this time, 27 per cent of the men hadn't heard about contract (integrated) farming. So the article started with the handicap of trying to attract some readers who were unfamiliar with the subject.

Wallaces Farmer, September 20, 1958



This is the 30-acre herd of Erwin Luecke, Dodge county. Farmers with larger herds like this area as one source about production quotas in the great dairies.

Would You Cut Milk Production?

Wisconsin farmers were asked this question by WAAF Pollsters. Here are their views on production quotas

A RE Wisconsin dairy farmers ready to accept marketing quotas on milk? As everybody knows, cotton, wheat and soybeans farmers have had marketing quotas for a long time. But up to date dairy farmers have looked away from such a program.

To find out what Wisconsin farmers think about marketing quotas for milk, the Wisconsin Agriculturist Poll sent its interviewers out in the country to interview farm operators all over the state.

This question was put to each man.

Would you be willing to cut your 1958 milk production 10 percent unless it that would get you a 15-20 percent increase in milk price? This would mean you'd be allotted a production quota and excess milk would be paid for at a very low price.

Percent were asked to pick one of the following statements:

1. I'd accept a production quota in order to get higher milk prices.

2. I'd not care the plan will work but am willing to give it a try.

3. No. My 1958 production is less than the capacity of my farm. I can't cut 10 percent under 1958.

4. Production quotas won't work. We'll have to get higher prices some other way.

How did farm operators vote? This is the result:

1. Accept quotas	39
2. Will try it	30
3. Can't cut	37
4. Quotas won't work	19
5. Undecided	13

Note that a 10 percent cut was asked for. Some farms could say that 5 percent

would be enough. Yet even so the 10 percent cut, 75 percent of the farmers showed a willingness to try the experiment.

If the question had asked about a 5 percent cut, the opposing vote would probably have been higher.

Eighty-seven per cent of those who voted that they wouldn't cut production under 1958. None of these were young farmers with small herds.

Any program that is worked out in this line will probably establish a base for each farm in line with average production over the last three or four years. And probably some modification would be made to farms with small herds who are just starting.

The last five of questions to production quotas was made up of 13 percent of the men interviewed. This covers a small "No" vote for such a radical proposal. It may indicate the strength of farm families with present milk prices.

By age groups, the 50 percent who wanted production quotas were divided up this way:

Want quotas—	
22-34 years	16%
35-49 years	18
50 and up	24

A farmer in Blount county said, "The thought of production quotas is not pleasant, but it is the only way to raise the price to the producer."

"I think the government should get out of the farmer's business," commented a farmer in Janesville county, "but if they come around with something like that, I'd be foolish not to take advantage of it."

A young farmer in La Crosse county was enthusiastic. "I'd go along with it. It would mean less cattle, less wheat, less soybeans and more net profit to the dairy."

Farmers who left they couldn't cut production below 1958 divided this way according to age:

Can't cut—	
22-34 years	16%
35-49 years	21
50 and up	28

A farmer in Lafayette county has this reason for being doubtful. "My herd was low in 1958 and that would make the plan tough for me."

"I couldn't cut my production 10 percent under 1958," said a Walworth county dairyman. "We were at rock bottom then."

As you might expect, small dairymen—those with 1 to 4 cows—were most inclined to worry about the 1958 base. Some were young farmers whose herds were just getting started.

The bigger dairymen—with herds of 50 cows or more—said they wouldn't vote against the program. Of these groups, only 17 percent said "Production quotas won't work."

Neither political party has adopted this program as yet. Democrats and Republicans voted about the same.

How will farmers vote if and when a more definite program on marketing quotas for milk is put up to them? Nobody can tell for sure now. But when farm politicians pick up this issue, the Wisconsin Agriculturist will go to the country again and find out what farmers want.

A Wisconsin Agriculturist Poll --

Figure 10.2

Page Score

Men 80.2%

Women 42.0%

Poll Articles Rank High

This is the report of a *Wisconsin Agriculturist* Poll on a proposed change in dairy policy. The article was given a high score by men and a fair score by women. Both wanted to know what other farmers thought about production quotas.

	Men	Women
Read Most	59.9%	19.1%

The article appealed to men of all ages:

Read Most	21-34 years	35-49 years	50 up
	63.6%	54.5%	63.0%

Education seemed to make no difference in the response. Farmers who had quit school at eighth grade and those who had gone to high school and beyond scored about the same.

Wisconsin Agriculturist, April 5, 1958