

11.

Subjects That Appeal

WE HAVE NOTED that selecting subject matter is the major task of the editor. If the reader is excited about a subject, he'll endure bad writing, small type and un-attractive layout.

To discover the most attractive subject matter, the editor can pre-test themes, as suggested in Chapter 10.

He can also, within limits, rely on past experience with readership tests. It is always necessary to remember that a subject exciting in 1960 may not be exciting in 1961, and that a subject full of attraction in November may be old and dull the following April.

One of the most complete studies on subject matter was conducted by the Statistical Laboratory of Iowa State University in three editions of "InFARMatIon Please" (1947, 1951 and 1955). (1) In each of these surveys around 600 farmers and 600 farm women were used in a probability sample of Iowa farm operators and homemakers.

The study was designed to find out where farm people go to get information. It also showed the kind

of farming and homemaking information in which farm people were interested.

In the first study (1947) farm operators were given a card listing 11 subjects. Each was asked to "read off the five things for which you most often need and use information."

The subjects and the number of farm operators choosing each are shown in the summary below:

Subject	Farm operators choosing subject	
	No.	Per cent
Handling and feeding livestock . . .	387	69.48%
Market prospects a year or more in the future	334	59.96
Advice on present livestock and grain markets	303	54.40
Corn and other field crops	252	45.24
Care and use of farm machinery . . .	239	42.91
Contouring, terracing, drainage, etc. .	201	36.09
Repairing and constructing barns . .	176	31.60
Farm accident prevention	155	27.83
Keeping poultry	126	22.62
Corn loans and other federal farm programs	82	14.72

Field work was done in the fall of 1947. This was a year farm prices and income were good. Probably for that reason the interest in "corn loans and other federal farm programs" was low. The editor, thinking of the high interest in such programs in the 'thirties, was inclined to overestimate farm interest in the subjects in 1947.

Market outlook ranked high and resulted in some changes in copy and in editorial emphasis. Although *Wallaces Farmer* had always given special weight to

these subjects, it seemed possible that we should do even more in that field.

At the same time, farm women were asked similar questions:

	Farm homemakers choosing subject	
	No.	Per cent
Recipes and meal planning	370	69.42%
Canning and preserving food	361	67.73
Patterns, sewing and fashions	322	60.41
Home improvement	294	55.16
Keeping poultry	275	51.59
Health and medicine	247	46.34
Kitchen and home equipment	232	43.58
Gardening	225	42.21
Child care	172	32.27
Beauty care	52	9.76

There were few surprises here. It looked as if the usual concentration on food in *Wallaces Farmer* was justified. We did wonder why the low score on "beauty care." Did farm women think it unwomanly to admit an interest?

The next survey of this kind was in November, 1951. Had times changed? Did farmers and farm women have different interests?

Four choices were given to each farmer. Note the top four in the men's list:

	Farm operators choosing subject	
	No.	Per cent
Marked prospects in months ahead . .	316	53.5%
Fertilizers and rotations	312	52.8
Handling and feeding livestock . . .	286	48.4
Weed and insect control	258	43.7

Fertilizer was coming to the front. The chemical revolution in weed and pest control was on the way. Corn this time was down to 9th in a list of 12.

Women had changed less. The top four were the same. But "health and medicine" had come up a notch. A vote was not taken on "beauty care."

In November, 1955, another survey was made. The top subjects for men were as follows:

	Farm operators choosing subject	
	No.	Per cent
Market prospects in the months ahead .	360	54.9%
Current livestock and grain markets . .	296	45.1
Handling and feeding livestock	294	44.8
Price supports, farm legislation, social security, etc.	275	41.9

"Fertilizers and rotations" was in fifth place and "weed-insect pest control" in seventh. Observe the steady appeal of market information and the rise of "price supports, farm legislation, etc."

Farm income in 1955 in Iowa was still good, but it was starting down from the peak. Hogs in Iowa, in November, 1955, were down to \$11.60. This was quite a change from the May price of \$17.00 and the peak price in April 1954 of \$26.40.

Women's choices stayed about the same with one striking exception. "Health and medicine" came up to third place. There were 326 women, or 52.4 per cent of the total who selected this subject.

It looked as if *Wallaces Farmer* was justified in running more copy on price supports and more on health and medicine than in 1947 or 1951.

A readership survey supported this view. In October 1, 1955, the readership survey checked a page article

entitled "Ask \$17 Support for Hogs." The page as a whole pulled 87.5 per cent with men. The article had a 64.9 Read Most score for men. It also drew a fair number of women readers, 28.5 per cent Read Most. Women, on this and other occasions, indicated that they knew where the money for their new washer was coming from — or if it was not coming.

Readership scores in survey issues underline the same points. In *Wallaces Farmer* (February 4, 1961) a page of discussion of market trends and of management problems pulled 84.5 per cent of the men, with a Read Most of 66.5.

A three-column article on page 72, "Insurance for Hospital Bills" got Read Most scores of 28.5 per cent with men and 44.0 per cent with women. This article was outside the Home Department, aimed at women, but also drew some men.

The importance of timely news was shown in *Wallaces Farmer* (November 19, 1960) when a two-column Washington Letter, headed "What Will Farmers Get From Kennedy" pulled 64 per cent Read Most for men and 33 per cent for women. A post-election analysis of the farm vote in the same issue got 56 per cent Read Most for men and 39.5 for women. (Incidentally, this proves again that farm women do a lot of reading outside the Home Department.)

The same issue illustrates treatment of a subject of interest only to a minority. A two-column turkey article got a Read Most for men of 15.0 per cent and 14.5 for women. This was a deliberate play to a small group.

Another example of outlook copy registering high came in *Wisconsin Agriculturist* (April 15, 1961). The two-column department "What's Ahead" got a Read Most of 68.5 for men and 30.0 for women.

A page article appealing to smaller farmers, in the same issue, was, "He Farms 60 Acres." This had a page score for men of 72.5 and for women of 62.5, with a Read Most of 59 per cent and 43 per cent. This article was a mixture of farm management and human interest. Its main appeal probably was to farmers who were uncertain about the ability of a man farming 60 acres to make a living.

Another *Wisconsin Agriculturist* (April 2, 1960) shows the usual response by farm women to a food article. The page score was 92 per cent for women and Read Most 71 per cent. A few men, as usual, gave a quick glance at the illustration (pancakes) and went on hastily. We can get women to read men's articles but have a hard time getting men to read women's articles. The exception is when the Home Department lead deals with family problems and is illustrated by photographs in which men appear.

Dairymen are a minority in Iowa, just as hog farmers are a minority in Wisconsin. So when *Wallaces Farmer* (January 16, 1960) devotes a page to dairy farming, a high score is not expected. In this case the market was further narrowed by the title, "Stanchions and Pipeline Milking" which didn't apply to all dairymen. But the page score still was 43.5 per cent for men and 34.5 for women. Read Most was 22.5 for men and 14 for women.

Outlook copy scored high on both papers. An example is "What's Ahead" in *Wallaces Farmer* (January 16, 1960) where the two-column department pulled 76 per cent of the men and earned a Read Most of 66 per cent. Some women, 28 per cent, were also interested.

Figure 11.1

Page Score
Men 87.5%
Women 47.5%



When Hog Prices Hurt

A timely subject will bring the readers in. In 1955, there was a sharp drop in hog prices. The *Wallaces Farmer* Poll asked farmers about federal action on hog supports.

The resulting article was read by both men and women:

Read Most

Men 64.9%

Women 28.5

The top pictures scored 78.6 per cent with men and 42 per cent with women. The bottom picture scored 54.8 with men and 26.5 with women.

Wallaces Farmer, October 1, 1955

Figure 11.2

LIGHT UP THE LIVING ROOM!



How many portable lamps do you have in your living room? A general rule says that there should be a table, floor, put-down, or wall-mounted lamp for each grouping of furniture. These lamps need not be used at the time.

THE THIRD, nervous feeling you have at night may not be due to hard work, Junior's tantrums, or trying to keep up with a time schedule.

It can be caused by lying and working with insufficient light in your home.

It is a paradox that in an era when practically every house has electricity, many either do not have enough light or have it in the wrong places.

This lack of light is particularly noticeable during the winter months when the short days require longer lighting hours. Winter is the time when people do more visiting indoors. It is also the season when both family and guests wear the dark clothing that absorbs light like a sponge does water.

Have you ever noticed that the living room seems to have plenty of light when you or your family are alone? But let several friends drop in all wearing dark clothing and almost immediately the room seems too dark for comfort?

It takes merely just to see how little power of what we know and feel comes from our eyes. Yet most of us squander energy because of poor lighting. The sad part is that we often don't know it.

Take the living room, for instance. If you have an older house the chances are that you have overhead lights. This is fine for there is no better way to flood a room with light than from overhead fixtures. But some overhead fixtures seem more satisfactory than others. How do you select them?

It's confusing to most of us to go into a store and pick out the light fixtures that will look attractive and still give out enough light. You know, of course, that you want the light well-diffused to avoid glare, but how many lights should there be in a room and what size?

"There is a rule of the thumb," says Norma Shank, home management specialist, Iowa State University. "A light fixture should be as many inches in diameter as there are feet in the diameter of the room."

But in case of a large room where the diagonal might equal 30 feet—diameter of inches—you would know immediately that an 8 1/2" fixture would be impractical and even unsightly. In that case there should be two fixtures, one at either end of the room.

The trend today in lighting fixtures is toward those that have single lens and that provide effective shielding of the lamp bulbs. They should not only be efficient in lighting, but attractive to the eye.



Well-lighted entrance on the Lee Hanes house, Franklin County, Iowa, has a gable light on front and bank entrance, plus fixtures over the doors.



Page Score

Men 20.5%

Women 77.0%

Better Light in the Home

Food copy always scores high with women, but so do articles built around home improvement. Here is an article about lighting the farm home. Women responded well; a number of men also read it.

Read Most score for women was 60.5 per cent. Also important was the fact that women of different ages responded about the same way.

	Women 21-34 years	35-49 years	50 years up
Read Most . . .	50.0%	48.6%	52.8%

Women who had gone to school for eight years or less scored as high as women who had gone to high school or beyond.

Wallaces Farmer, February 4, 1961

What does our experience with subject matter add up to?

1. Hit hard on the major interests of your audience. This means hogs and corn in Iowa and dairy cattle in Wisconsin. But try for new material and new angles. A dairyman doesn't want to read about cows every issue unless the material is timely, fresh and loaded with human interest.
2. Keep checking on the interests of readers. You know that when hog prices drop sharply, interest in hog outlook and hog supports will pick up. But other angles are harder to figure out. Why, for instance, did women's interest in "health and medicine" pick up? For information on some points, you have to dig, use opinion polls and pre-tests of subject matter.
3. Don't forget minorities. In a hog state, you can't give as much space to sheep as to hogs, but sheep still are entitled to some attention.
4. Farm people are human. Articles on family problems score well. And even a dirt copy article gains when the problems are stated in terms of Henry Brown of Black Hawk County and Jim Jones of Keokuk County.