

14.

What Kind of Editor?

ANY DISCUSSION OF READERSHIP tests should close by repeating the usual warning. A readership test measures the past. An editor may in June of 1963 get out exactly the kind of publication that scored high in 1962. But 1963 is not 1962. There will be resemblances, but there will also be differences. How do you figure these out?

Before trying to answer this question, let us look for a moment at what I have called the "Joe Ratner Formula." Ratner was a talented editor who worked with *Better Homes and Gardens* and later with an advertising agency. He believed in research. He used it. But he also could laugh about its limitations.

"This is the way it works," Joe said. "You believe in readership research. So you check on the last issue. Food copy ranked high. OK, you throw out everything but food copy. Now in the next issue, you find that pie recipes outscore everything else. So you fill the next issue with pie recipes. But your readership survey shows that apple pie recipes score higher than others. The result is that the next issue, the climax of readership testing, includes nothing but apple pie recipes."

This is ridiculous, but true. Every readership expert should repeat it to himself regularly.

What you need, of course, is balance in the issue. In a farm publication in Iowa, we are sure that corn and hog copy will score high. But that doesn't mean everybody wants to read only about corn and hogs. Minor interests play a part. So does variety.

But the major problem is still: What kind of new copy will attract your readers?

The pre-test of subject matter, already described in Chapter 10, is one way of estimating short-run changes. If the editor is bright enough, he can set up a number of possible subjects and have these checked by the reader.

But how does he know which subjects to ask about? Surveys on opinion and readership can give him some clues, but only clues. He needs to generate some ideas himself.

He can borrow ideas from other magazines. This is often a risky business since editors sometimes run together like sheep in what may be the wrong direction. The pre-test may help to show an editor that he is running the wrong way. This has value, even though it is negative value.

The editor can read widely, talk to people with different views, visit farmers and then think, "What can we say next issue that will do this fellow and his wife any good?" And he can use the pre-test to check his hunches.

So far we have been looking ahead in 1962 to what will be timely and useful in 1963. Now we come to a much harder task. How do we, in 1962, manage to look

ahead to what will be timely and useful in 1965 or 1970?

My best example concerns Henry A. Wallace and his articles on hybrid corn. He began to write about hybrid corn in 1918. We had no readership tests then. If we had, my guess is that the score would have been low. Yet Wallace kept on writing on this subject which gradually became important. By 1934, when hybrid corn was first used, farmers knew much more about it and were quicker to use the new strains than if Wallace had waited 10 years to begin discussing the subject.

You can make the same point about economic issues. I'll use Wallace again as an example since he is the editor about whom I know the most. In 1922 he began to hammer on the need to adjust production to market demand. This program did not result in actual legislation until 1933.

Does it pay an editor, or his publication, to be five or ten years ahead of his times? Franklin D. Roosevelt, an expert in political affairs, used to say that a political leader should be a year or two ahead of the public, but no more.

An editor perhaps should follow the same rule. Yet I think there is an argument for letting readers know what is in the air, and what is likely to happen some years in the future. For this kind of copy, an audience will grow.

How can farm publications get the kind of editorial talent that can look ahead? If they get this kind of talent, can it be turned into circulation and into advertising lineage?

There are some doubts on this second point. I knew

one man active in the business end of a farm publication who said flatly that the job of the editor is to fill in the white spaces left in the dummy after the ads are placed. He insisted that he saw no relation between editorial copy and circulation or between editorial copy and advertising appeal. (Perhaps he did see this relationship, but felt it better business to ignore it while arguing over editorial salaries.)

Circulation is not solely a matter of editorial appeal. It depends, to a great extent, on the skill and persistence of the circulation department. Editorial appeal does make renewals come easier. A paper that isn't read with interest cannot be boomed by even the most skillful circulation campaign.

Advertising readership, of course, is dependent on the ability of the editor to get readers to go through the issue and give an advertiser a chance. I can recall one "expert" who insisted that he wanted an ad placed opposite a dull article, so that the article wouldn't distract attention from his ad.

One constant question is: Are we getting out a paper for the readers or for the advertisers and the advertising agencies. Very often a layout that appeals to an agency falls flat when exposed to readers. And editors may be led into editorial blind corners by an agency's art director who has never checked his layouts against farm readership.

Finding first class editors is a problem and holding them is more difficult than it used to be. Editors are often persuaded into going with ad agencies, public relations firms, house organs and the like. This has been a good break for the journalists. They can bargain for

pay and fringe benefits. But this situation has often lost farm papers the kind of editorial talent they can hardly afford to lose.

Pay in money isn't the only temptation. An editor is paid by prestige, by the feeling of power and by the satisfaction in making policy and influencing readers. Men — and women — who don't get this kind of pay are apt to move.

There are different kinds of editors, of course. One is the amiable kind, who knows everybody, whose editorials irritate no one, and who has the skill to introduce new ideas into the reader's head without the irritations that usually accompany that process.

Then there is the editor who fills up space, who goes through the motions and whose paper reads like everybody else's.

The most useful editor may, according to my biased view, be the one who is able to look a few years ahead and to get his readers ready to accept the future or perhaps to modify it. He needs to know more than agriculture. He should know how United States agriculture fits into the affairs of the nation and of the world.

Here are two quotations that seem to me to indicate the kind of thinking that farm paper editors — and all editors — ought to be doing.

Lawrence E. Hinkle, Jr. said after describing the authoritarian way of life,

The point might well be made that the conflict between this way of ordering a human society and its opposite — the open system of thought, based upon observation, constantly tested against reality, allowing for great uncertainty, accepting a variety of points of view, not pretending to know the ultimate right or good and always keeping open the possibility that any judgment is incorrect — may be the basic conflict of our time. (1)

I think a farm paper editor ought to be on the side of the "open system of thought." He should be thinking also about Kenneth E. Boulding's "traps for the future." Boulding of University of Michigan said,

The three traps are war, population and exhaustion. A nuclear war if it did not put an end to man, might easily remove from him any chance of perpetual affluence. Unlimited growth of population could do the same thing more slowly but just as effectively. The ghost of Malthus has been laid many times, but it won't lie down.

If science and technology give us death control, it must also give us birth control. We must eventually have a stable population and if we are all going to live to be 70, the birth and death rate cannot be more than about 14 per thousand. This means an average of a little over two children per family and no nonsense.

The third trap might be our inability to develop a non-exhaustive high-level technology. Our existing technology is essentially suicidal so far as it is based upon geological capital which we are rapidly squandering. We cannot build permanent affluence on fossil fuels, not even uranium, and still less upon deposits of ores.

Permanent affluence must depend upon fusion as a source of energy, either in the sun or here on earth and it must depend upon the use of this energy to concentrate the diffuse elements of the sea and the atmosphere. Fortunately this high-level technology seems almost in sight. It is perfectly possible, however, that either nuclear or population explosions might prevent us from ever attaining it. (2)

I do not suggest that every editor should agree with Boulding's statement of the problems or of their treatment. I do suggest that these are the kinds of subjects on which a good editor should spend some time and thought.

It is not enough to know that 9-point type on an 11-point slug will get more readers than 9-point solid or

that a picture six inches square will get more attention than a picture three inches square.

These — and their cousins and their brothers in research — are tools to be used by an editor who has something to report that may be useful to his readers, his nation and folks in other lands. While he must write with today in mind, it is hoped that he can also keep in mind the needs of 1970 and even the needs of the year 2000.

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