

idea corner

Your Newspaper Column

"Most press releases are pretty boring!" That's what one of my colleagues said during public affairs training in the U.S. Navy. Unfortunately, many people agree with this conclusion. That's too bad, because the newspaper can be an extremely powerful tool for educating the public.

And for Extension workers in these times of tight budgets, perhaps more relevant is that words published there are free. They don't cost nearly as much as those typed, printed, and mailed from your office. The circulation is much wider as well, so your words touch infinitely more potential contacts—giving you far more exposure than other programs.

We all know the Extension Service deals in information. It's good information, too, and doesn't have to be dull. There's a school of thought that entertainment must somehow be separated from education. I know of no irrefutable evidence stating educational materials can't be presented in an entertaining way. In fact, I'd wager that if they're not, most of the audience is already lost. Just take a look at the success of "Sesame Street," for example, to see the wisdom in this approach—many adults watch that program, as well as the children it's designed for.

Give some thought then to jazzing up your press releases. Use personal

pronouns and contractions to simulate actual dialogue. One of the best ways to do this is to develop a column. A few well-placed words on a regular basis can net huge dividends in education. You can do many things with a column impossible to achieve with conventional press releases:

1. Develop a personal touch by establishing a dialogue with your readership.
2. Develop a regular readership, not feasible with on-the-spot releases occurring only occasionally.
3. Ask for and receive feedback from both editors and the readership—to spot successes and weaknesses.
4. Increase your effectiveness—the concrete results Extension administrators always ask for.

Is your interest piqued? Then I'd suggest a trial run before you go ahead with the idea. In my case, I wrote up some sample columns, developed a logo and format, and sent these off, with a form letter, soliciting comments from editors across the state.

I considered positive feedback essential to commit myself to my proposed weekly column. The column was sent only to weekly papers at the advice of the Extension news editor so it wouldn't compete by being printed in the big dailies as well.

I also decided that follow-up was essential—actually seeing the words published. If I find my column isn't being used, then I'll change its format or stop writing one. So far though it's being published, and I've received good comments from both editors and clientele on its effectiveness.

Writing a newspaper column isn't for everyone, but for those with the interest, it can be a major cornerstone in some Extension programs. Realize, however, it'll be extremely difficult at times to come up with periodic words when you must. If you're dedicated to it, however, and sincere, enthusiastic, and entertaining, the column has a good chance of being widely read. And if it relieves the reader's boredom, think what it might do for the writer!

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