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Evaluation of an Electronic Horse Owner Newsletter

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Abstract: The University Minnesota developed an electronic equine newsletter. An on-line survey was developed to determine the effectiveness and impacts of the newsletter. A majority of respondents stated that the newsletter improved their ability to make informed decisions, resulted in changes in management of horse health and nutrition, and led to improvements in communication with veterinarians. According to survey results, the newsletter had impact, resulted in positive behavior change in subscribers, and can be used to improve future educational programs. The authors believe this is the first survey investigating a content-based newsletter for a livestock audience.

Introduction

Newsletters have been used as a standard method of information dissemination for decades. Recently, there has been a trend toward electronic delivery of newsletters. More recently, authors of electronic newsletters have begun evaluating them on educational components and outcomes (Brotherson, & Bouwhuis, 2007; Coffin, 2007; Futris, Blair, & Tsai, 2005; Garton, Hicks, Leatherman, Miltenberger, Mulkeen, Nelson-Mitchell, & Winland, 2003; Zimmer, Shriner, & Scheer, 2006). Although some of the findings of these evaluations can be useful in developing electronic newsletters, these findings are limited to the areas of family and youth development, with the exception of Coffin (2007), who evaluated a gardening newsletter. There has been little to no evaluation of the benefits of electronic newsletters within the area of agriculture and specifically livestock. In April of 2008, the University of Minnesota Horse Team conducted a thorough evaluation of its widely disseminated electronic newsletter.

In 2004, the University of Minnesota conducted a statewide survey of 1,000 Minnesota horse owners to characterize their preferences for equine education (Martinson, Hathaway, Wilson, Gilkerson, Peterson, & DeVecchio, 2006). The survey indicated a strong interest in horse owner education. In response to indications that horse owners desired brief, electronic information, the University of Minnesota developed a monthly, electronic newsletter in April of 2005. The objectives of the newsletter were to provide brief, timely, research-based articles that increased adult, recreational horse owner's knowledge and improved the quality of care for horses and their habitat.

The newsletter is a collaborative, peer-reviewed effort of the University of Minnesota Horse Team, representing members from Extension, Animal Science, Agronomy, Veterinarian Medicine, and guest authors from private industry. The first newsletter was sent via e-mail to approximately 400 horse owners. E-mail addresses for the first newsletter were collected from equine breed organizations, and county, 4-H, and Extension lists. Currently, there are over 2,000 subscribers to the newsletter, with most individuals subscribing at various horse owner educational programs and via the University of Minnesota equine Web site <<http://www.extension.mn.edu/horse>>.

The newsletter is free, two-pages long and electronically distributed via a listserv on the first working day of each month. Sections of the newsletter include Upcoming Events, Ask the Expert, Research Update, and two to three content articles each month. Current and past archived issues can be viewed on the horse team Web site. As the popularity of the newsletter grew, so did interest in the effectiveness of the newsletter. The objective of the newsletter evaluation was to determine the effectiveness, readability, usefulness, and impact of the newsletter, as well as to determine the demographics of subscribers.

Methodology

A survey was designed to capture respondent perceptions on eight general dimensions of the newsletter:

1. Layout, length, and article size
2. Content readability and usability
3. Subscriber interaction with the newsletter
4. Effect on subscriber decision-making
5. Overall satisfaction and usefulness
6. Topical interest and desired information dissemination methods
7. Dollar value
8. Subscriber demographics.

An open invitation for respondents to add comments was also included. The survey questions were developed and reviewed by the University of Minnesota Horse Team.

Since the newsletter was distributed through a listserv, an online survey <<http://www.surveymonkey.com>> was used to collect subscriber responses. Everyone who received the newsletter via the listserv (2,012 email addresses) received an email invitation and link to complete the survey. As a reminder, one prompt with a link to the survey was emailed to the listserv after 2 weeks. The survey was open for 23 days, with 488 people completing the survey, yielding a response rate of 24%. Data are reported as valid percents and excludes non-responders.

Respondent Demographics

Survey respondents were mostly:

- Located in Minnesota (83%)
- Women (86%)
- Between the ages of 30 and 60 (83%)
- Recreational horse owners (89%)
- Owners of one to four horses (73 %)
- Keeping their horse(s) on their own property (76%)
- Owners of horse(s) for 11 or more years (59%).

Respondents indicated they vary widely in the types of activities in which they participate, with the exception of trail riding (81%). The next most common activities were:

- Western pleasure (33%)
- English pleasure (22%)
- Games (22 %)
- Dressage (21%).

These findings reinforced the 2006 survey data that described the Minnesota horse owning population as having an average age of 44 years old, owning horses for 10 or more years, keeping horses on their own

property, and mostly participating in trail riding (Martinson, Hathaway, Wilson, Gilkerson, Peterson, & DeIVecchio, 2006).

Respondents learned about the newsletter from a variety of sources, including the horse team Web site (43%), Extension programs and workshops (32%), friends (12%), and referrals from Extension employees (10%).

Newsletter Readability and Use

The newsletter design and readability was assessed, with most respondents reporting they were satisfied with related aspects. The newsletter content was perceived as readable (88%), and its distribution frequency (82%) and amount of space between articles (95%) were perceived as appropriate. However, there was less agreement about other aspects of the newsletter. Thirty-six percent of respondents indicated they wanted the newsletter to be longer than two pages, and nearly the same percentage (38%) wanted more articles. Furthermore, 28% indicated they would like more pictures.

Respondent newsletter reading behavior was assessed, indicating that most participants read the entire newsletter each month (77%) and occasionally or frequently referred back to the newsletter (82%). Most respondents also refer other people to specific articles in the newsletter (80%), with 58% indicating they forward the entire newsletter to individuals or groups who are not on the listserv, which accounts for an additional 678 groups or individuals.

The monetary value of the newsletter was assessed, with nearly half of the respondents (45%) indicating they would pay \$6.00 to \$24.00 for a yearly subscription (12 issues). However, 18% indicated they were not willing to pay for the newsletter.

Usefulness, Impacts, and Positive Behavior Changes

Survey respondents reported that information provided by the newsletter was somewhat useful (46%) or very useful (52%) and that the newsletter somewhat improved (67%) or greatly improved (30%) their ability to make informed decisions. Fifty-six percent of respondents indicated that the newsletter provided them with specific information that was extremely useful, and 77% stated they were satisfied or very satisfied with the newsletter.

The usefulness of the newsletter sections varied. The content articles were generally useful, followed by Ask the Expert and Research Update sections (Table 1).

Table 1.
Usefulness of Different Sections of an Equine Newsletter (n = 425)

	Not Useful	Sometimes Useful	Often Useful	Very Often Useful	Rating Average*
	<i>%</i>				
Content Articles					
Horse Health	0	9	40	51	3.4

Nutrition	0	18	41	41	3.2
Forage	3	22	37	38	3.1
Management	1	21	49	29	3.0
Ask the Expert	1	19	48	32	3.1
Research Updates	1	26	43	30	3.0
Upcoming Events	7	41	36	16	2.6
*Not Useful (1); Sometimes Useful (2); Often Useful (3); Very Often Useful (4)					

The degree to which the newsletter resulted in changes in behavior of its readers was also assessed. A majority of subscribers reported some changes in how they manage their horse's health, pasture, and plan for emergencies and how they feed their horse(s) (Table 2). Managing flies and pests, barn management, and various communications with equine professionals resulted in fewer behavior changes. These topics, however, received less exposure in past newsletters.

Table 2.

Rate of Behavior Change Among Subscribers to an Electronic Equine Newsletter (n = 416)

	No Changes	Some Changes	Many Changes	Rating Average*
	%			
Manage my horse(s) health	21	74	5	1.8
Manage my pasture(s)	33	52	15	1.8
Plan for emergencies	33	56	11	1.8
Feed my horse(s)	33	61	6	1.7
Manage flies and pests	48	45	7	1.6
Communicate with my veterinarian	44	47	9	1.6
Manage my barn	49	47	4	1.5
Communicate with my hay provider	63	34	3	1.4
Communicate with my feed provider	67	29	4	1.4
*No Changes (1); Some Changes (2); Many Changes (3)				

Topics of Interest and Preferred Program Delivery Methods

Identifying topics that horse owners want to learn about can be challenging. Selecting topics that horse owners are not interested in can result in poorly read newsletters or poorly attended programs. Ranked from a list of 27 topics, the top 10 topics subscribers were most interested in included horse health, behavior, hoof care, nutrition, lameness, colic, elderly care, poisonous plants, research updates, and vaccinations (Table 3). Topics identified as "interesting" by subscribers will be given priority in future newsletters, factsheets, and presentations at Extension programs. The ranking of topics may also be useful in developing content by equine Extension programs in other states.

Table 3.
Topics of Interest to Subscribers of an Electronic Equine Newsletter (n = 426)

	Not Interested	Somewhat Interested	Interested	Very Interested	Rating Average*
	<i>%</i>				
Horse Health	1	10	41	48	3.4
Equine Behavior	3	10	40	47	3.3
Hoof Care	2	14	43	41	3.2
Horse Nutrition	2	13	43	42	3.2
Lameness	1	18	43	38	3.2
Colic	2	16	47	35	3.1
Elderly Horse Care	3	17	44	36	3.1
Poisonous Plants	5	21	36	38	3.1
Research Updates	3	21	42	34	3.1
Vaccinations	3	17	42	38	3.1
Equine Dentistry	3	22	46	29	3.0
Hay	3	23	43	31	3.0
Minerals and Vitamins	4	19	46	31	3.0
Fly and Pest Control	4	26	44	26	2.9
Grazing Habits	6	26	41	27	2.9
	7	26	40	27	2.9

Liabilities for Horse Owners					
Pasture Management	8	25	37	30	2.9
Supplements	7	22	42	29	2.9
Weed Control	8	23	39	30	2.9
When to Call a Vet	7	24	41	28	2.9
Environmental Impacts of Horses	8	28	39	25	2.8
Basic Care	9	31	44	16	2.7
Manure Management	13	30	34	23	2.7
Rehabilitation Therapies	8	37	34	21	2.7
Fencing	12	35	34	19	2.6
Horse Facility Design	17	32	26	25	2.6
Breeding and Foaling	42	25	20	13	2.0
*Not Interested (1); Somewhat Interested (2); Interested (3); Very Interested (4)					

Once preferred topics have been identified, the next challenge is usually determining how the audience would like to receive the information. Delivering a program in the audience's preferred method is essential. However, considerations must also be made to balance faculty, time, and monetary resources. Subscribers indicated they preferred hands-on workshops, Web site information, live seminars, on-line courses, printed factsheets, and educational CDs (Figure 4). News releases, podcasts, and radio programs were not as preferred. Future delivery methods will focus on face-to-face workshops and on-line information and seminars. The preference of educational mediums may also be useful in program delivery for equine Extension programs in other states.

Table 4.

Preferred Program Delivery Methods of Subscribers to an Electronic Equine Newsletter (n = 419)

Educational Medium	Response Percent*
Hands-on Workshops	64
Web site Information	59

Live Seminars	57
Online Courses	48
Printed Factsheets	36
Educational CDs	31
News Releases	14
Podcasts	10
Radio Programs	4
*Respondents could select up to three options	

Topical Interest Differences Between Groups of Horse Owners

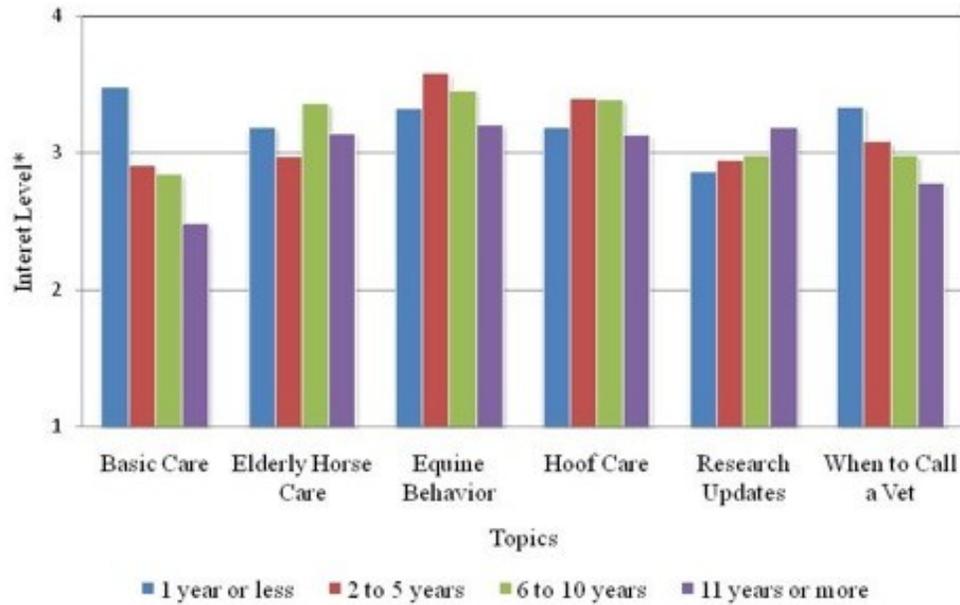
Horse team members and stakeholders wanted to determine which topics were of interest to various groups of horse owners. Offering topics that appeal to a broad range of horse owners should increase interest and the outcomes of horse Extension products and programs. Surveys responses for the question "how interested are you in the following topics for future articles" (Table 3) were analyzed for significant difference among three distinct groups of horse owners on where horses are kept, length of ownership, and number of horses owned.

There was a significant difference ($p = 0.005$) in the level of interest regarding weed control and pasture management between people who board their horses and those who keep horses on their own property. People who keep horse(s) on their own property are more interested in weed control (3.03 vs. 2.63 for owners who board) and pasture management (3.05 vs. 2.59) than equine owners who board their horses. All other listed topics (Table 3) were of equal interest to the various groups of horse owners.

Figure 1 shows topics that were significantly different ($p = 0.005$) in interest for horse owners who have owned horses for different lengths of time. Horse owners who have owned horses for a shorter length of time (1 year or less or 2-to-5 years) are less interested in research updates and more interested in basic care and when to call a vet compared to more veteran horse owners (6-to-10 years and 11 or more years). Equine behavior and hoof care were of more interest to horse owners of 2-to-5 and 6-to-10 years. Respondents who owned horses for 6-to-10 years were also more interested in elderly horse care than their counterparts. Other listed topics (Table 3) were not significantly different among various groups of equine owners based on their length of horse ownership.

Figure 1.

Differences in Topical Interest Between People Who Have Owned Horses For Different Lengths of Time

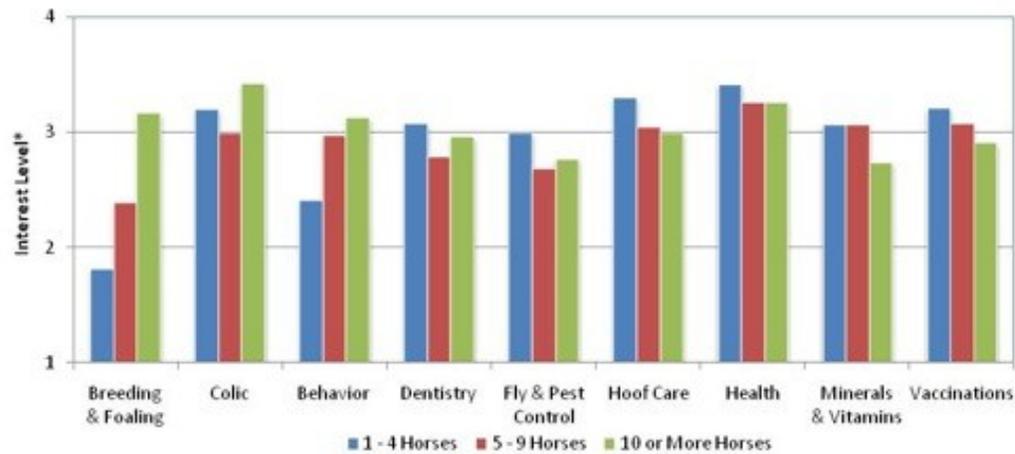


*Not Interested (1); Somewhat Interested (2); Interested (3); Very Interested (4)

Figure 2 shows topics that were significantly different ($p = 0.005$) in interest for individuals who own different numbers of horses. With the exception of breeding and foaling, colic, and equine behavior, horse owners with one-to-four horses were interested in more topics than owners who owned five or more horses. Owners with more horses (10 or more), were more interested in breeding and foaling, colic, and equine behavior than owners with fewer horses.

The topics of basic care and when to call a vet also had significant differences ($p = .005$) among the groups (data not shown). Although these topics were of lesser interest among all groups, horse owners with one-to-four horses showed the most interest in these topics. Other listed topics (Table 3) were not significantly different based on the number of horses owned.

Figure 2.
Differences in Topical Interest Between People Who Own Different Numbers of Horses



*Not Interested (1); Somewhat Interested (2); Interested (3); Very Interested (4)

Conclusions

The survey evaluation data will be used to improve future newsletters and equine Extension programs in Minnesota. Photographs, when appropriate, will be incorporated into future newsletters. The newsletter will remain two pages in length and available at no charge. Future newsletter content will continue to focus on horse health, nutrition, and forage utilization, while the number of articles on behavior, hoof care, lameness, and colic will be increased. Topics will be strategically chosen and combined to maximize interest among the diverse groups of subscribers. Future delivery methods for equine Extension programs will focus on face-to-face workshops and on-line information and seminars. The methods and results of this survey may also be extrapolated and used by equine Extension programs in other states, as well as in the equine industry.

As far as the researcher(s) know, this is the first survey analyzing the outcomes of an electronic newsletter written for a livestock audience, specifically horse owners. The survey determined subscriber demographics, topical interests, and differences between groups of horse owners. The survey also determined that the newsletter improved the subscribers' ability to make informed decisions, resulted in management changes in horse health and nutrition, led to improvements in communication with veterinarians, and resulted in positive behavior changes. Finally, the survey determined that an electronic newsletter can be effective and result in significant outcomes and positive behavior changes.

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