

Promoting Nutrition and Wellness Statewide Through an Electronic Newsletter

Abstract

The *Words on Wellness (WOW)* newsletter was designed as an electronic newsletter intended to provide research-based nutrition and wellness information to Iowans. An evaluation was conducted to assess to what extent the newsletter is being used by its readership and whether readers are making lifestyle changes as a result. Those who completed the online survey ($n = 154$) report making lifestyle changes and finding the information to be current, understandable, and relevant to their lives. These results indicate that the use of indirect nutrition and wellness educational materials (i.e., a newsletter) is effective in promoting research-based information that results in self-reported behavior change.

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Introduction

Distributing newsletters is a commonly used indirect education method for providing Extension clientele with current and research-based information. Indirect education methods are becoming more common in Extension due to limited resources and improved technology (Erickson & Hansen, 2012; Francis, Martin, & Taylor, 2011; Henneman & Franzen-Castle, 2014). Newsletters, particularly electronic newsletters, are cost-effective and nontechnical educational tools that allow Extension educators to be "reactive, efficient, and timely in meeting clientele needs" (Erickson & Hansen, 2012, "Introduction," para. 1).

Iowa State University (ISU) Human Sciences Extension and Outreach Nutrition and Wellness transitioned from distributing county- and region-based nutrition newsletters to distributing a single nutrition newsletter, *Words on Wellness (WOW)*, statewide.

The development of a single nutrition newsletter for statewide distribution offers the advantages of consistency, efficiency, and accuracy:

- **Consistency.** The newsletter is designed by a graphic designer to ensure consistent branding, and it allows for the distribution of a uniform message statewide.
- **Efficiency.** Each specialist is responsible for writing only one newsletter annually versus a monthly newsletter.
- **Accuracy.** Use of a single newsletter provides a platform for quality control, as editions of the newsletter are reviewed for content by a team of state and regional nutrition and wellness specialists.

Description of the WOW Newsletter

The 2-page color WOW newsletter (Figure 1) is made available to all county Extension offices digitally and is comprised of four main sections (Table 1).

Figure 1.
WOW Newsletter



Table 1.
WOW Newsletter Sections

Newsletter section	Description
Nutrition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Main focus • Appears on front page • Addresses current nutrition topics (e.g., safety of genetically modified organisms, or GMOs; fad diets; current food packaging changes)

Recipe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears on front page • Coordinates with nutrition topic as applicable • Must meet ISU Extension and Outreach criteria for a healthful recipe (e.g., low in fat, sugar, sodium)
Food Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears on back page • Addresses current food safety topics (e.g., current food safety outbreaks, general food safety topics, seasonal topics)
Physical Activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears on back page • Addresses benefits of regular physical activity; promotes a variety of activities to try; links to local Iowa-based resources, as applicable
Blank editable space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appears on back page • Allows specialists to list upcoming nutrition and wellness programming opportunities for their clientele

The *WOW* newsletter is distributed via download from county Extension websites. Printed newsletters are distributed to local grocery stores and delivered to homes via home health care and are available at Extension events and in Extension offices. Additionally, in some counties, *WOW* newsletter articles are reprinted in local newspapers.

Methods

A statewide evaluation of the *WOW* newsletter was conducted. *WOW* readers were invited to complete an online survey intended to assess to what extent the *WOW* newsletter is used and whether the information provided is applied by readers. An announcement with the direct link to the survey was included with three editions of *WOW* as well as in an email to *WOW* readers on an electronic mailing list; 154 readers responded.

Findings

Survey respondents were primarily college-educated, White females, aged 45 to 64 years, who were employed in health services and had received the *WOW* newsletter for a period of 2 years or less (Table 2).

Table 2.
Survey Respondent Demographics

Characteristic	Number	%
Gendera		
Male	7	6.8
Female	96	93.2
Ageb		
18–24	2	2
25–34	15	15
35–44	12	12
45–54	25	25
55–64	34	33
65+	14	14
Ethnicityc		
White	97	97
Non-White	3	3
Educationc		
High school or GED	8	8
Some college	13	13
Associate's/technical degree	23	23
Bachelor's degree or higher	56	56
Self-reported occupation aread		
Health	18	19
Education	16	16.8
Administrative assistant	14	14.7
Retired or homemaker	15	15.8
Childcare provider	10	10.5
Other	22	23.2
Duration of <i>WOW</i> newsletter subscriptione		

< 1 year	30	23
1 to 2 years	58	45
3 to 4 years	16	12
5+ years	10	8
Don't know	16	12
a103 respondents. b102 respondents. c100 respondents. d95 respondents. e130 respondents.		

The content and design of the *WOW* newsletter were viewed positively by respondents. Most respondents (98%, 104 out of 106 respondents) were somewhat to very interested in the nutrition information and healthful recipes. Also, respondents found the newsletter to be visually appealing (Table 3).

Table 3.

Visual Appeal of *WOW* Newsletter

Visual appeal rating	Number	%
Color		
"Not appealing" to "somewhat appealing"	9	97
"Appealing" to "very appealing"	8	92
Font size		
"Not appealing" to "somewhat appealing"	11	95
"Appealing" to "very appealing"	10	90
Page layout		
"Not appealing" to "somewhat appealing"	11	10
"Appealing" to "very appealing"	95	90
Graphics		
"Not appealing" to "somewhat appealing"	11	10

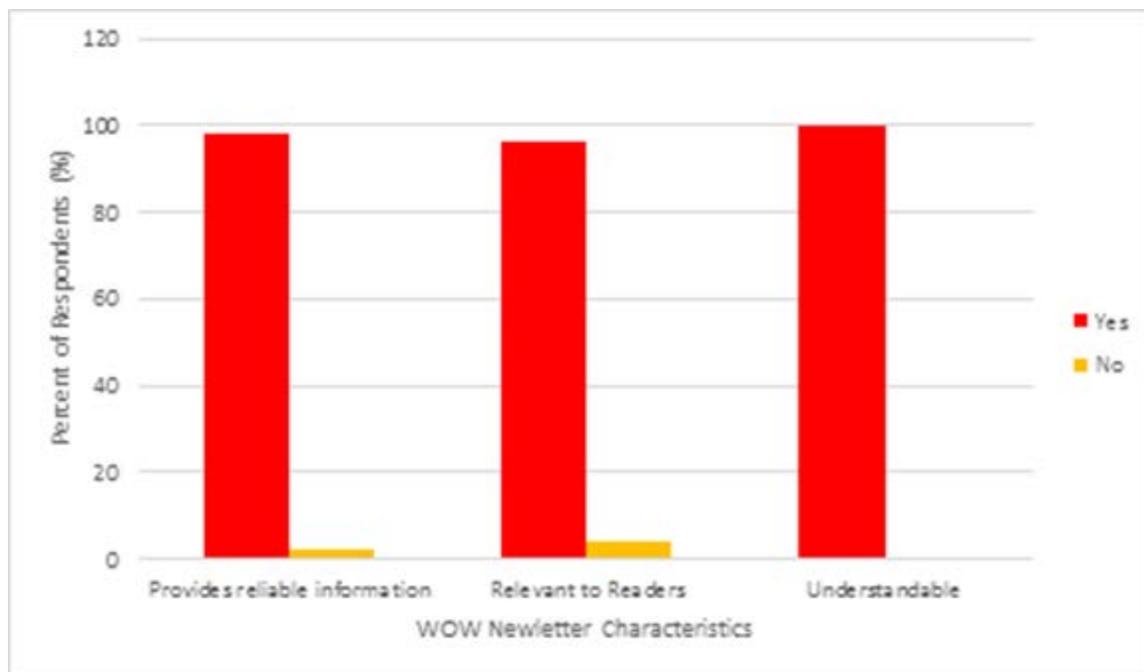
appealing"		
"Appealing" to "very appealing"	95	90
aPercentages based on a total of 106 respondents.		

Respondents also viewed the *WOW* newsletter as "easy to understand" (100%, 127 out of 127 respondents) and relevant to their needs (96%, 122 out of 127 respondents) (Figure 2). Some reported thinking that the newsletter is "nicely done," "quick to read," "useful," and "handy."

Nearly all respondents (98%, 121 out of 124 respondents) believed that the newsletter provides reliable, research-based information (Figure 2). One stated, "I enjoy reading the newsletter; it covers topics I am not familiar with and provides a quick yet enjoyable read."

Figure 2.

Acceptability of *WOW* Newsletter Characteristics



Additionally, most respondents (83%, 103 out of 124 respondents) reported applying the *WOW* newsletter content to their daily lives. Most of the self-reported lifestyle practices included trying recipes, following nutrition recommendations, and using the information from the newsletter to educate others. Respondents made the following statements related to these practices:

- "[I have] tried some of the recipes and have tried to follow some dietary recommendations."
- "[I am] trying to apply [the information in the newsletter to] improve my and my family's nutritional habits."

"[I am] sharing [the information in the newsletter] with others for health initiatives and menus for quick and simple meal time."

Respondents also were asked to indicate topics of interest to help guide future newsletter articles (Table 4); most requested current information about health and wellness.

Table 4.
Requested Future *WOW* Topics

Newsletter section(s)	Topics
Nutrition, Recipe	Fad diets and current issues General nutrition and nutritional content Special diets and diet modifications Recipes and snacks
Food Safety	General/current issues Canning/food preservation Seasonal safety Time/temperature, food handling
Physical Activity	Activity by age group Older adults and/or limited mobility Low impact, office and home exercise Easy and fast exercise

Summary

These results indicate that the *WOW* newsletter is well-received and is meeting clients' expectations. Respondents appreciate the layout, design, color, and content. Additionally, the *WOW* content is understandable and is being used to help respondents make lifestyle changes.

For the *WOW* newsletter to remain relevant to readers, its articles will need to continue to address current nutrition, food safety, and physical activity issues that appear in the popular press. The unique aspect that the *WOW* newsletter will offer is the research-based approach to these issues. Since the majority of respondents were females aged 45 years and older, future *WOW* topics will target the issues relevant to this demographic group.

Acknowledgments

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