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Plain language is all about providing readers with the information they want and can easily find, understand, and use. So, the first step in the process needs to be figuring out what readers want.

Getting to know your target audience, connecting with your readers, and getting their input can take many forms and doesn't need to be complicated nor expensive. The methods I've used over my 30-year career working on newspapers, magazines, journals, and websites have changed from one medium to another and as technologies have changed.

Newspaper communities

I was a reporter-photographer at daily and weekly newspapers for 7 years before being promoted to editor. I was part of the community, so getting to know my readers was easy. They were everywhere I went.

Just picking up a coffee on my way to and from assignments provided me with opportunities to talk with them.

Giving readers the information they want and can use

I talked with them at the community events and meetings I covered. I wanted to hear what they thought of the paper, what they would like to see more of, and what they could do without.

More than that, readers wanted to talk with me. They wanted to share what they knew was happening in town or rumors they had heard. While some were only rumors, others pointed to larger problems, which generated articles our target audience wanted to read.

Letters to the editor provided a similar perspective. These were often published as bricks (complaints) and bouquets (compliments). Everybody in the newsroom knew that one bouquet was worth 10 bricks because people needed much more motivation to write a compliment than a complaint.

When I became an editor, I looked at letters more closely. Were the bricks legitimate complaints that I could use to make better decisions? Did the bouquets highlight what our readers wanted more of?

Magazine communities

When I became the editor of a collectible magazine, I needed to change how I connected with my target audience. While a newspaper's community is based on geography, a magazine's community is based on a common interest. Because the magazine's readers were spread across Canada, connecting with them became more difficult.

The readership and the columnists were mostly retired or retiring men who were recapturing their childhood hobby. I don't collect, so I wasn't part of this community. Thankfully,

my consulting editor and regular contributors were the subject-matter experts. They gave me one level of insight into the community.

Some of my coworkers would complain about having to work trade shows every 2 or 3 months. I loved trade shows. That's when I was able to talk with collectors and dealers.

My questions were simple. What do you like and dislike? What do you want to read more of? What do you want to read less of? (The magazine couldn't cover more, but it could cover differently.)

At one trade show, a man told me he was wondering whether he should buy insurance for his collection. His concern was two-fold. He understood that his regular home insurance wouldn't be enough to cover his collection, but he didn't know whether a rider or a new policy would be best for his needs. He also didn't want to alarm his spouse when she found out the value of his collection.

The consulting editor agreed those were common concerns, so an article on the topic would be worthwhile. The regular contributor who took the assignment covered the topic thoroughly. We received so many positive letters to the editor. It was information our readers wanted, needed, and could use.

Journal communities

Connecting with my reading community changed again when I became the editor of a plain language academic journal of Indigenous health and then 3 medical journals. The quantity and quality of my direct discussions with readers declined. What were once quarterly trade shows became annual conferences.

The periodicals I published were not the focus of the booths, so I had fewer opportunities to talk with my readers at each event.

Thankfully, journals value research and surveys. By that time in my career, email and the internet were commonplace, which made readership surveys less expensive and time consuming. Readers no longer needed to mail in paper surveys. Editors no longer had to manually tally results.

As well as the basic “what do you like and dislike”, the surveys asked about specific sections of the journal, how much time respondents spent reading an average issue, and perspectives about the advertisements. It wasn’t the same as meeting readers over coffee, but it provided some insights.

Editorial board members became my window into the reading community, not that they were the average reader. However, they were ambassadors for the journal and would share their colleagues’ perspectives. They had daily conversations with our readers. They shared these perspectives during twice-annual brainstorming sessions for the journal’s monthly series of non-systematic reviews.

These articles were usually the journal’s most often cited research articles. Whether it’s a consulting editor or an editorial board, having members of the reading community who can act as ambassadors for a periodical is invaluable.

Online communities

My professional development not only focused on transitioning my writing and editing from print to online but also capturing and analyzing website and social media data.

Readership surveys are self-reported comments about what readers think they read. Website data shows exactly which pages people were accessing, how long people spent on a page, and which articles they downloaded. Social media data shows which topics followers engaged with most.

I no longer need to spend time and money traveling to and attending trade shows. Social media groups give me access to a more diverse community of people from further away than any coffee shop or trade show ever could.

Working for small publications and not-for-profit organizations rarely provided me with the budget to do formal user testing. However, just talking with readers whenever I would get the chance, doing a simple and inexpensive online survey, or talking with the publications’ ambassadors provided valuable insights over the years.

As an editor, I continue to advocate for my readers no matter the publication, its community, nor the technology.

Virginia St-Denis is the associate editor at the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction, where she edits research reports, policy briefs, government submissions, web text, and social media posts. She also runs a part-time publishing and communications consulting business, where she manages a forensic psychiatry journal, website, and social media pages. Virginia volunteers doing marketing and communications work for Editors Canada. In her spare time, you can find her riding her e-bike, or photographing nature or architecture.

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