

4-1-2015

## Know Your Audience, Ask Your Audience

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### Recommended Citation

McCann, A., & Stableford, S. (2015). Know Your Audience, Ask Your Audience. *The Journal of Extension*, 53(2), Article 34. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol53/iss2/34>

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## Know Your Audience, Ask Your Audience

### Abstract

This article describes the process used to develop an award-winning series of 27 well water Tip Sheets for Rhode Island private well owners. Our multi-agency team worked to develop the series by: 1) Combining our knowledge of the audience with scientific, writing, and design expertise and teamwork; 2) Applying principles of risk communication and plain language; and 3) Asking for and using audience input at multiple stages. Our commitment to know and learn from our audience and incorporate their suggestions into the final product required extra planning, time, and money, but made a difference in the final quality of the materials.

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## Introduction

Getting private well owners to pay attention and act to forestall possible problems with their wells or their water quality are no small tasks. It means understanding barriers such as lack of awareness, denial, and fear, and helping well owners to move beyond them. Our job as professionals is to communicate with adults who need our expertise in ways that get their attention but don't overwhelm them. To do this successfully, we can engage our audiences in helping us understand how they think and feel about the issue at hand, their questions and concerns, and the words and phrases that help them know what to do. This article describes how we used our experience and awareness about our audience and their opinions to develop an award-winning series of 27 well water Tip Sheets, titled *Safe Well Water RI* (Rhode Island).

## Background: Know Your Audience and Other Risk Communication Imperatives

Extension has long been in the business of private well water education (McCann & Gold, 2012). And publications such as brochures and factsheets are fundamental tools of the trade for many Extension professionals (Yancura, 2008). Before writing and designing brochures and factsheets, it's essential to

learn about the audience's knowledge, behaviors, and questions with respect to the topic (Beato & Telfer, 2010).

After new materials have been developed and before they are finalized, they should be tested with the audience, to learn whether they "hit the mark." Usually, some elements of materials work well, and others need further refinement.

Yet few materials are audience tested before publication, leading to wasted efforts. Often, testing isn't done due to the perception that it's labor intensive, time consuming, and expensive. This need not be the case. Qualitative testing with small numbers can identify major successes and problems in materials efficiently and effectively. While the results are not statistically significant and audience opinions must be balanced with professional judgment, interviews (or focus groups) can enlighten writers and designers, increasing the likelihood of communication success. The results of using qualitative testing techniques can be a rich source of information about the audience and inform communicators about how and why the audience will react to materials (Lobdell, Gilboa, Mendola, & Hesse, 2005).

## Steps in Developing and Testing Tip Sheets

Effective communication projects require professionals with different skills who work together well. Our project team consisted of experienced professionals who had previously worked together to develop a well water testing booklet (University of Rhode Island, 2009). The team consisted of five professionals from:

- RI Department of Health (HEALTH), Office of Drinking Water Quality
- University of Rhode Island's (URI) Extension Water Quality Program
- University of New England Health Literacy Institute
- Graphic design firm experienced in designing clear health communications

Our effort began in September 2012, and the series was published in December 2013.

### Step 1: Met with Project Team Early

- Developed a shared vision about the series' audience, purpose, and distribution methods;
- Exchanged science and audience information; and
- Assigned project team roles and responsibilities.

The project team decided that existing well water fact sheets were too technical and hard to understand for private well owners, based on extensive interaction with them on the phone and at public well water workshops. Consumers needed appealing, easy-to-read, actionable information. We planned to use the new series as:

- Handouts at workshops and other events;
- Follow-up materials after telephone conversations; and
- PDF documents on websites.

## Step 2: Developed and Designed Materials

- Grouped existing fact sheets into two major categories (harmful substances and treatments) for the new Tip Sheet series and agreed on the need for a new, introductory overview Tip Sheet;
- Developed a consistent organizational schema with consistent subtitles for Tip Sheets in each category;
- Identified and translated key information from each existing technical fact sheet into plain language for each new Tip Sheet; and
- Developed two design templates, one for the overview piece and one for the harmful substance/treatment sheets.

## Step 3: Tested with the Audience

- Determined that using a limited number of phone interviews to audience test the content and design templates for 3 Tip Sheets would be adequate to inform us about what was and was not working well (Krug, 2010). This would also be feasible within time and budget constraints.
- Tested:
  - The four-page overview sheet
  - A two-page harmful substance sheet prototype.
  - A two-page treatment sheet prototype.

Table 1 details our approach to testing the Tip Sheets with our audience.

**Table 1.**  
Audience Testing Steps

<p><b>Step 1:</b> Developed an interview schedule with a list of open-ended questions to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure consistent structure during each interview</li> <li>• Solicit audience feedback about key aspects of the Tip Sheets, including:           <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How well design features worked to engage users and create reading ease; and,</li> </ol> </li> </ul>
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2. Whether the text addressed audience concerns in a logical way and in clear language.

URI's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the interview schedule and methods.

**Step 2:** Pre-arranged telephone interviews with private well owners whom we recruited from community private well workshops conducted by URI and HEALTH. Mailed draft Tip Sheets and the IRB-required privacy statement to interviewees prior to the phone call.

**Step 3:** Conducted 3 rounds of interviews to identify the elements in the Tip Sheets that worked well and others that we needed to reconsider. The overview and harmful substance sheets were tested in 2 rounds of interviews. The treatment sheet was tested in 1 round of interviews.

**Step 4:** Summarized and shared interview results with project team.

**Step 5:** Revised Tip Sheets based on audience comments and tempered by professional experience and judgment.

**Step 6:** Reviewed by a water quality expert in another state. His expertise and comments were invaluable, since professional colleagues were another anticipated audience for the series.

## What We Learned from Our Audience

Overall, interviewees described the materials as being "straightforward," "concise," "easy to follow," and "clear." Despite our well-informed approach to the series' development, we made both major and minor changes as a result of audience interviews. Below are key findings from the interviews and resulting changes.

- Interviewees told us, "We don't want to learn science. We just want to know how to take care of our well." The comment helped us refocus early in our development process to provide just enough science information to explain a problem without expecting readers to struggle with technicalities. For example, they pointed out that one section of the overview sheet titled "Understand your well water test results" was unnecessary information and too complicated. They suggested removing it, and we did.
- We added new content to the overview Tip Sheet and replaced the overly technical information noted above with sections on what to test for and where to test. This information was readily available in another document, but our audience told us they wanted all the information they needed in one place.
- Interviewees also suggested changes to words, the sequence of some information, and certain images. These changes were incorporated into revisions. For example, we changed one image twice

because interviewees told us it did not represent the audience.

- Interviewees asked us to label helpline phone numbers in each Tip Sheet as direct lines, because they "didn't want to get the run around" when calling for assistance. This small labeling change could be key to supporting audience action.
- Originally we had a "testimonial" in the title page sidebar with an image of a couple stating that the Tip Sheets were helping them protect their drinking water. Interviewees stated that this wasn't needed, as anyone reading it likely already knew they had a problem and just wanted to know what to do. They also suggested that the sidebar might be more effective if it explained the series—an idea we adopted.
- In the harmful substances sheet, interviewees suggested changes to how we presented the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's standards for contaminants in water so they were easier to understand. We made changes to this section and re-tested to help us refine it.

## Conclusion

While the total number of interviewees in our three rounds of testing was small (12 total), it was adequate when combined with our other audience-engagement experiences to achieve our goal of developing appealing, easy-to-read, actionable Tip Sheets. We were striving to develop useable, attractive materials, given resource and time constraints and the challenging dynamics of a multi-organizational effort. We were rewarded with national awards for the series from the Center for Plain Language. The Tip Sheet series is online at [riwelltesting.org](http://riwelltesting.org).

## Acknowledgements

The authors of this article served as the lead authors of the series; Alyson McCann provided the technical expertise and audience knowledge, and Sue Stableford brought health literacy and plain language communications expertise. The Rhode Island Department of Health initiated and funded the project and provided additional expertise. We thank Eric Frohberg at the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention in the Maine Department of Health and Human Services for his time and professional review of the series. His comments and suggestions were very valuable to us.

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