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Strengthening Marriages: An Evaluation and Assessment of a Couple's and Marital Enrichment Newsletter

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Strengthening Marriages: An Evaluation and Assessment of a Couple's and Marital Enrichment Newsletter

Abstract

In times of shrinking budgets, are newsletters a wise use of resources? Findings from Ohio State University Extension indicate they are. Results from an evaluation and assessment on the impact of a statewide couples and marital enrichment newsletter reveal that a significant proportion of readers experience positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Readers tend to rate the newsletter positively and view it as a helpful resource in their personal relationship. Newsletters like this can serve as a cost-effective way to reach more couples in the community (who may not attend a relationship class) and promote healthy marriages.

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Introduction

Research has documented that healthy marriages are of general value and benefit to adults, children, and communities (Waite & Gallagher, 2000). Still, marriage appears to be a fragile institution. National trends suggest that the marriage rate in the United States continues to decline, the number of unmarried couples living together has increased dramatically and the increase continues, and the lifetime probability of divorce or separation for those who do marry remains close to 50% (National Marriage Project, 2004). Consequently, marriage has appeared on the public agenda at both federal and state levels (Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004), and the beginnings of a marriage movement have emerged in the U.S. over the last decade (Administration for Children and Families, 2004; Gallagher, 2000).

While Extension educators have offered marital enrichment programs in the past, the current national movement has created a resurgence of emphasis on programming in this area across many state cooperative extension services (see Ooms, Bouchet, & Parke, 2004). In an effort to contribute to the wealth of educational resources provided by Extension in this area (Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Services, 2004), the state Human Development and Family Science Extension unit at Ohio State University has produced *Marriage Matters*, a couples and marital enrichment newsletter that provides research-based information, suggestions and activities to help couples at various stages in their relationship enhance the quality of their relationship.

About *Marriage Matters*

Marriage Matters is distributed in PDF format via the Web to OSU Extension educators three to four times annually and is direct mailed to households at the county level. Each issue of the newsletter features four articles written by Extension faculty that address topics for couples at various stages in their relationship—dating, engagement, newlywed, mid- and later-life, remarriage, and the transitions associated with these stages. Even though the articles specifically focus on a particular couple life stage, the information, practices, and principles presented are applicable to couples of all ages and at all stages of their relationship. While *Marriage Matters* can be used as a stand-alone newsletter, all of the articles can also "stand-alone" and may be used as inserts or supplements to existing newsletters, as program handouts, as bulletin inserts, or as a series of longer news releases.

Approximately 46,500 copies of the 9 issues developed between February 2002 and June 2004 have been distributed across Ohio by OSU County Extension Offices. About 62 county educators have each distributed, on average, 125 copies of each issue. *Marriage Matters* also is available on-line for the public and other professionals to access, read, and/or share at <http://hec.osu.edu/famlife/marriagematters>. Between January 2003 and June 2004, the Web site received about 24,500 hits. Each month the newsletter is accessed, on average, by 139 visitors (62.9% from Ohio)—30% of whom are professionals accessing the newsletter to share with clientele.

Purpose of the Study

The use of newsletters has been noted as an alternate and effective way for reaching at-risk families who may be less likely to attend face-to-face educational programs (see Bogenschneider & Stone, 1997). Additionally, newsletters can reinforce program effects by encouraging on-going maintenance activities that promote healthy relationships (Hawkins, Carroll, Doherty, & Willoughby, 2004). In general, results from previous newsletter impact studies show that newsletters do have a significant positive impact upon their readers when the content was related to parenting (see Garton et al., 2003). Would similar positive impacts hold true for newsletters focused on couples and marital enrichment content?

It is expected that individuals who read *Marriage Matters* will: (a) gain knowledge about healthy relationship skills to help them enhance the quality of their relationship; (b) feel more confident in their relationship; and (c) use the information learned from this newsletter in their relationship. Considering the large numbers of readers, the purpose of the study reported here was to determine if *Marriage Matters* was indeed achieving its intended goals.

Method

In a selective, stratified, random sampling approach, counties were identified that, based on demographic data, were representative of Ohio's diverse population (e.g., mix of urban, rural, and Appalachian counties). We contacted the county offices and requested their *Marriage Matters* mailing labels for individuals who received at least four of the first six issues of the newsletter. From those, we randomly selected names from each list to reach a total sample size of 800. A cover letter, 2-page survey, and pre-addressed, stamped return envelope were mailed. As an incentive to return the survey, respondents could choose to enter a drawing for two \$25-dollar gift certificates.

Sample

Of the 800 surveys mailed, 152 were returned as not deliverable. Of the remaining 648 surveys, 133 were returned and completed (21% response rate) from readers across 18 counties. Respondents were mostly females (93%), Caucasian (93%), and ranged in age from 17 to 83 years ($M = 41$): 26.2% 29 or younger; 28.4% 30-39; 18.4% 40-49; 26.9% 50 or older. Ninety percent of the respondents were currently in a relationship: 9.9% not in a relationship; 8.4% dating; 6.1% engaged; 64.1% married; 11.5% remarried. Among those currently in a relationship, more than half were in long-term relationships over 10 years: 27.1% 1-5 years; 19.5% 6-10 years; 31.4% 11-20 years; 22.0% 21 or more years.

Results

First, we examined whether respondents were reading the newsletter and what sections they were most likely to read. On average, respondents reported reading at least two of the six newsletter topic sections (four sections are included in each issue): 36% read one section only; 41% read two-three sections; and 23% read four-six sections. Couple Talk, which focuses on communication issues and is applicable to all couples, was the most commonly read section of the newsletter: 85% of the respondents reported reading Couple Talk. Analyses also showed that respondents were most likely to read the article that was specific to their relationship status (e.g., those who were remarried were most likely to read the section on remarriage; those who were engaged to be married were most likely to read the section for engaged and newlywed couples).

Next, a 5-point semantic differential scale was used to assess readers' perceptions of the newsletter's quality (e.g., boring-interesting, negative-positive). Overall, at least 98% of the respondents rated the newsletter as interesting ($M=4.4$), positive ($M=4.6$), meaningful ($M=4.3$),

useful ($M=4.3$), informative ($M=4.5$), and easy to read ($M=4.6$).

When asked what they did with the newsletter after reading it, respondents tended to discuss the information with someone else (51%), tuck it away for future use (34%), give it to another person to read (33%), and/or immediately put the information to good use (24%). Only 7% of the respondents reported thinking about the information learned but never using it. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (87%) reported that they shared the information learned from reading the newsletter with others. Respondents tended to share the information from the newsletter with spouses or partners (66%), their neighbor, coworker, or friend (37%), and/or another relative (34%).

To assess the impact the newsletter had on the reader, three questions were asked regarding changes in knowledge, confidence, and behavior, and one question on the readers' overall perceptions of the newsletters' helpfulness in their personal relationship.

- On a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*), at least 95% agreed that they learned new information ($M = 4.9$), felt more confident in their relationship ($M=4.5$), and used the information learned from *Marriage Matters* ($M=4.7$). See Table 1 for a summary.
- On a scale of 1 (*not helpful*) to 5 (*most helpful*), nearly all of the respondents (98%) reported that the newsletter was helpful in their personal relationship ($M=3.3$): 38% reported that it was very or most helpful; 60% reported that it was a little or somewhat helpful; and 2.3% reported it was not helpful.

Table 1.

Readers' Level of Agreement with Evaluation Impact Statements (Percentages).

	Level of Agreement					
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I learned new information from this newsletter to help me improve my relationship	17.8	55.0	24.0	1.6	1.6	0.0
I feel more confident in my relationship as a result of reading this newsletter	8.0	42.4	44.0	4.0	1.6	0.0
I have used the information I learned from this newsletter in my relationship	7.1	55.9	32.3	3.9	0.8	0.0

Last, we conducted Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) to examine whether the positive impact of the newsletter varied based on the readers' relationship status, length of time in their relationship status, and the number of sections read.

- No statistically significant differences were found based on relationship status or length of relationship.
- Instead, statistically significant between-group differences were found for number of sections read (see Table 2). Post-hoc analyses confirmed that the more articles respondents reported reading, the more likely they were to gain knowledge and confidence in their relationship skills, the more likely they were to use the information learned, and the more helpful they felt the newsletter was in their personal relationship.

Table 2.

Impact of *Marriage Matters* by Number of Sections Read: Mean (SD) and ANOVA results

	Number of Sections Read			F-value
	Only One (n=48)	Two to Three (n=54)	Four or More (n=30)	
Learned new information	4.74 (.68)	4.79 (.87)	5.17 (.70)	3.17*
Feel more confident	4.22 (.76)	4.50 (.65)	5.00 (.76)	10.67**
Used the information learned	4.48 (.66)	4.62 (.72)	4.97 (.68)	4.54**

Overall helpfulness of this newsletter	3.17 (.67)	3.26 (.79)	3.64 (.78)	3.72*
* Significant at the p <.05 level; **Significant at the p <.01 level				

Conclusions

Overall, these results suggest that a couple and marital enrichment newsletter, such as the *Marriage Matters* newsletter, can positively affect the quality of its readers' relationships. After reading the newsletter, a significant proportion of readers reported positive changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. In fact, the positive benefits of reading the newsletter appear to be greater for those who read more of the articles included in the newsletter. Overall, readers tend to rate the newsletter positively and view it as a helpful resource in their personal relationship.

Newsletters like this have great potential as serving either as stand-alone educational tools or supplements to face-to-face programming. Importantly, they can serve as a cost-effective way to reach more couples in the community (who may not attend a relationship class) and promote healthy marriages.

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