

USING MAIL SURVEYS TO EXPLORE NEW EXTENSION AUDIENCES. Krishona Martinson, Regional Extension Educator, University of Minnesota, Andover, MN 55304.

Surveys have been used extensively in Extension program needs assessments, however, response rate has historically been low leading to frustration and uncertainty regarding the results. The University of Minnesota conducted a state-wide survey of 1,000 Minnesota horse owners to understand the need of horse owner education in Minnesota. The survey identified key Extension program needs with a response rate of 69%. The objectives of this paper are to discuss the processes which led to the high response rate and valuable program information. The survey of Horse Owners was conducted as a mail survey in spring of 2004 with assistance from the Minnesota Center for Survey Research (MSCR) and endorsement from the Minnesota Horse Council. The initial questionnaire draft was developed by MCSR and based on questions developed by Extension faculty. The draft instrument was presented to three different focus groups. Prior to the start of data collection, changes suggested by these three groups were incorporated into the survey to create the final questionnaires. Questionnaires were sent to a random sample of Minnesota horse owners. Because no comprehensive list of Minnesota horse owners was available, horse groups and organizations were asked to share their membership and/or mailing lists. Mailing and data collection were conducted from April 2 to May 25, 2004. The first mailing was sent to horse owners on April 2, and included a cover letter inviting participation in the survey, the survey, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. The second mailing consisted of a reminder postcard, which was sent April 9 to all horse owners selected for the sample. On April 23, a third mailing was sent to all individuals who had not yet returned their survey. This mailing was identical procedurally to the first mailing and included a copy of the questionnaire, a reminder cover letter, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope. Returned surveys were counted to track sample status and response rate. Peak survey returns occurred within a few days after each mailing. The survey identified the need for a state-wide horse program in Minnesota and gave insight on topics and how horse owners want to receive horse related information. The majority of horse owners responding currently obtain information from equine magazines, other horse owners, veterinarians, trainers and farriers. When asked how likely they would be to obtain horse related information, horse owners preferred short publication, the internet, and evening seminars. Saturday morning programs, on-line courses and all day Saturday programs were less desirable. The survey identified local veterinarians and feed and tack store owners as key partners needed to make a state-wide program successful. The survey data was also used to build the Horse Team. The Program Team now consists of 22 faculty members from 11 different Departments or Colleges. The survey has helped the team forge relationships with key local horse groups and secure financial contributions. In conclusion, mail surveys can be very usefully in determining needs assessments in Extension programs. However, endorsement by local organizations, assistance from a professional survey center, and multiple mailings are recommended for high participant response and survey success.