

A READERSHIP SURVEY OF  
BLUELINCS MEMBER NEWS  
TULSA, OKLAHOMA

By

MONICA A. MINJARES

Bachelor of Science

Oklahoma State University

Stillwater, Oklahoma

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TULSA, OKLAHOMA

Thesis Approved:

*Barbara de Santo EdD, APR*

Thesis Advisor

*[Signature]*

*Jami A. Fullerton, PhD*

*Alejo J. Salas*

Dean of the Graduate College

## PREFACE

Valid research gives health care newsletter editors the knowledge and data they need to make educated decisions about the newsletter. This study was designed to provide the editors of BlueLincs Member News, a Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) newsletter demographic information regarding their readers, as well as reader interest in the newsletter.

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# CHAPTER I

## Introduction

### General

It is estimated that some 50,000 corporate newsletters alone are published each year (Bivens, Fundamentals 1). Most newsletters are internal publications in the sense that they reach a highly unified public – employees, shareholders, members, volunteers, voting constituencies and others with a common interest (Bivens, Fundamentals 1).

With the advent of desktop publishing, the newsletter has become even more popular, since it can now be produced with even more ease (Bivens, Fundamentals 1). Although it took several years for “desktop publishing” to catch on, it is now sweeping the country (Bivens and Ryan vii). The result is literally thousands of newsletters, direct mailers, brochures and magazines vying for a captive audience. To compete against 500 to 3,000 bids for the average American’s attention each day, editors of employee publications have to take dramatic steps (Wylie 1).

Newsletter editors must attract the reader through an appealing design. “[...] good design attracts and holds readership, while bad design repels and discourages it” (Bivens and Ryan 39). Like it or not, we read externally first and internally second, which is to say that we judge publications not only by their covers, but also by their overall appearance (Bivens and Ryan 39).

To *keep* the readers attention, a newsletter must be written in an effective and easily understood manner. Whether for consumers or business prospects, a good newsletter is designed and written to communicate in ways that make sense to the reader. In other words, a successful newsletter is reader-driven. It helps readers solve a problem and provides them with helpful information. In doing so, it establishes credibility (Graham, 3).

The goal of this thesis is to find out how to effectively communicate to a managed health care membership through a company newsletter. In achieving this goal, literature has been reviewed and a random sample of readership of the BlueLincs Member News, a corporate health care newsletter has been surveyed.

The random sample is representative of current BlueLincs members who receive a quarterly member newsletter called BlueLincs Member News. The aim of the survey was to determine if the newsletter was accomplishing its message strategy and also to uncover what formats members felt were most effective in conveying this important information.

### **Research Problem**

Managed care newsletter editors need to know how to best communicate member information to their constituencies. Effective member communications should not only ensure that members will use their benefits as intended, but should also explain the advantages and disadvantages of managed care in reader-

appropriate language. This will enable members to make intelligent health care decisions for themselves and members of their family.

As mentioned earlier this thesis seeks to answer the following question:

**How effective is a newsletter as a conveyor of important health and benefit information to its membership?**

### **Research Questions**

1. Does Member News meet the audience's needs and interests versus the perceived needs and interests determined by BlueLincs?
2. What are members' opinions of the Member News newsletter?
3. Is Member News meeting its message strategy of providing member information, as determined by health care accreditation organizations such as the National Committee on Quality Assurance?

### **Message strategy defined:**

As defined by the editor, the message strategy has to do with what you want your newsletter to accomplish – the desired effect you want it to have on your targeted audiences. For most letters there are three basic strategies:

*entertainment, information and persuasion* (Bivens, Fundamentals 27).

Entertainment strategy is commonly used in all types of writing, including advertising. The entertainment value of a message helps it gain and maintain attention. Entertainment alone is not often used in newsletter writing without one of the following complementary strategies (Bivens, Fundamentals 27).

An information strategy is usually a straightforward statement of fact best used on audiences interested in seeking information. This strategy is frequently employed for such messages as new product announcements and consumer awareness campaigns (Bivens, Fundamentals 27).

A persuasion strategy assumes that there are at least two sides to the issue being addressed. Persuasive messages usually require an audience that is already interested in the issue and able to process information fairly well (Bivens, Fundamentals 27). The Persuasive strategy makes frequent appeals to reasoning and logic and is best structured to reach either those who are already convinced or those who are neutral and open to reasoning (Bivens Fundamentals 27).

**Needs defined:**

“Needs” are defined by the newsletter editor as successfully informing the readership of their health care benefits and preventive health issues in an understandable and interesting way. The “need” to inform members of their health care benefits, rights and responsibilities is defined by the National Committee on Quality Assurance (NCQA), a Health Maintenance Organization accreditation organization . Consistent member information on these issues is a requirement of NCQA for accreditation. The “need” to inform members of preventive health issues is determined by member claims use and is also a requirement of NCQA.

**Interests defined:**

The newsletter editor defined “interests” as the type of stories readers enjoy reading. These stories include health and wellness tips, member testimonials and benefits information.

**Opinions defined:**

“Opinions” are defined by the newsletter editor as how readers perceive the reporting, article content, article size and format, as well as the balance between photographs and written information.

Through this research the editor gained insight as to what BlueLincs HMO was effectively in enticing or retaining membership to read the newsletter. This enabled the editor to duplicate those things which were working and re-work those things that needed improvement, with the ultimate goal being to increase overall readership and readability.

**Significance**

This thesis will help managed care newsletter editors better determine if they are accomplishing their dual responsibility of informing membership of pertinent health and benefit information while meeting readers’ needs and interests. In addition, editors will also gain the readers’ perspective of this newsletter’s current approach and changes that could be implemented to aid in the future effectiveness of member communications.

## Related Research

In the 1980s the Sperry Corporation advertised a basic strength in a unique and most effective manner. “We Listen” was the company’s simple yet profound theme throughout its print, radio and television advertising (Seitel 112).

Indeed the element of listening has become an increasingly important part of the public relations practitioner’s job. Another name for listening in public relations work is *research*, particularly the kind that involves public opinions, attitudes, and reactions to policies and practices of an organization (Seitel 112).

Not too long ago, the broad majority of practitioners contended that public relations work could not be measured because it was too creative and intangible. Today, however, the idea of measuring public relations work has steadily gained acceptance (Seitel 112).

A variety of research has addressed newsletter communication. These studies have focused on everything from audience needs to organization objectives. In 1995 researchers at John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company conducted a reader survey to determine whether employees were attending to its employee health benefit booklet.

In the fall of 1994 John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company of Boston added preventive medical care to the indemnity plans offered to employees. In an effort to better communicate the new employee benefit, the company developed a health care booklet (Woolsey 6).

John Hancock surveyed a random sample of 100 of its employees about the booklet in January 1995 to find out if it was an effective communications tool (Woolsey 6). The researchers found that employees were not only reading the information, but continued to utilize the booklet as a reference piece (Woolsey 6).

Another study conducted by researchers at The American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) tested article format preference among its AARP Bulletin, a member newsletter, readers. Carey Silver, director of research at the AARP Bulletin and Modern Maturity magazines chose reader interview research.

The goal of the research was to determine which format best communicated the intended message. Readers were presented an article topic in several different story formats, then were asked to rate the likelihood that they would modify their behavior based on the article format. (Silver *Telephone Interview*).

Silver said that the research findings gave AARP Bulletin editors direction when retooling the newsletter. The new format of the newsletter is now representative of reader format preferences (Silver *Telephone Interview*).

Other researchers have investigated the needs and interests of their readers in relationship to the content of newsletters and/or magazines. Researchers at Carmichael Lynch Spong of Minneapolis conducted a 1994 readership survey of Mack Trucks' customer magazine Bulldog ("*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines" par. 1).

The survey found that this target audience was reading less and less of the magazine, mainly because of content that focused on Mack rather than audience needs and interests (“*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines” par.1). After reviewing the research findings, editors of Bulldog completely reevaluated the magazine changing the content, format and design of the publication. (“*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines” par.3).

Another study conducted by Sally Moore studied whether or not Oklahoma State Magazine, an alumni magazine published by Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma was meeting the needs and interests of its audience. Editors were able to use information from the survey to align their purpose and goals to their readers needs and interests (Moore 7).

Opinion research in which researchers investigate reader opinions of a publication also provide valuable information to magazine and newsletter editors. In 1993 chemical giant Rhone-Poulenc surveyed employees about their impressions of the internal company newsletter. The employees were blunt in their assessment of the company’s internal newsletter: “It’s short and hard to read” (“*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Newsletters” par.1).



Now each monthly newsletter includes an editor's poll. This helps to ensure that the editorial content remains focused ("Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Newsletters" par. 6)

In 1996, Napaporn Laotaweesub conducted a readership survey of The Daily O'Collegian, a university campus newspaper published by Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma. The purpose of the study was to determine reader preferences for different types of stories published in the newspaper (Laotaweesub 31). The findings of this study helped the editors and reporters of The Daily O'Collegian know what their readers wanted so that they could adjust and improve the newspaper (Laotaweesub 124).

In 1997, The OECD Observer conducted a survey of 11,300 subscribers to find out their views on the information and analysis in each issue and the lay-out of the magazine. The OECD Observer is a magazine published by the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development ("Readership Survey Results" 43). Researchers found that readers were satisfied with the choice and variety of topics in the magazine.

### **Availability of Sources**

Sources for this thesis included academic and professional textbooks, journals and newsletters, as well as personal interviews and research, academic and professional articles published in print and online. Popular press such as newspapers and magazines focusing on health care marketing and

communication, as well as those focusing on managed care issues and policy were also utilized. A survey of managed care members was also included.

### **Methodology**

For this study, a survey was mailed to 498 current members of BlueLincs HMO. The members have been randomly selected from a database, including heads of household only. At the time of the mailing, the database included approximately 31,000 names.

The study was intended to provide current reader views and opinions of Member News. From these views and opinions, recommendations were made in adjusting the editorial content of the newsletter to better meet members needs while communicating pertinent benefit information.

The survey was inserted within the newsletter. The questionnaire was printed on an oversized business reply mailer. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma provided funding for this project.

### **Outline of Study**

Chapter II of this study contains a brief history of the first newsletter, as well as the changes that newsletters have undergone over the years. It also includes a discussion of the principles of successful communication and various theories surrounding communications. The chapter goes on to discuss the importance of reader research, giving examples of various studies that have been conducted. Lastly, a brief discussion of managed health care, public opinion of

managed care and the importance of effectively communicating managed health care issues to plan membership is discussed.

Chapter III contains the methodology of this study. Chapter IV includes the interpretation of the data gathered in this study. And Chapter V contains the conclusion of the study and recommendations for the editor, as well as suggestions for future research.

## CHAPTER II

### Review of Literature

#### Overview

This chapter discusses the history of newsletters and the perception of newsletters from organizational and reader perspectives. It also describes the creation of managed care in Oklahoma and the need to communicate complicated issues of health care to health plan membership, particularly in light of negative media and public perception and industry-required communication. Lastly, this chapter covers the creation and transitions of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma's health maintenance organization (HMO), and the goals of its member newsletter.

#### Introduction

The name *newsletter* comes from its earliest format – a single-page news digest delivered to a limited audience in a rather informal, almost personal letter style (Bivens, Fundamentals 1). The first documented newsletter was developed by Doris E. Fleischman, a former New York Tribune women's page writer who in 1919 joined the public relations firm of "Edward L. Bernays, Counsel on Public Relations" (Henry par. 6, 8, 32). Fleischman's clients included the U.S. War Department, the Lithuanian National Council, the U.S. Radium Corporation and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Henry par. 10, 11).

In the early 1920s, she developed a newsletter called Contact. It was targeted to potential public relations clients. Fleischman served as designer, researcher, writer and editor of each issue (Henry par. 14, 15):

She began Contact, a four-page newsletter published three or four times a year for more than a decade. Contact was a compilation of brief articles and summarized information from popular and trade publications, accompanied by comments pointing out the power of public opinion and the importance of public relations. This material was presented in a straightforward manner within a conservatively designed format that was intended to give a strong impression of respectability and restraint. Sent without charge to approximately 15,000 media people, heads of organizations, and community leaders, Contact helped attract new clients while improving the visibility and image of the new field of public relations (Henry par. 14).

From its humble beginnings in the 1920s, the newsletter has grown in popularity among public relations practitioners as a cost-effective means for reaching a targeted audience (Bivins, Handbook 95). In fact, if you ask any self-respecting communications professional for the most effective means of reaching a primarily internal audience, the response will most likely be the newsletter (Bivins, Handbook 95).

Estimates of the number of organizational publications in the United States range from 100,000 up to more than a million, if you count all the newsletters (Cutlip, Center, Broom 263). Part of the newsletters' increasing popularity is due to page-layout software which revolutionized how organizations thought about in-house publications. What once had to go through the traditional writing, editing, typesetting, pasteup and printing process could now be done in a few, simple steps (Bivens and Ryan vii).

### **Newsletter Components**

Newsletters are as varied as the audiences who read them; however, they do break down into two categories, each based on *distribution*. (Bivens and Ryan 385). Authors Thomas Bivins and William E. Ryan explain in How to Produce Creative Publications:

Newsletters that are distributed within a corporation are usually considered **vertical** publications because they are intended for everyone from the mailroom clerk to the CEO. Newsletters that are distributed to a more narrowly defined group with a common interest are called **horizontal** publications (385).

Within each of these categories, vertical and horizontal newsletters can be further divided into subgroups. Vertical publications can be described in three ways: association newsletters, community group newsletters, and institutional newsletters (Bivens and Ryan 385-386).

**Association newsletters** help a scattered membership with a common interest keep in touch. Profit and nonprofit associations and almost every trade association in the United States publish newsletters for their members, often at both national and regional levels (Bivens, Handbook 96).

**Community group newsletters** are often used by civic organizations to keep in touch with members, announce meetings, and stimulate attendance at events. For example, a community church group newsletter distributed throughout surrounding neighborhoods might be a tool for increasing membership (Bivens, Handbook 96).

**Institutional newsletters**, perhaps the most common type of newsletter, are usually distributed among employees. They are designed to give employees a feeling of belonging. They frequently include a balanced mix of employee-related information and news about the company (Bivens, Handbook 96).

Horizontal publications can also be subdivided into three types of newsletters. Newsletters categorized as horizontal publications include: publicity newsletters, special interest newsletters, and self-interest or “digest” newsletters (Bivens and Ryan 386).

**Publicity newsletters** often create their own readers. They can be developed for fan clubs, resorts (some resort hotels mail their own newsletters out to previous guests), and politicians. Congressional representatives often use

newsletters to keep their constituencies up to date on their activities (Bivens, Handbook 96).

**Special interest newsletters** developed by special-interest groups tend to grow with their following. *Common Cause*, for instance, began as a newsletter and has grown into a magazine representing the largest lobbying interest group in the United States (Bivens, Handbook 96).

**Self-interest or “digest” newsletters** are designed to make a profit. The individuals or groups who develop them typically offer advice or present solutions to problems held in common by their target readers. These often come in the form of a sort of “digest” of topics of interest to a certain profession (Bivens, Handbook 96).

According to Bivens, the ideal organizational structure provides vertical (upward and downward) and horizontal communication. A newsletter is a good example of downward communication. It fulfills the company’s or editor’s need to provide formal channels of communication to its audience. Upward communication provides the audience a means of communicating its opinions to the newsletter editor or company (Bivens, Handbook 97).

Regardless of a newsletter’s distribution or category, most newsletters’ intent is to communicate with a highly unified public – employees, shareholders, members, volunteers, voting constituencies and others with a common interest (Bivens, Handbook 95). Fundamentally, communication is a process of



exchanging information, of imparting ideas, and of making oneself understood by others. It also means understanding others in return. Indeed, understanding is critical to the communication process (Seitel 135).

### **Communication Process**

According to Fraser Seitel, author of The Practice of Public Relations, “Although there are numerous models of communication, one of the most fundamental is the S-M-R approach” (137). This model later became the S-M-E-D-R communications model. The S-M-E-D-R model suggests that the communication process begins with the **source**, who issues a **message** to a **receiver**, who then decides what action to take, if any, on the communication (Seitel 137).

The modified, S-M-E-D-R model includes an **encoding** stage, in which the source’s original message is translated and conveyed to the receiver; and a **decoding** stage in which the receiver interprets the encoded message and takes action (Seitel 137-138).

In the S-M-E-D-R model, the **source** of a message is the central person or organization doing the communicating. While the source usually knows how he wants the message to be received there is no guarantee he’ll be understood that way by the receiver (Seitel 140).

The source relies on the **encoder** to translate his idea to a communication. The encoder may be a speech writer, a reporter or a public relations practitioner.

In many cases the source's message is encoded by multiple individuals. Each time, in all likelihood, the particular encoder has added new subjective shadings to the politician's original message (Seitel 141).

Once the encoder has taken in the source's ideas and translated them into terms a receiver can understand, the ideas are then transmitted in the form of a **message**. The message can be carried by a variety of communications media, speeches, newspapers, news releases and face-to-face reports (Seitel 143).

Although theorists differ on exactly what constitutes a message, the most popular theory is the content of the communication. In other words, what it says constitutes its message. According to this view, the real importance of a communication – the message – lies in the meaning of an article or in the intent of the speech (Seitel 143).

The message must be decoded by a **receiver** before action can be taken. As in the encoding stage, a receiver must take the message and translate it into his own common terms, determine its usefulness, and then take action (Seitel 145). For this stage to be successful, the decoder must fully understand the message before acting on it. If the message is unclear or the receiver is unsure of the intent, there is little chance that the desired action will be taken. Therefore, the message must be in common terms (Seitel 145).

How the **receiver** decodes a message depends on several characteristics such as the receiver's own perception, stereotypes, symbols, semantics, peer

groups, and the media (Seitel 146-150). Therefore, although the message might reach the intended receiver, his/her interpretation of the message might not be what was intended (Seitel 150).

This confusion is apparent in public relations when practitioners offer media placements as evidence that communication has occurred. This myth suggests that sending a message is the same as communicating a message (Cutlip, Center and Broom 228-229). This belief is also known as the magic bullet theory of communications (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach, 164).

### **Communication Theories From the Organizational Perspective**

The basic idea of the magic bullet theory is that media messages are received in a uniform way by every member of the audience and that immediate and direct responses are triggered by such stimuli (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 164). Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach explain in Theories of Mass Communication:

“It stated that powerful stimuli were uniformly brought to the attention of the individual members of the mass. These stimuli tapped inner urges, emotions, or other processes over which the individual had little control. Because of the inherited nature of these mechanisms, each person responded more or less uniformly (165).”

This theory was further reinforced by the seemingly indisputable facts from mass advertising that the media were capable of convincing people of purchasing

particular goods. The effects of wartime propaganda also played a significant role in reinforcing the magic bullet theory (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 165).

In relation to BlueLincs Member News, this study examines whether the audience is receiving and acting upon messages as intended by the editor. Previous to this study, no research had been done to determine whether the editor's message was effectively reaching the audience.

In the 1940s information scientists Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver based their work for Bell Telephone Laboratories on a similar model to the magic bullet theory. Shannon and Weaver's model consisted of an information source, message or signal, channel and receiver or destination (Cutlip, Center and Broom 229).

Weaver wrote, "The questions to be studied in a communication system have to do with the amount of information, the capacity of the communication channel, the coding process that may be used to change a message into a signal and the effects of noise" (Cutlip, Center and Broom 229). Nevertheless, the late Wilbur Schramm pointed out that communication is much more complicated:

"Communication (*human* communication, at least) is *something people do*. It has no life of its own. There is no magic about it except what people in the communication relationship put into it. There is no meaning in a message except what the people put into it. When one studies communication, therefore, one studies people – relating to each other and to

their groups, organizations, and societies, influencing each other, being influenced, informing and being informed, teaching and being taught, entertaining and being entertained – by means of certain signs which exist separately from either of them. To understand the human communication process one must understand how people relate to each other” (Cutlip, Center and Broom 229).

### **Communication Theories From the Reader’s Perspective**

Early in 1940 before television was available, researchers began to look at the importance of group ties, as a complex of intervening variables between media and audience influence. One landmark study took place in Erie County, Ohio. For decades Erie County had voted as the nation voted in presidential elections (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 190).

The focus of the study was on the influence of campaign speeches and other political messages presented in newspapers, magazines and radio during the contest between Wendell Willkie, the Republican candidate, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the Democratic candidate (DeFleur, Ball-Rokeach 190).

Researchers found that both psychological and sociological factors that distinguished people from one another were potential intervening variables in the communications process (DeFleur, Ball-Rokeach 195).

These intervening variables operated between the *stimulus* (S) on the one hand – the content presented by the mass media – and the *response* (R) -- changes

in feeling, thinking or action produced among audience members who were exposed to that content (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach 195).

Instead of the simple S-R situation of the magic bullet formulation, with no factors operating between media and mass, there were now several sets of *intervening* variables modifying the relationship. This concept is known as the theory of selective influence (Defleur and Ball-Rokeach 195).

In the case study of voters in Erie County, the influences of various social categories on vote intention and media behavior were pronounced in many cases. Age, party affiliation, sex, rural versus urban residence, economic status, and education were key variables (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 191).

These social category memberships determined “interest” and led to early or late voting decisions. Acting in concert, this complex of variables influenced not only people’s degree and direction of exposure to the mass-communicated campaign material, but also the kinds of influences such content would have on them (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 191). These findings can be further explained by examining the principles associated with the selective influence theory.

1. **The principle of selective attention.** First, individual differences in cognitive structure result in distinctive patterns of attention to media content. Our media societies are so saturated with competing messages that people cannot possibly attend to everything that is directed toward them (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 195).

To avoid mental overload, people develop “mental filters” that screen out vast amounts of information. Their attention is confined to only a limited segment of what is available daily (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 195).

The readership survey of BlueLincs Member News determined whether members were actually attending to the newsletter or using a “mental filter” to screen out information contained in the newsletter. It also investigated whether some article formats and/or topics were more readily filtered out than others.

2. **The principle of selective attention.** Because of the differences in such cognitive factors as interests, beliefs, prior knowledge, attitudes, needs and values, individuals will perceive – that is, attribute meaning – to virtually any complex stimulus differently than will people with different cognitive structures (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 196-197).

The readership survey of BlueLincs Member News investigated whether different segments of the population attributed more meaning to various topics within the newsletter. Comparisons were made between gender, age, education, income level and family status to determine how the needs, values, interests and attitudes of each segment of the population contributed to their attentiveness of each article type.

3. **The principle of selective action.** Finally, not everyone will act the same way as a result of being exposed to a given media message. Before action

can take place, a member of an audience must attend to the media presentation, perceive its meaning and remember its content (DeFleur, Ball-Rokeach 197-198).

In relationship to the BlueLincs Member News readership study, members were asked to relate the number of times that they acted upon the information that was found in Member News. This served as a guide to not only determine whether or not the messages contained in the newsletter were persuasive, but if they illicited the intended action.

The role of informal social relationships in the Erie County setting added yet another new perspective on the mass communications process. It became clear that family members, friends and others brought ideas from the media to the attention of voters who where themselves not directly exposed (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 192).

Thus, the research suggested a movement of information through two basic stages: first, from the media to relatively well-informed individuals who frequently attend to mass communications; second, from those persons through interpersonal channels to individuals who had less direct exposure to the media (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 192). This process was called the “two-step flow of communication.”

In the Erie County research, individuals who were more in contact with the media were called “opinion leaders” because it was discovered that they not only relayed information, but they also interpreted information for others. Through this



action they actually shaped voters opinions as they passed on the information (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 193). This form of “personal influence” became immediately recognized as an important intervening process that for many people operated between the mass communicated message and the responses made to that message (DeFleur, Ball-Rokeach 193).

This finding set off an intense effort to investigate the nature of opinion leaders and the process of personal influence. Many studies followed that indicated that informal social relationships were indeed important factors that shaped the way people selected media content, interpreted it and acted upon it (DeFleur, Ball Rokeach 193).

The two-step flow of communication was also investigated in the BlueLines Member News survey. Readers were asked where they received the majority of the health information. One option presented to readers was the media. Other options included various individuals who could be perceived as “opinion leaders.” This finding demonstrated the legitimacy members attributed to the publication.

### **Reader Research**

Communications experts agree that feedback is critical to the process of communication. A communicator must get feedback from a receiver to know what messages are or are not getting through and how to structure future communications (Seitel 152). Seitel states, “Occasionally, feedback is ignored by professional communicators, but this is always a mistake (152).”

Authors Cutlip, Center and Broom state in their book, Effective Public Relations, “No topic dominated the practice [of public relations] as does program evaluation – the final step in the process. Actually using systematic measures of program effectiveness, however, lags behind practitioner interest in program evaluation” (406).

British physicist, mathematician and inventor Lord Kelvin stated, “When you can measure what you are speaking about, and express it in numbers, you know something about it. But when you cannot measure it, when you cannot express it in numbers, your knowledge is of a meager and unsatisfactory kind (Cutlip, Center, Broom 406).

Following are some examples of reader research conducted by various companies and the information and guidance the findings provided.

**John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company Boston:**

In the fall of 1994, John Hancock Mutual Life Insurance Company Boston surveyed its employees to determine if it was effectively communicating to its employees a new preventive medical care plan. The company had developed its own health care materials “to try to promote employees taking individual responsibility for their health,” said Barbara Witcher, director of benefit design and communication (Woolsey 6).

The materials took the form of a 24-page booklet called “Your Body, Your Health: An Owner’s Manual.” It was modeled after an automobile manual and

encouraged employees to care for their bodies as they would their car (Woolsey 6).

The book included a mixture of text, charts and cartoons. Space was also provided for employees to record important health information such as health status and family health history (Woolsey 6).

John Hancock Mutual Life surveyed a random sample of 100 of its employees about the booklet in January 1995. Forty-five percent had adopted healthier lifestyles as recommended by the booklet. Of the remaining employees, 90 percent said they would change their behavior based on the booklet's advice (Woolsey 6).

### **Carmichael Lynch Spong**

Carmichael Lynch Spong of Minneapolis conducted a readership survey in 1994 of Mack Truck's customer magazine Bulldog. The magazine's readers were primarily Mack truck owners, dealers and technicians ("*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines" par.1).

The survey found that its target audience was reading less and less of the magazine, mainly because of editorial fluff that focused too heavily on Mack rather than their needs ("*Tactics* July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines" par. 1). With reader feedback in their hands Carmichael Lynch Spong went to work.

The first thing they did was re-focus the editorial to reflect the interest of the magazine's readers. Self-serving, self-congratulatory articles were replaced with new columns about Mack customers and other useful articles. To put industry trends in perspective, they created a column Bulldog Interview, a Q & A with industry leaders such as U.S. Secretary of Transportation Frederico Pena (*"Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines"* par. 3).

Creating two-way dialogue, once an afterthought, became central to the publication's mission. The editors of the magazine urged readers to write letters in response to published articles. The goal: To strengthen relationships with customers (*"Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Magazines"* par. 4).

#### **Rhone-Poulenc Inc., Princeton, N.J.**

In 1993 chemical giant Rhone-Poulenc surveyed employees about its impressions of the internal company newsletter. The employees were blunt in their assessment of the company's internal newsletter: "It's short on news and hard to read" (*"Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Newsletters"* par. 1).

To fix the problem, company editors did what many newspapers and magazines have done to boost readership: they added lots of color, jazzed up the graphics and started running shorter and more relevant stories. "The result was

Connections, a snappy, four-color tabloid that screams Read Me!” (“Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Newsletters” par. 2,3).

The facelift received good reviews from the company’s more than 7,000 employees based in North America. After launching the new publication in 1994, the company did a follow-up survey that found that 63 percent of employees rated the newsletter good or very good, up from 49 percent in 1993 (“Tactics July 1996 Issue Highlights Bronze Anvil Winners Newsletters” par. 4).

The editorial direction was tweaked somewhat, too. The newsletter became more reader-driven, rather than management-oriented, although it still included a monthly column from the president and articles on key organizational changes (Public Relations Society of America par. 5, 6).

Following the changes, employees cited the newsletter as one reason why morale remained high despite corporate downsizing in 1995. Also included in each monthly newsletter was an editor’s poll that helped to ensure that the editorial content remained focused (Public Relations Society of America par. 5, 6).

### **Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development**

In the 1996 issue of the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development’s monthly publication, The OECD Observer, subscribers were surveyed to determine their views on the information and analysis in each issue and the layout of the magazine (“Readership” par. 1-2).

Of the 11,300 subscribers, 540 responses were received (“Readership” par. 2-3). The main message to emerge clearly from the survey was that the readers were pleased with the choice and variety of topics as well as the format of The OECD Observer. One comment the researchers found particularly significant was that the mix of subject matter should be left alone (“Readership” par. 22).

The criticism, suggestions and praise by readers outlined a number of strong points and avenues for bringing The OECD Observer even more closely in tune with its time, and with its present and future readership. Suggestions included providing a clearer expression of OECD’s opinions and those of the authors would allow the style to be more direct and lively; adding more charts and tables without making the layout too dense; and maintaining the quality of readership and reference value of articles (“Readership” par. 23, 24, 25, 26).

### **Survey Methodology**

#### AARP Bulletin:

In 1998, an informal phone interview was conducted with Cary Silvers, director of research for AARP Bulletin and Modern Maturity magazine. AARP Bulletin recently redesigned its 35-page monthly newsletter – the result of a reader survey.

According to Silvers, the AARP survey was done in a personal interview format. A telemarketer set up individual interviews with AARP members, inviting them to meet with a researcher for approximately three hours to go over the

newsletter's content, format and impact. Response to the invitation was high, even though no incentive was offered (*Silvers Telephone Interview*).

Interviewees were given various article format options from which they were to choose the most appealing. For example, an article covering a new Medicare Plus option would be presented in three different formats (essay, bulleted and question-and-answer). The respondents would then be asked which format they would most likely read (*Slivers Telephone Interview*).

The same approach was used to identify reader preference on article content and impact. For example, an article on high blood pressure and its causes would be presented to readers in three different formats (factual, testimonial and question-and-answer) (*Silvers Telephone Interview*). Interviewees were asked to read the article then rate on a sliding scale the likelihood that they would modify their behavior in some way and take the necessary action to prevent high blood pressure (*Silver Telephone Interview*).

According to Silver, the approach is very effective and is used by other major national publications including Time, Newsweek and Modern Maturity (*Silver Telephone Interview*).

As the above examples illustrate, research can be used in a variety of ways. Research in public relations can be applied to determine, in advance of a communications program, the attitudes and beliefs of a public. It can be used to monitor the performance of a public relations program in process, and it can be

used as an evaluative mechanism to determine a program's progress as well as modifications in the future (Seitel 113).

Feedback is critical in researching attitudes and beliefs of a public, as well as monitoring a public relations program in process (Seitel 152, 113). Public relations communications compete in a crowded message environment in which few messages get through and even fewer have an impact (Cutlip, Center and Broom 228).

The BlueLincs Member News readership study attempted to serve as a benchmark for monitoring its performance at a given point in time. Although a readership survey had never been conducted for this newsletter, studies demonstrate that reader research can provide valuable information to an editor.

### **Managed Care Background**

The concept of managed care dates back more than 70 years with a rural farmers' cooperative plan in Oklahoma in 1929. That same year, two Los Angeles physicians entered into a prepaid contract to provide health services to about 2,000 water company employees (Managed Care 2-1).

Several prominent plans emerged in subsequent decades, including the Kaiser-Permanente Medical Care Program, established in 1942, and now one of the largest, most widely distributed programs in the United States (Managed Care 2-1). For the next 25 years, managed care organizations which include preferred



provider organizations (PPOs) and health maintenance organizations (HMOs) were minor players in the healthcare system (Managed Care 2-1).

Managed healthcare organizations became more important in the 1960s as rising medical costs gained national attention (Managed Care 2-1). Beginning in 1988 the healthcare market began shifting from predominantly conventional plans to a market where managed care plans began to dominate. From 1988 to 1995, HMO enrollment more than doubled (Managed Care 2-2).

Today more than 150 million Americans belong to managed care plans, up from just 92 million in 1992, according the American Association of Health Plans (“Managed” par. 6). Managed care plans are clearly becoming the health plan of choice for employers with only 38 percent still offering traditional indemnity insurance as an option (Source One Solutions par. 6).

These changes in the healthcare environment have proven to be confusing to many Americans. According to a survey conducted by Towers Perrin, a health care consulting firm, almost two-thirds of Americans (63 percent) feel they do *not* have a good understanding of the differences between traditional fee-for-service health insurance and managed care (Gilkison 6). This lack of knowledge is even more prevalent among Americans under 30, those who do not have any college education, and those who work at small companies (fewer than 100 employees) (Gilkison 6).

Coupled with this lack of understanding is a general lack of trust. A recent survey of 1,100 people by the international public relations firm Porter/Novelli ranked managed care 17th out of 18 industries in terms of its credibility. Only the tobacco industry scored worse ("Managed" par. 7).

Similarly, a national survey conducted for Medical Economics magazine by Harvard professor Robert Blendon found that almost 40 percent of respondents had never heard of managed care, while most who had heard of it considered it to be a bad thing, with a third saying their dislike was based on personal experience ("Managed" par. 7).

Such sentiments can be seen in ominous headlines from small city newspapers to national magazines.

Hittner, Patricia. "When Your HMO Says No." Better Homes and Gardens, October 1996: 68-74.

Boulton, Guy. "HMOs Shifting Risk to Doctors," The Wichita Eagle, 1 October 1995: E1.

Larson, Erik. "The Soul of an HMO." Time, 22 January 1996: 44-52.

Spragins, Ellyn; Kahn, Jeremy; Miller, Annetta. "Does Your HMO Stack Up?" Newsweek, 24 June 1996: 56-63.

It is obvious that a serious need exists to educate individuals on managed care principles. Kathleen Larey Lewton, director of Porter Novelli's U.S. Health Care Practice and author of Public Relations in Health Care: A Guide for Professionals states,

“Americans, when given sound information, presented in context and with an honest assessment of options, implications and alternatives, could begin to forge a national consensus about what they want, need and are willing to pay for. That process of forging consensus must begin with health care executives taking the lead in working together to create a climate where a rational conversation can ensue” (par. 23).

Providing an “honest assessment of options, implications and alternatives” is one area in which today’s HMOs have miserably failed, according to Peter Nasca, a senior partner health care marketing specialist at Miami-based Paradigm Marketing. He states that the HMO industry has failed to build a relationship of trust and respect with its consumers. He goes on to say that managed care plans should show respect not only to their members but to employees, news media and their physician partners, hospitals, brokers and other constituencies (“Managed” par. 20).

[Clearly] health care professionals and the insurance industry play important roles as intermediaries in dealing with consumers of health care. Consequently, a growing number of public relations practitioners work for the American Medical Association, American Nursing Association, Blue Cross, HMOs, preferred provider

organizations (PPOs), and similar groups at the national, state, and local levels (Cutlip, Center and Broom 505).

### **Health Maintenance Organizations in Oklahoma**

The history of health maintenance organizations in Oklahoma goes back to April 1981, when Prudential Health Care Plan, Inc., doing business as Prucare of Oklahoma City, was licensed. Prudential expanded to Tulsa in January 1983. GHS Health Maintenance Organization Inc., doing business as BlueLincs HMO, followed in January 1984 in Tulsa (Morrow 8). Today, Oklahoma has nine licensed health maintenance organizations that provide managed care medical services to more than 200,000 residents (Morrow 8).

According to Ann Metcalf, former Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma vice president of advertising and public communications, BlueLincs HMO began communicating with its health plan members through a quarterly newsletter. Metcalf said that prior to this members did not receive any consistent communication from the company.

Metcalf said that a newsletter was chosen to communicate with members for a number of reasons including to promote wellness issues, inform members of benefit information and nurture corporate good will. The newsletter was entitled Takin' Care Newsletter and was distributed to health plan members and employees.

The name of the newsletter was reflective of GHS' recent acquisition of an existing HMO called TAKECARE of Oklahoma. Consistent with the newsletter's general goals, it contained articles on health and wellness, announcements of new programs, new customer groups and a limited amount of benefit information (Metcalf *Personal Interview*).

It was not until 1988 that the company and the newsletter changed to its current names respectively: BlueLincs HMO and BlueLincs Member News. Metcalf said that the newsletter's name was changed to eliminate confusion among membership and to build upon the BlueLincs brand name and logo. Metcalf said that at this time the newsletter took on a new look (Metcalf, *Personal Interview*).

The previous newsletter was a four-page, two color (black and blue) piece, printed on a glossy paper stock. The new newsletter was also four pages in length, but was three color (black, blue and a rotating third color) and printed on matte paper stock. Each quarter the third color would change.

In 1989, the newsletter went through a series of redesigns for each of the first three quarters of the year. Metcalf said that the changes were the result of staff changes personal preferences. The newsletter went from a two-color, eight-page piece on gloss stock; to a two-color, six page piece on dull stock; to a two-color, four-page piece on matte stock (Metcalf, *Personal Interview*).

The third quarter 1989 newsletter design remained relatively constant for nine years. In the first quarter issue of 1998, however, the design was once again

overhauled to reflect a logo change. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma executives decided to drop HMO from the BlueLincs logo. This change also reflected a renewed commitment to meeting member needs, surpassing accreditation requirements and combating negative publicity.

With the newsletter redesign came a reassessment of the newsletter purpose. Linda Sponsler, the current vice president of advertising and public information, and the newsletter editor determined that these needs could be divided into three categories: internal goals, accreditation requirements and customer needs.

### **Internal Goals**

Informing members of their HMO benefits and procedures was one of the top internal goals of BlueLincs Member News. Christine Woolsey, writer for Business Insurance, explains, “Providing employees with the right tools and information to make better health care decisions will not only improve their health status, but also help to immunize employers from painful increases in health plan costs” (Woolsey 3).

In addition, it was believed by the advertising and claims/customer service departments that informed members could have a long term benefit to Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma. Sponsler, the newsletter editor and the claims/customer service vice president, assumed that informed members would be

less likely to generate calls to customer service and less likely to submit faulty or incomplete health care claims (Sponsler, *Departmental Staff Meeting*).

In turn, it was assumed that the reductions in call volume and claims examination would improve internal and national customer service and claims standards, performance standards that are reviewed on a yearly basis. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma's customer service and claims processing performance is evaluated according to National Management Information System (NMIS) guidelines, a division of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association (Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma 1).

Secondly, it was hoped by Sponsler and the editor that BlueLincs Member News would serve as a valuable public relations tool. In the article, "Capturing Customers with a Company Newsletter," published in Agency Sales Magazine, John R. Graham, president of Graham Communications, explains that a newsletter is a fierce marketing weapon, in that:

1. A newsletter will keep you in front of customers and prospects.
2. A newsletter puts you in the right place when a customer is in need.
3. A newsletter helps establish and enhance your credibility.
4. A newsletter transforms your company into a valuable resource.
5. A newsletter draws the customer to you (58-59).

The final internal goal of the publication involved creating a newsletter that members would pick up and read on a regular basis. To find out what makes

members read the newsletter, the vice president and editor decided to do this survey.

In the fourteen years that BlueLincs had published a newsletter, a formal survey had never been conducted. According to the authors of Public Relations: Strategy & Tactics, authors Dennis Wilcox, Philip Ault and Warren Agee, agree that newsletter editors should evaluate readership annually.

“Such an evaluation can help ascertain (1) reader perceptions, (2) the degree to which stories are balanced, (3) kinds of stories that have high reader interest, (4) additional topics that should be covered, (5) credibility of the publication, and (6) the extent which it is meeting organizational objectives” (204).

### **Accreditation Requirements**

In 1991 the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) began accrediting managed care organizations in response to the need for standardized objective information about the quality of these organizations (National par. 3). Today almost half the HMOs in the nation covering three quarters of all HMO enrollees, are currently involved in the NCQA Accreditation process (National par. 4).

The Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma NCQA task force made clear to Sponsler and the newsletter editor that the newsletter was tied to NCQA Accreditation. BlueLincs Member News served as an important record and



showed that BlueLincs was making a diligent effort to inform members of health and wellness issues and programs, as well as benefit and procedural information. And as such, the newsletter is submitted during accreditation review (Breen, *NCQA Taskforce Meeting*).

According to its published definition, “The National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA) is a private, not-for-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of health care. The organization’s primary activities are assessing and reporting on the quality of the nation’s managed care plans, work that has led to partnerships and collaborative efforts with many states, the federal government, employer and consumer groups and many of the nation’s leading corporations and business coalitions. It is governed by a board of directors that includes, employers, consumer and labor representatives, health plans, quality experts, policy makers, and representatives from organized medicine (National par. 1).

During the last nine years NCQA has become the standard in measuring quality health care. In fact, several employers now require or request NCQA Accreditation of the plans with which they do business. Some of the many well-known companies in this category include American Airlines, AT&T, Boeing, Bristol Myers-Squibb, Citibank, Chrysler, Delta Airlines, Federal Express, Ford, GE, GTE, IBM, J.C. Penney, Mobil, NationsBank, PepsiCo, Sara Lee, UPS and Xerox (National par. 4).

When a health plan seeks NCQA Accreditation, it are scored on 60 different standards, each of which fall into five broad categories: Access and Service; Qualified Providers; Staying Healthy; Getting Better; and Living with Illness (National par. 5). According to the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma NCQA task force, BlueLincs Member News has direct impact on three of the five areas: Access and Service; Staying Healthy; and Living with Illness.

Access and Service: The newsletter must inform members of how to best get access to the care and services that they need. It must inform members of the health plan's policy on open patient-doctor discussion of treatment options and grievance procedures (National par. 9).

Staying Healthy: The newsletter must provide health wellness articles to help members maintain good health and avoid illness. It also must provide information on tests and health screenings and when members should get these tests and screenings (National par. 11).

Living with Illness: BlueLincs Member News must also serve as an avenue in which to inform members of programs that are in place to help patients manage chronic conditions such as asthma and diabetes. It also must inform individuals with chronic conditions of scheduled exams and screenings (National par. 13).

### **Customer Needs**

Consumers are targeted by literally thousands of newsletters, direct mailers, brochures and magazines all of which are vying for a captive audience. To

compete against 500 to 3,000 bids for the average American's attention each day, editors of newsletters have to take dramatic steps to grab readers' attention and meet their individual needs (Wylie 1).

To *keep* the reader's attention, a newsletter must be written in an effective and easily understood manner. In the article, "Capturing Customers with a Company Newsletter," published in Agency Sales Magazine, John R. Graham, president of Graham Communications wrote,

"Whether for consumers or business prospects, a good newsletter is designed and written to communicate in ways that make sense to the reader. In other words, a successful newsletter is reader-driven. It helps readers solve a problem and provides them with helpful information. In doing so, it establishes credibility" (57).

Creating a credible source of information with regard to health care will encourage members to actually use the newsletter as a learning tool and create a return audience. In the article, "Benefits: Communicating with Employees" published in Business Insurance, author Christine Woolsey states, "[...] building a better knowledge of health care involves a lot more than simply distributing pamphlets on general health care topics or handing out self-care manuals without directions"(Woolsey 3).

In the same article, John Bunker, a health care consultant with The Wyatt Co., in Washington, states, "You need to empower the consumer. Most patients

are intimidated or in awe of physicians. Giving them a book on self-care isn't enough. You also need to give them training on how to talk to their doctors and their pharmacists and how to ask the right questions" (Woolsey 3).

Woolsey states, "How much direction employers should give their employees varies. For some companies, a simple, quarterly newsletter that includes tips on good health habits or how to talk to a physician may fit the bill. Others may want to distribute self-care manuals" (Woolsey 3).

Thomas Bivins and William E. Ryan explain in How to Produce Creative Publications that journalists all seem to agree on several major criteria for judging whether or not something is newsworthy to a target public. These same criteria apply to newsletters as well.

**Consequence:** Basically, is it something your readers want to know?

**Interest:** People like to read about other people like themselves.

**Timelines:** People like to read about topics with currency.

**Proximity:** The information presented should pertain to events affecting the target audience and occurring locally.

**Prominence:** Readers respond to celebrities or event that are already in the news (390-391).

Nevertheless, no matter how well-written and carefully edited a message may be, readers will pass over poorly designed print materials. Without structure, visual thought and order, a publication will not get the attention it deserves (Bivens and Ryan 39).

Newsletter content and design go hand in hand in gaining readership. “[...] good design attracts and holds readership, while bad design repels and discourages it. Like it or not, we read externally first and internally second, which is to say that we judge publications not only by their covers, but also by their overall appearance” (Bivens and Ryan 39).

### Conclusion

This chapter has examined the history of the newsletter and the theories and principles behind successful communication. Also discussed was the importance of feedback from the target audience to determine if the sender’s messages are received with the proper meaning intact.

Related reader research was examined. In each case, the editor was able to adjust his or her publication to better communicate with the audience.

After reviewing the information pertaining to BlueLincs Member News it is clear that research must be done to determine if the newsletter’s goals are being met. It was determined that during the last 15 years of the publication’s existence, no formal reader research had been conducted.

Prior to this study, it had been assumed that the newsletter’s goals were being met, however the only communication that was occurring was vertical-downward communication. There was no upward-vertical or horizontal communication from the audience.

Simply assuming that communication goals were being met without conducting research is simply relying on the magic bullet theory which has been discussed as an outdated and incorrect theory of communication. This study has been designed to hopefully shed some light on whether or not the target audience is receiving BlueLincs Member News intended communication messages and whether or not the messages are actually getting through to the audience.

## CHAPTER III

### Methodology

#### General

The purpose of this study is to determine how effective BlueLincs HMO's Member News is as a conveyor of important health and benefit information to its members. Health industry interviews and a review of readership survey research served as the basis for developing questions for a mail questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to a sample of BlueLincs members/readers.

#### Research Method

After reviewing various options for gathering reader opinions a readership survey was chosen as the research method. Although the AARP had great success with a personal interview format, this method was rejected due to the benefits of a readership survey outlined below.

**Wider distribution:** Unlike the interview format, mail surveys can reach rural as well as urban homes in any number of counties. The cost factor in getting to several areas is also much less than sending an interviewer to various locations (Erdos 6). This was important for this project since the random sample was drawn from across the state of Oklahoma.

**Less Distribution bias in connection with neighborhood, type of family or individual:** It is not surprising that interviewers often miss a disproportionately large number of interviews among people living in neighborhoods that they regard

as undesirable territory or in wealthy neighborhoods and apartment houses where interviewers are refused admission (Erdos 6). The result is that both the rich and poor can be underrepresented in a survey using personal interviews. Mail, however, gets through and reaches all segments of the population (Erdos 7).

Mail surveys also avoid the problem of interviewees missing individuals who are not home on a regular basis. Individuals who work or travel are difficult for the interviewee to reach, however, mail will be waiting for him/her (Erdos 7) upon return.

**No interviewer bias:** Getting unbiased answers in an interview situation is very difficult after the respondent's opinion has been filtered through the mind and writing style of the interviewee. Even the interviewee's appearance can have an impact on an individual's responses (Erdos 8).

**Better chance of a truthful reply:** When in an interview situation, people don't want to appear prejudiced, stupid, poor or boastful to an interviewer. Individuals are more likely to provide honest responses when completing an unsigned questionnaire addressed to an impersonal research firm in a distant city (Erdos 8).

**Better chance of a thoughtful reply:** In an interview situation, answers are required immediately providing little time for thoughtful reflection. A mail survey can be done at a person's leisure when he/she can give the questions thought and/or seek help from a family member (Erdos 9).



**Time saving:** A mailing can be done in a matter of weeks depending on the scope of the survey and the kind of postage used (Erdos 10).

**Centralized control:** It is much easier to keep the quality of data-gathering uniformly high by means of the centralized control possible in the mail survey (Erdos 10).

**Cost-saving resulting in more flexibility per dollar spent:** The combined costs of a mailing piece, postage, and incentives offered to respondents are usually considerably less than the training, briefing, supervision and checking of interviewers (Erdos 10).

Although the survey method was chosen for this research project, it is also important to look at the serious drawbacks of this research method.

1. The returns from mailed questionnaires sent to the general public are usually very low, often ranging from about 10 to 20 percent (Parten 95).
2. Since the informant fills in the data on the questionnaire without the assistance of an investigator, he may misinterpret questions, omit essential items, or send in material which cannot be put in form for tabulation, making it necessary to discard many of the questions (Parten 95).
3. Checks on the honesty and reliability of returns are difficult to devise when the personal interviewer does not see and size up the informant (Parten 95).
4. It is practically impossible to return unsatisfactory or incomplete schedules to the informant for correction (Parten 95).

5. An up-to-date address list of potential survey informants is difficult to find (Parten 95).

6. Mail returns from the last third of the respondents come in slowly; hence the mail survey must be spread over a relatively long period, if a high percentage of returns is to be secured (Parten 95).

Several research surveys have been conducted that demonstrate many of the pros and cons of readership survey techniques. In all cases, a random sample was drawn from a targeted segment of individuals. In most cases, the sample was drawn from a group of magazine subscribers or organization members.

Of the questionnaires reviewed, the number of questions varied from a high of 76 (Beard 81) to a low of 25 (Cooper 76). One would think that the number of questions would have an effect on the number of responses. However, further investigation, proved this theory incorrect.

John Herschel Beard surveyed 1,400 members of the Oklahoma Banker's Association regarding their reader preferences of regular feature material and reader preferences in identifying new subject matter which could be of interest to readers in future articles (7). Within a month of mailing the questionnaire, the majority had been returned. After another month 1,246 or 89 percent of the questionnaires had been returned (Beard 16). This represented the highest response rate from all the theses and dissertations that were reviewed.

It appears instead that the single most determining factor in response rates is the commitment respondents feel to the organization that is conducting the survey. Melvin L. DeFleur and Sandra Ball-Rokeach state in their book, Theories of Mass Communication:

“Individual differences in cognitive structures, category subcultures, and social relationships among members of audiences lead them to selective patterns of attention, perception, recall, and action regarding specific forms of media content” (198).

Therefore, the stronger the membership ties, the more likely individuals are to pay attention to a survey. In addition, their perceived responsibility to the organization could have an impact on whether or not they will take the appropriate action to complete the questionnaire.

It was difficult to predict the response rate of the BlueLincs HMO sample. Although insurance holders are referred to as members, in many cases membership may not be voluntary. Employers frequently choose insurance plans for their employees, and employees may or may not pay an out-of-pocket premium for their membership. Although each contract holder received a free copy of Member News, he is not directly subscribing to the newsletter.

### **Sampling Method**

The sample size was determined by the need to have an acceptable margin of error. After discussing the survey goals and budget with a thesis advisory

committee, it was determined that a sample of 498 would be appropriate. This allowed a margin of error of plus or minus three percent, leaving the level of confidence at 97 percent.

The random sample was drawn from a database of current BlueLincs HMO contract holders (N = 30,242). Contract holders represent the individuals who have signed a contract with BlueLincs HMO. Although one person may sign a contract with BlueLincs HMO, he or she may add his or her dependents or his or her spouse to their health insurance plan. By only sending the survey to contract holders, the chance that duplicate surveys would go to any one household was eliminated. The database is updated quarterly, adding new members and deleting former members who have left the health plan.

A computer program for generating random numbers was used, and the number 23 was randomly selected as the starting point. Starting with the 23rd name, every 61st name was selected to the end of the listing, and back to the starting point until 500 names had been drawn.

### **Framework of the Questionnaire**

The main concerns of this survey were to find out if Member News was actually read by BlueLincs HMO members, whether the newsletter was clearly communicating important benefit and health information, and whether the information contained in the newsletter was having an impact on members behavior. The final point of analysis was to determine the ages of the readers and

compare that to the three categories of interest (readership rates, newsletter clarity and impact). Therefore the questionnaire was divided into four main categories.

### **Category I – Readership Rates**

1. Respondents were asked to report what percentage of the last three issues of Member News they had read. Answers from this question would serve as an indicator of whether or not *BlueLincs* Member News was gaining the attention of the membership and whether or not it was read on a consistent basis.
2. Respondents were then asked what percentage they read of specific article types. For this measurement, the newsletter content was divided into three main categories: wellness (nutrition, exercise and stress management); disease prevention/management (disease specific articles such as diabetes, high blood pressure and immunizations); member benefits (grievance procedures, staff announcements, how to use your benefits). For each category respondents were asked to fill the appropriate percentage that they read articles falling into each topic.

This question served as an indicator of reader preference for specific types of articles. This is important in determining what type of articles members are more likely to read. In the future this could help the editorial staff in determining newsletter content.

3. Members were then asked to choose on a sliding scale (1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree) whether they preferred to read 1) stories with illustrations and 2) short stories of less than one-half page.

These questions provided information regarding members' format preferences. This information should assist the editor in satisfying reader preferences which will hopefully make the publication more enjoyable to read and possibly increase readership by giving readers what they want.

### **Category II -- Communication**

1. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale how understandable *MemberNews* articles were (1 = easy to understand; 5 = difficult to understand).

This question indicates whether or not the material contained in the newsletter is written at the appropriate education level. If the articles are difficult to understand, the editor may need to write articles geared to a lower educational level. Clearly this will provide valuable information to the editor in reaching the target audience and satisfying reader needs.

2. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale whether articles in Member News provided too much or too little technical information (1 = too little technical information; 5 = too much technical information).

This question serves as an indicator of whether or not articles contained in Member News are not technical enough. In other words, if a person rates the articles as having too little technical information, the editor may need to write to a

more highly educated reader. Likewise, if articles are rated as having “too much technical” information, the editor may want to look at simplifying industry jargon into laymen’s terms.

3. Finally respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale whether articles in Member News provided readers with too much detailed information or not enough detailed information (1 = not enough detailed information; 5 = too much detailed information).

This question serves as an indicator of whether or not articles contained in the newsletter provide too much information on particular issues. Perhaps the readers would prefer streamlined articles that contain only important facts and not background and/or unnecessary details. On the other hand, members may need more detailed information to understand complicated issues. In each case, meeting members’ needs could make articles more enjoyable to read and increase readership.

### **Category III: Impact**

1. Respondents were asked if they had attended any of the free health and wellness classes advertised in the newsletter.

This question is an indicator of whether or not the newsletter is causing people to take action. If readers are not attending the free health and wellness classes perhaps the space allocated to class listings could be better used for another topic of interest.

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2. Respondents were then asked how many family members had applied health care guidelines found in Member News.

This question served as an indicator of whether or not members find the health information contained in Member News useful and worth implementing.

3. Respondents were asked to rank six health care sources (BlueLincs Member News, daily newspaper, family, family doctor, friends, other health publications) in order from 1-6 the order in which they received their health care information (1 = the source from which they received the most health care information; 6 = the source from which they received the least health care information).

This question serves as an indicator of how members perceive BlueLincs Member News. If members do not perceive MemberNews as a health information source, perhaps the newsletter should change its focus or determine ways in which it could become a health information source, such as including articles from reliable outside experts (American Heart Association, American Diabetes Association).

#### **Category IV: Demographics**

1. Respondents were asked to report if they male or female.

This question could aid in the content of the newsletter. If the majority of readers are female, perhaps the articles could be geared to that segment of the population. Articles could include topics on child care, pregnancy and

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mammography. If the readership is male dominated, perhaps information on prostate exams, sports injuries and colon health would be more appropriate.

2. Respondents were asked to choose their highest level of education (high school graduate, two-year college degree, four-year college degree, masters, doctorate).

If they did not have a college degree they were asked to fill in how many years of post-high school education they completed. If they did not have a high school degree, they were asked to fill in how many years of education they had completed.

This question serves an important purpose: determining the educational level of readers. The newsletter should be written to match educational level of the readers.

3. Respondents were asked to categorize themselves as single, married, divorced or widowed.

This question can help to determine the content of the publication. If the majority of readers are widowed, the editor might want to consider implementing articles on the effects of depression or the importance of social activity. If the majority of readers are married, perhaps articles on conflict resolution, balancing children and marriage, or cooking for two would be more appropriate.

4. Respondents were asked how many years they had been a member of BlueLincs HMO.

This is an indicator for newsletter content. If the majority of members have been with the health plan for a short period of time, the editor might want to consider re-running or recycling important member benefit articles on a yearly or semi-annual basis.

5. Respondents were asked what type of coverage they had (self, self and spouse; self and dependent(s); or self, spouse and dependent(s)).

This information is helpful for the editor for article content. If most readers have individual membership, articles regarding dependent coverage and procedures may not need to run on a regular basis.

6. Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale how satisfied they were with their health plan coverage (1 = very satisfied; 5 = very dissatisfied).

This question may indicate additional research that may need to be conducted. Perhaps the newsletter could incorporate a forum for reader questions or concerns.

7. Respondents were asked if BlueLines was their only coverage. If it was not, they were asked to check all categories that apply (spouse has additional or separate coverage at work; we have additional private coverage; child(ren) have separate health coverage.

This is an indicator of whether or not a family could be getting more than one newsletter from more than one health insurance company. If the majority of households are covered by more than one plan, research may need to be conducted

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regarding other newsletters. Perhaps BlueLincs Member News provides repetitive information or is mailed at the same time as other company newsletters. The editor may need to think of ways to set the BlueLincs newsletter apart.

8. Lastly, members were given the opportunity to provide other comments or suggestions.

This provides the members with an open forum to discuss their own personal preferences and suggestions regarding the newsletter.

### **Questionnaire Format**

The questionnaire was inserted into the fourth quarter Member News letter to persons comprising the random sample. The questionnaire was printed on card stock and included a self adhesive strip so that when folded it acted as a self-mailer. The address and postage permit were printed on the outside of the folded piece. The questionnaire was coded for tracking purposes.

The questionnaire was kept short and simple. The sections were arranged in the order previously discussed (the questionnaire is included in Appendix A).

### **Survey Pre-test**

Eight individuals were selected and provided a copy of the cover letter and questionnaire. Three individuals were employees of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma's advertising department and five of the individuals were insurance holders who worked outside of the insurance industry. The packet was delivered to these individuals on December 7, 1998.

## **Response Rate**

To draw the readers' attention to the survey, the questionnaire was printed on a one-page oversized sheet. The letter of transmittal was printed on BlueLines letterhead and signed by the vice president of advertising and communications (a copy of the cover letter is included in Appendix B). In the book Surveys, Polls and Samples, author Mildred Parten reinforces this approach, "A letter of transmittal soliciting cooperation should accompany the questionnaire blank. It should be written on the official stationery of one of the survey sponsors" (386).

Instructions for completing the survey were contained in the cover letter and mailing instructions were printed at the bottom of the survey as well as deadline and return mail information in case the cover letter was lost. The survey was coded to identify respondents who returned their questionnaires from the first mailing. This enabled the researcher to organize an accurate second mailing.

## **Mailing Schedule**

Survey packets were sent in the December/January issue of Member News. Respondents were given a due date of January 30, 1999, to return the questionnaire. The due date was included in the cover letter and questionnaire. The newsletter and packets were sent on January 7, 1999.

On February 8, 1999, follow-up packages were sent to those who had not responded to the first mailing. The package contents included another

questionnaire, the same letter included with the original questionnaire, plus a reminder and deadline extension notice, as well as a BlueLincs HMO pen

The reminder notice was printed on bright yellow paper in blue ink to grab the attention of the recipient (The reminder notice is included in Appendix C). It has been found that a personal touch in the letter of transmittal is quite effective in bringing in return. A postscript which looks as if it were written by hand or a personal signature of the sender whose name appears on the stationery have proved effective (Parten 356).

### **Statistical Analysis**

Statistical analysis was conducted through the Oklahoma State University Graduate Studies Department with the help of Dr. Jim Lackey using SPSS programming. The statistical tests used are further discussed in chapter IV, included frequency counts, randomized ANOVA, Oneway ANOVA, Tukey and Independent T-test.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

It is assumed that the respondents answered the questions accurately, and with complete understanding and honesty. The questionnaire format limited responses, while the open-ended questions required respondents to take time to think about the question. The open-ended questions made coding difficult, since answers varied greatly. Responses only hold true for this population at this time.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Overview**

Chapter IV looks at the relationship between the five independent variables of gender, age, education, income and marital status with dependent variables including readership frequency, preference, understanding and impact. It also provides explanation of the statistically significant findings.

#### **General**

This study was designed to determine reader needs, interests, opinions and basic understanding of BlueLincs MemberNews. BlueLincs members were surveyed on their interest on various topics contained in the newsletter and the format in which these topics were presented. They were also surveyed on their understanding of the content and whether or not they use the information contained in the newsletter. This helps to determine the newsletter's perceived credibility and usefulness.

In an attempt to determine the newsletter's perceived credibility and usefulness, a questionnaire was sent to 498 randomly selected members. The first mailing yielded only 30 responses or a six-percent response rate. A cover letter and one-page, oversized questionnaire was mailed to respondents on January 7, 1999.

The same questionnaire and cover letter along with a reminder attachment was mailed on February 8, 1999, to those who did not return the first questionnaire. Responses to the second mailing were due back on March 15, 1999. The second mailing yielded 97 additional responses. In all, one-hundred and twenty-seven questionnaires were returned after two mailings, which gave a 25.5 percent response rate.

### Description of Respondents

**Gender:**

The demographics of this sample revealed that more women than men responded to the survey.

**TABLE I**  
**Description of Respondents by Gender**  
**N = 122**

	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Male	51	41.8%
Female	71	58.2
Total	122	100%

More than 58 percent of respondents were female (N = 71) compared to the percentage of men who responded to the questionnaire (48.8%, N = 51).

**Age:**

The majority of respondents were upper-middle age. Table II shows the ages of the respondents.

**TABLE II**  
**Description of Respondents by Age**  
**N = 121**

---

	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Age 30 and under	23	19%
31 - 40	29	24
41 - 50	28	23.1
51 - 60	33	27.3
Age 61 and over	8	6.6
Total	121	100%

---

The majority of respondents were between the ages of 51 - 60 (27.3%, N=121). The second highest percentage of respondents 24 percent were between the ages of 31 - 40 (N= 29). The percentage of respondents in the 61 and over category (6.6%) had the lowest response rate.



**Marital Status:**

The majority of respondents were married. Table III shows respondents' marital status.

**TABLE III**  
**Description of Respondents by Marital Status**  
**N = 121**

<u>Marital Status</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
Single	22	18.2%
Married	88	72.7
Divorced	8	6.6
Widowed	3	2.5
Total	121	100%

The highest percentage, 72.7%, of respondents were married (N = 88) followed by those who were single, 18.2% (N = 22). A small minority of respondents were divorced, 6.6%, and widowed, 2.5%.

**Education:**

The highest level of education completed by the majority of respondents was high school. Table IV outlines the educational level of the respondents.

**TABLE IV**  
**Education Completed**  
**N = 151**

---

<u>Degree</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
High School Graduate	61	40.4%
Two-years or less Post-High School	31	20.5
2.1 - 4 years Post-High School	4	2.6
4.1 - 6 years Post-High School	1	.7
6.1 or more Post-High School	2	1.3
Two-year College Degree	17	11.3
Four-year College Degree	25	16.6
Master's	10	6.6
Doctorate	0	0
Total	151	100%

---

Sixty one of the respondents (40.4%) reported completing high school. The second most commonly reported educational achievement was a two years or less of post-high school education (N = 31 or 20.5%).

**Household Income:**

Respondents were asked their annual household income. This was an open-ended question on the survey, therefore reported income was grouped into the following categories: \$25,000 and less; \$25,001 - \$50,000; \$50,001 - \$75,000; \$76,001 - \$100,000; and \$100,001 and more. The income demographics of the respondents are reported in Table VI.

**TABLE VI**  
**Description of Respondents by Income**  
**N = 80**

<u>Income</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
\$25,000 and under	13	16.25%
\$25,001 - \$50, 000	38	47.5
\$50,001 - \$75,000	18	22.5
\$75,001 - \$100,000	9	11.25
\$100,001 - and over	2	2.5
Total	80	100%

The majority of respondents (47.5%) had incomes of between \$25,001 - \$50,000 (N = 38). The next highest income category was \$50,001 - \$75,000 with 18 respondents (22.5 %). The category with the least respondents included those households earning \$100,001 and over. This category only accounted for 2.5% of total respondents (N = 2)

### **Years of Health Plan Membership:**

Respondents were asked how long they had been a member of a BlueLincs HMO health plan. Table VII outlines the responses.

**TABLE VII**  
**Years of Health Plan Membership**  
**N = 105**

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<u>Years of Membership</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0 - 5	82	78.1%
6 -10	17	16.2
11 +	6	5.7
Total	105	100%

---

The majority; 82 (N=105) (78.1%) of respondents had been members of BlueLincs HMO for five years or less. This was an open-ended question on the survey, therefore; once the surveys were returned responses were categorized into years of membership: 0 - 5 years; 6 - 10 years; 11 years plus.

**Health Coverage Type:**

Respondents were asked to describe the type of coverage that they held.

Table VIII details the breakdown coverage of the respondents.

**TABLE VIII**  
**Respondents' Coverage Type**  
**N = 119**

---

<u>Coverage Type</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage of Responses</u>
Self	51	42.9%
Self and Spouse	25	21
Self and Dependent(s)	14	11.7
Self, Spouse and Dependent(s)	29	24.4
Total	119	100%

---

The majority of respondents either had individual policy coverage 51 members (42.9%) or had family coverage, 29 (24.4%) self, spouse, dependent(s).

**Health Plan Satisfaction:**

Respondents were asked to rate their health plan satisfaction on a five-point scale (1 = very satisfied; 5 = very dissatisfied). Table VIV outlines respondents overall satisfaction.

**TABLE VIV**  
**Respondents' Health Plan Satisfaction**  
**N = 120**

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<b><u>Ranking</u></b>	<b><u>N</u></b>	<b><u>Percentage</u></b>
1 (very satisfied)	38	31.7%
2	37	30.8
3	33	27.5
4	8	6.7
5	4	3.3
Total	120	100%

---

The majority of respondents said that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” (62.5%) with 31.7% reporting that they were “very satisfied.” Only four respondents stated that they were “very dissatisfied” (3.3%).

## Readership Rates

### Readership Rates of the Previous Three Issues:

Readers were asked what percentage of the last three issues of Member News that they had read. This was an open-ended question on the survey; therefore, once the surveys were returned responses were categorized into percentage categories of 0% - 25%, 26% - 50%, 51% - 75%, and 76% to 100% for convenience.

**TABLE X**  
**Readership Rates: General**  
**N=110**

---

<u>Percentage Read</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0 - 25%	46	41.8%
26 - 50	24	21.8
51 - 75	12	11
76 - 100	28	25.4
Total	110	100%

---

The majority of respondents (41.8%) read 25% or less of the last three issues of Member News and 63.6% of respondents reported reading one-half or less of the previous three issues of the newsletter. Only one-fourth (25.4% and N = 28) of the respondents reported reading 75% or more of the newsletter.

### **Readership Rates By Article Type:**

Respondents who read part or some of the last three issues of Member News were asked to allot a percentage of the following article topics according to the percentage that they read them. These categories included wellness (nutrition, exercise, stress management), disease prevention and management (disease specific articles such as diabetes, high blood pressure, immunizations) and member benefits (grievance procedures, staff announcements, how to use your benefits).

Tables XI - XIII outline readership rates by article topic according to percentages. This was an open-ended question on the survey; therefore, once the surveys were returned responses were categorized into percentage categories 0% - 25%, 26% - 50%, 51% - 75%, and 76% to 100% for convenience.

According to percentages, the mostly widely read article topic dealt with member benefits. Nearly half of the respondents reported reading 76% - 100% of articles of this type.



**TABLE XI**  
**Readership Rates by Article Topic**

**Wellness**  
**(nutrition, exercise, stress management)**  
**N = 84**

---

<u>Percentage Read</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0% - 25%	19	22.6%
26 - 50	17	20.3%
51 - 75	12	14.2
76 - 100	36	42.9
Total	84	100%

---

Of those respondents who had read some of the last three issues of Member News, the majority (42.9%) said they read 76% or more of articles dealing with health wellness issues. Ironically, the same percentage (42.9%) said that they read 50% less of articles dealing with health and wellness issues.

**TABLE XII**  
**Readership Rates by Article Topic**

**Disease Prevention/Management**  
**(Disease-specific articles such as diabetes, high blood pressure,**  
**immunizations)**  
**N = 83**

---

<u>Percentage Read</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0% - 25%	27	32.6%
26 - 50	18	21.7
51 - 75	8	9.6
76 - 100	30	36.1
Total	83	100%

---

Of those respondents who had read BlueLincs Member News 30% had read 76% or more of articles on disease prevention and management; however, approximately the same percentage of respondents (32.6) read 25% or less of this article type. More than half of the respondents (N = 45) read 50% or less of this article type.

**TABLE XIII**

**Readership Rates by Article Topic**

**Member Benefits**  
**(Grievance procedures, staff announcements, how to use your benefits)**  
**N = 81**

---

<u>Percentage Read</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0% - 25%	20	24.7%
26 - 50	14	17.3
51 - 75	7	8.6
76 - 100	40	49.4
Total	81	100%

---

Of all the article types, it appears that topics covering member benefits were the most often read by those individuals who reported having read some of the last previous issues of Member News. Forty percent reported reading 76% (N = 40) or more of articles regarding member benefits. In addition 47% of respondents reported reading 50% or more of this article type.

### Readership Preference of Illustrated Articles:

Respondents were asked to rate their preference of articles containing illustrations on a five degree scale ( 1 = strongly agree [to read articles with illustrations] to 5 = strongly disagree [to read articles with illustrations]). Table XIV outlines the readers' responses.

**TABLE XIV**  
**Readership Preference of**  
**Articles with Illustrations**  
**N = 86**

---

<b>Rating</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1 (strongly agree)	22	25.6%
2	23	26.7
3	32	37.2
4	5	5.8
5 (strongly disagree)	4	4.7
Total	86	100%

---

The majority of readers reported that they either agreed or strongly agreed that they preferred stories with illustrations (52.3% and N = 45) or did not have a strong preference for or against stories containing illustrations (32% and N = 32).

### Readership Preference of Article Length:

Respondents were asked to rate on a scale of one to five their preference of stories of one-half page or less (1 = strongly agree [with short stories less than one-half page] and 5 = strongly disagree [with short stories defined as less than one-half page]). Table XV outlines respondents preferences by percentage.

**TABLE XV**  
**Readership Preferences of Articles of**  
**Less Than One-Half Page**  
**N = 85**

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<u>Rating</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1 (strongly agree)	31	36.5%
2	27	31.8
3	24	28.2
4	3	3.5
5 (strongly disagree)	0	0
Total	85	100%

---

The majority (68.3%) of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that they preferred short stories of one-half page or less (N = 58). No respondents strongly disagreed that they preferred to read articles of one-half page or less.

### Differences Between Respondents Age And Story Length Preference:

A OneWay ANOVA was conducted to determine whether there was a difference between age groups and their preference of short stories of one-half page or less. The calculated  $F'$  was 2.702. The critical  $F'$  value at  $df = 4$  and 77 at

a 95% confidence level was 2.53. The calculated  $F$  value met and exceeded the critical value; therefore, there is a significant difference, and the null hypothesis is rejected. At a 95% confidence level there is a statistically significant difference between age groups and their preference for articles of one-half page or less.

A Tukey Test was conducted to determine between which age groups there was a significant difference. When comparing respondents ages 30 and under to respondents between 41 and 50, there was a significance level of .041, therefore; at a >95% confidence level, the null hypothesis is rejected. A significant difference between age group and article length preference exists between age groups of 30 and under and 41 to 50, with ages 30 and under having a stronger preference toward short stories of one-half page or less.

## Communication

### Respondents Ease of Understanding:

Respondents were asked to rate along a five-point scales the ease with which the articles in *MemberNews* are to understand (1 = are easy to understand; 5 = difficult to understand). Table XVI outlines the reader responses.

**TABLE XVI**  
**Respondent's Ease of Understanding Articles**  
**N = 84**

---

<b><u>Rating</u></b>	<b><u>N</u></b>	<b><u>Percentage</u></b>
1 (easy to understand)	40	47.6%
2	21	25
3	21	25
4	2	2.4
5 (difficult to understand)	0	0
Total	84	100%

---

The majority of the respondents (47.6%) found the articles easy to understand (N = 40). More than 72% rated the ease of understanding as a one or two with one being “easy to understand.” None of the respondents rated Member News articles as difficult to understand.

**Respondent Opinions of  
Technical Content:**

Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale whether or not *MemberNews* provided enough technical information within the newsletter. On the scale of one to five; 1 = Don't provide enough technical information and 5 = Provides too much technical information. Table XVII outlines the reader responses by percentage.

**TABLE XVII**  
**Respondents' Opinion of Technical Content**  
**N = 80**

<b>Ranking</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1 (don't provide enough technical info.)	7	8.8%
2	11	13.7
3	52	65
4	8	10
5 (provide too much technical info.)	2	2.5
Total	80	100%

The majority of respondents (65%) were neutral on this issue (N = 52) or leaned toward the statement that the articles did not provide enough technical information (respondents rating a one or two = 22.5% with N = 18).



### Respondents Opinions of Detailed Information:

Respondents were asked to rate on a five-point scale whether or not they felt that the newsletter provided too much or too little detailed information (1 = don't provide enough detailed information; 5 = provide too much detailed information). Table XVIII illustrates their responses.

**TABLE XVIII**  
**Respondents' Opinions of Article Detail**  
**N = 80**

<u>Ranking</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
1(don't provide enough detailed info.)	6	7.5%
2	16	20
3	53	66.3
4	4	5
5(provide too much detailed info.)	1	1.2
Total	80	100%

The majority of respondents were neutral on this issue as well. Fifty three (66.3%) of the respondents were neutral on whether or not the newsletter contained too much or not enough detailed information. Of the remainder of respondents, the majority (27.5%, N = 22) leaned toward the newsletter not providing enough detailed information.

## Impact

### Readership Participation In Free Health and Wellness Classes:

Readers were asked how many family members had attended the free health and wellness classes advertised in Member News. Readership responses are detailed in Table XVIV.

**TABLE XVIV**  
**Readership Participation in**  
**Free Health and Wellness Classes**  
**N = 85**

---

<u>No. Attended</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0	80	94.1%
1	3	3.5
2	1	1.2
3	1	1.2
Total	85	100%

---

The number of respondents (N = 80) who did not attend one of the free health and wellness classes advertised in member news represented the majority of respondents (94.1%). A very small minority (5.9%) attended the free seminars, with the majority attending one (N = 3).

**Reader Implementation of  
Health Care Guidelines Found in Member News:**

Respondents were asked how many family members applied the health care guidelines found in Member News during the last year. Reader responses are detailed in Table XX.

**TABLE XX**  
**Application of Health Care Guidelines**  
**by Readers and Their Family Members**  
N = 77

---

<u>No. of Family Members</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
0	48	62.3%
1	19	24.7
2	9	11.7
3	0	0
4	0	0
5	1	1.3
Total	77	100%

---

The majority of readers and their families (62.3%) did not apply any of the health care guidelines found in Member News. Of the remainder, 36.4% applied the health care guidelines found in Member News to one or two members of a household.

**Readers' Main Source of Health Information:**

Respondents were asked to rank the following sources of health information according to a six-point scale (1 = the source from which they received the most health information and 6 = the source from which they received the least health information). Table XXI details respondents ranking of BlueLincs Member News.

**TABLE XXI**  
**Respondents' Ranking of Member News**  
**As a Source of Information**  
**N = 75**

<b><u>Ranking</u></b>	<b><u>N</u></b>	<b><u>Percentage</u></b>
1 (receives the least health info.)	11	14.7%
2	9	12
3	11	14.7
4	18	23.9
5	15	20
6 (receives the least health info.)	11	14.7
Total	75	100%

The majority of respondents (23.9%) ranked Member News four out of six, with six being the source from which they received the least health information (N = 18). Of those who read MemberNews, 41.4% ranked it as one of the top three sources from which they receive health information (N = 31).

**Readers' Most Popular  
Source of Health Information:**

Table XXII outlines the frequency with which readers ranked various sources of health information as their number one source. Each test was run separately as a frequency count, therefore; the total number of respondents for each test varies. In the following table, N represents the number of respondents ranking each source as a one (1 = the source from which respondents get the most health information). And "Total" represents the total number of respondents in that particular frequency count. "Percentage" is calculated on each test and totaled individually.

**TABLE XXII  
Readers' Ranking of Their  
Number One Source of Health Information\***

<u>Information Source</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Percentage Ranking</u> <u>No. 1</u>
Member News	11	75	14.7
Daily Newspaper	12	69	17.4
Family	11	71	15.5
Family Doctor	34	76	44.7
Friends	7	71	9.9
Other Health Publications	8	67	11.9
Other (General)	7	14	50
Total	153	443	164.1%

\* Percentages do not equal 100 percent, since each test was calculated separately

The most popular source of health information for the respondents was their family doctor with 44.7 percent of respondents ranking a family doctor as the source from which they receive the most health information. Member News, the

daily newspaper, family and other health publications are roughly equal in their popularity when weighed against the number of respondents in each category.

The category of “other” was not only ranked by respondents, but a blank was available for respondents to list a description of “other.” These descriptions can be found in Appendix C.

#### **Comments by Respondents:**

This research contained one open-ended question asking respondent to offer suggestions or comments. This question was intended to relate to the newsletter being studied; however, many respondents took this opportunity to offer suggestions to the health plan rather than the newsletter. These comments are contained in Appendix D.

#### **Summary**

Analysis of this data show that the majority of respondents, independent of age, gender or education level, agree on most issues regarding the newsletter. It appears that the majority of respondents did not read Member News newsletter; however, those who did read the newsletter read the majority of the articles. They also read articles of all types to varying degrees. However, the greatest readership seemed to be achieved through articles that discussed member benefits.

The majority of respondents were either neutral or preferred articles with illustrations and short stories of one-half page or less. With regard to story size, there was a significant difference between age groups. Respondents ages 30 and

under had stronger preference toward stories of less than one-half page than respondents in the 41 - 50 age group.

The majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that the articles were easy to understand. Most of the respondents were neutral with regard to whether there was too much or too little technical content and article detail.

The great majority (94%) of respondents did not attend any of the health and wellness classes advertised in Member News. In addition, the majority (61%) of respondents did not have anyone in their family apply the health care guidelines found in Member News. The highest percentage of respondents ranked Member News as their fourth source out of six possible sources for health information. Respondents seemed to rely on their family doctor for the majority of their health information (44.7 percent).

The highest percentage of respondents were women between the ages 51 - 60. They were married with high school being the highest level of education completed. The majority had been BlueLincs members for less than five years and either had individual policy coverage or family coverage.

Recommendation for use of this data and a summary of conclusions are contained in the following chapter.

## CHAPTER V

### Summary, Conclusions, and Recommendations

#### Overview

Chapter V offers a summary and conclusions of the readership survey conducted on BlueLincs Member News. It also offers suggestions for further research and recommendations to managed health care newsletter editors.

#### Summary

When a company enrolls its employees in BlueLincs HMO, a customer retention representative provides new members with a member packet and explains health plan benefits in a personal presentation format. Following this initial contact, the member newsletter serves as the company's main member communications vehicle.

This study was designed to determine whether BlueLincs Member News was effectively communicating important member health benefit information. Respondents to the survey were asked questions regarding their readership habits and preferences; whether or not they felt that the information was easy to understand; whether or not they felt the information contained in the newsletter was useful; and questions regarding reader demographics.

A study of BlueLincs Member News had never been conducted in the 14 years that the newsletter had been published. This study has been designed as a starting point for further reader research.



It is recommended that Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma continue to conduct reader research of the BlueLincs Member News newsletter. It is recommended that if a readership survey is conducted in the future that it is mailed at a different time of year in hopes of boosting response rates. This reader survey was mailed during the Christmas holiday season which could have hampered return rates.

It is also suggested that the editor look at other research options such as focus groups, personal interviews, phone surveys, and town meetings. One-to-one contact could create open dialogue and fine-tune the broad findings of this study.

As the findings in Chapter IV show, the majority of respondents (72.7%) were married (72.7%) women (58.2%) between the ages of 41 - 60 (50.4%). The highest level of education for the majority of respondents was high school (54%), however; most high school graduates (62.2%) had completed two years or less post-high school education (81.6%). Respondents' income ranged from less than \$25,000 to more than \$100,000, however, the greatest percentage (47.5%) of reporting households had an annual income that ranged between \$25,000 - \$50,000.

As the predominant reader population consists of married, middle-aged, women without a college education, it is suggested that the editor gear articles to areas of interest to this population. Perhaps articles regarding family and female health issues would be well received by this demographic. Additionally, it is

further recommended that the editor write articles to match the educational level of the readership.

Future surveys could focus more on the demographics of the respondents, so the editor could further target his or her article content to the membership. Questions that should be addressed include: Are most of the newsletter readers working or stay-at-home moms? Do the readers work in blue collar or white collar jobs? Do the majority of readers live in rural or urban areas?

The majority (78.1%) of individuals who responded to this survey had been health plan members for less than five years and most (42.9%) had individual health plan coverage. The majority (61.4%) of these respondents were “very satisfied” or “satisfied” with their health plan.

Because the majority of readers are new to the health plan, health benefit information should be consistently addressed. Stories covering health benefit information should be recycled on an annual basis due to the health plan’s membership turnover. It is also recommended that the editor investigate putting a three-hole punch in the newsletter so that benefit information could be saved and referred to on an as-needed basis.

With regard to readership rates, it appeared that more respondents did not read or read very little of the newsletter. More than 41% said they read 25% or less of the newsletter. More than 63% said they read less than 50% of the newsletter. Only 36% read 50% or more of the newsletter.

It is suggested that a follow-up study attempt to determine why members do not read the newsletter. Are members too busy? Is the content of interest? Is the design enticing?

Other research is suggested that would determine what kinds of articles members are more inclined to read. Do members prefer bulleted items of information rather than articles in paragraph form? Do members like to read member testimonials? Do members prefer reading articles by guest columnists?

It is also suggested that additional research be conducted to investigate other ways of communicating with members that might garner greater attention. Would a slick, four-color biannual magazine attract more interest? Would a video or cassette tape with pertinent benefit information receive more attention? Would a town meeting attract membership? Does the membership have Internet access; if so would it be of benefit to put information on the company web site or send e-mail notices to an Internet mailing list?

When respondents read the newsletter, it appeared the most popular article topics dealt with member benefits (grievance procedures, staff announcements, how to use your benefits). Nearly 50% (49.4%) of respondents read 76% or more of this article type.

The second most popular article type was health and wellness (nutrition, exercise, stress management). Nearly 43% (42.9%) of respondents said they read

health and wellness articles. Nevertheless, the same amount (42.9%) read 50% or less of this article type.

It is recommended that the editor continue to run, and even focus on, health benefit information stories since this story type seems to be the most popular. It is also recommended that the editor consider organizing the newsletter according to reader preferences. This could include placing benefit information articles on the front page and continuing the copy inside the newsletter to help draw readers into other articles.

The editor might also want to consider weighting newsletter content according to reader preferences. In this instance, the majority of space would be given to benefit information, followed by health and wellness articles and the least amount of space allotted for disease management information.

The majority (52.3%) of respondents strongly agreed or agreed they preferred to read stories with illustrations. Respondents (63.3%) also said that they strongly agreed or agreed that they preferred to read articles of one-half page or less in length.

Age proved to be an indicator of reader preference toward stories of one-half page or less. A OneWay ANOVA and Tukey test were conducted and a statistically significant relationship was found between age and reader preference regarding story length. Respondents age 30 and under had a stronger preference

toward stories of one-half page or less than respondents between the age of 41 and 50. This relationship was proven at a 95 percent confidence level.

This finding is interesting in that the majority of respondents, as discussed earlier, were between the ages of 41 - 60. Therefore, it is recommended that the editor be cognizant of story length and only increase story length if the subject material warrants a lengthier discussion.

Respondents found the articles in Member News to be easy to understand. On a scale of one to five (1 = easy to understand and 5 = difficult to understand), the majority (72.6%) of respondents rated articles a one or two for ease of understanding. It is suggested that the editor continue to write the newsletter at the current reading level.

With regard to technical content and detail of information, the majority of respondents were neutral. Sixty-five percent were neutral regarding whether or not the newsletter contained too much or too little technical content, and 66.3% were neutral regarding whether or not the newsletter contained too much or too little article detail.

With regard to the amount of detail and technical content, it appears that one of two things existed. The newsletter is providing the correct amount of detail and technical content or the respondents did not fully understand the question. Until further research can be conducted, it is recommended that the editor continue to include the same amount of detail and technical content.

For the most part, readers did not seem to implement the health and wellness information available through Member News. Each quarter, Member News publishes free health and wellness classes held throughout the state on a monthly basis. Of respondents, 94.1% said they had not attended any of the free classes.

It is recommended that the editor reevaluate this section and determine if the reader would be better served by changing the content. If this section is eliminated, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma could save printing and design costs.

When asked how many members in their family had applied health guidelines found in Member News within the last year, 62.3% said that no one in their family had utilized the health guidelines found in the newsletter. The remaining, 24.7%, said that one family member had implemented Member News health information.

It is suggested that the editor look at options to encourage usage of health guidelines. Perhaps a three-hole punched newsletter would cause members to save the information for reference. Another option could be perforating sections containing quick health tips. This would enable members to easily save information that could be helpful later (child CPR, poison control and emergency phone list, formulary listings).

Respondents ranked Member News toward the bottom of their list of health information sources. On a scale of one to five (1 = source from which you receive the most health information; 6 = source from which you receive the least health information), 58.6% of respondents ranked Member News as a four, five or six. Respondents (44.7%) ranked their family physician as their most common source for health information.

Using the two-step flow of communication model, it appears members perceive their family physician as an “opinion leader” with regard to the health information. It is suggested that the editor consider inserting a guest column each quarter. Perhaps each quarter a guest column could highlight a different network physician. Each quarter the highlighted physician could discuss a different health issue. In addition, this approach could create good-will among network physicians by providing them with free advertising and promotion.

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## APPENDIXES

## **APPENDIX A**

FOLD THIS END FIRST

**Section I: Readership**

- On a scale of 0% - 100%, on the average, how much of the last two issues of *MemberNews* have you read? \_\_\_\_\_%  
(If you answered 0%, please skip to question 3)
- On a scale of 0% - 100%, on the average, how much do you read of the following types of articles?  
(A) Wellness \_\_\_\_\_%  
(nutrition, exercise, stress management)  
(B) Disease Prevention/Management \_\_\_\_\_%  
(disease specific articles such as diabetes, high blood pressure, immunizations)  
(C) Member Benefits \_\_\_\_\_%  
(grievance procedures, staff announcements, how to use your benefits)

For question 3, please check the appropriate box on the scale that indicates your preference.

- I prefer to read  
(A) Stories with illustrations      Strongly Agree                Strongly Disagree  
(B) Short stories of less than 1/2 page

**Section II: Article Clarity**

For question 4, please check the appropriate box on the scale that indicates your view of *MemberNews* articles.

- MemberNews* articles:  
(A) Are easy to understand                     Difficult to understand  
(B) Don't provide enough technical info                   Have too much technical info.  
(C) Don't provide enough detailed info.                   Provide too much detailed info

**Section III: Article Usefulness**

Please answer questions 5-7 as your actions relate to *MemberNews* information.

- Within the last year, how many family members have attended one of the free health and wellness classes (*Healthy You!*) advertised in *MemberNews* newsletter? \_\_\_\_\_
- Over the last year, how many family members have applied health care guidelines found in *MemberNews*? \_\_\_\_\_
- Please rank in order from 1-6 the order in which you receive your health information  
(1 = the source from which you receive the most health information, 6 = the source from which you receive the least health information)  
 BlueLincs *MemberNews* newsletter       Family doctor  
 Daily newspaper       Friends  
 Family       Other health publications  
 Other (please list) \_\_\_\_\_

**Section IV: About You**

Questions 8-14 will be used to compare the responses of different *MemberNews* readers

- I am  male     female
- My age is \_\_\_\_\_
- The highest education level I have completed is  
 High school graduate     Two-year College degree     Four-year College degree     Master's     Doctorate  
If you do not have a college degree, how many years of post-high school education have you completed? \_\_\_\_\_  
If you are not a high school graduate, how many years of education have you completed? \_\_\_\_\_
- My household income is: \$ \_\_\_\_\_
- I am  single     married     divorced     widowed
- How many years (months) have you been a member of BlueLincs HMO? \_\_\_\_\_ years    \_\_\_\_\_ months
- My policy covers  
 self     self and spouse     self and dependent(s)     self, spouse and dependent(s)

On question 15, please mark the box that best corresponds to your opinion.

- Overall, how satisfied are you with your health plan coverage?  
Very satisfied                     Very dissatisfied
- (A) Is BlueLincs HMO your only medical coverage?  Yes     No  
(B) If not, what other type of coverage do you have? (please check all that apply)  
 Spouse has additional or separate coverage at work  
 We have additional private coverage  
 Child(ren) have separate health coverage

17 Other comments or suggestions \_\_\_\_\_

FOLD UP AND AFFIX TO BACK OF FIRST FOLD

FOLD UP AND AFFIX TO BACK OF FIRST FOLD

475      **Thank you for participating in this survey!**  
Please fold this questionnaire, peel back the tape strip at the bottom of this page and return the survey by January 30, 1999.  
Your participation is voluntary and your responses will be kept anonymous and confidential.

TO EXPOSE ADHESIVE REMOVE LINE    WITH FINGER OR INSTRUMENT PROCEED    TO EXPOSE ADHESIVE REMOVE LINE    WITH FINGER OR INSTRUMENT PROCEED

## **APPENDIX B**



# BlueLincs

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma

1400 S. Boston • PO Box 21128 • Tulsa, Oklahoma 74121-1128  
(918) 561-9900

3401 NW 63rd • PO Box 60545 • Oklahoma City, OK 73146-0545  
(405) 841-9770

December 22, 1998

Dear BlueLincs Member:

At BlueLincs HMO we want to provide our members with information they feel is important and interesting. Please help us meet this goal by taking a few minutes to fill out the enclosed questionnaire.

You have been randomly selected to represent BlueLincs members in your opinion of BlueLincs' quarterly newsletter *MemberNews*. Therefore, your response is most important.

Simply take five minutes to mark your choices on the 17-item, attached questionnaire. Once completed, fold it, adhere the tape strip and mail it.

Your responses will only be used for statistical tabulations, and all individual responses will be kept anonymous and confidential. The coding at the bottom of each questionnaire is for book keeping purposes only. If you would like to receive the results of this survey, indicate your wish in the space provided at the end of the questionnaire.

If you have any questions, contact Monica Ford in Tulsa at 918/592-9402 or outside of the Tulsa area at 1-800-722-5675. We thank you in advance for helping to make *MemberNews* a more enjoyable and useful newsletter.

Sincerely,



Linda Sponsler  
Vice President  
Advertising and Public Communications



## APPENDIX C

*Life can get busy sometimes, especially around the holidays. That's why we're extending our deadline to return the MemberNews newsletter questionnaire you received earlier this year.*

*Please take a few moments to fill out the enclosed questionnaire and mail it back to us by March 15, 1999.*

*We have included a free Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma pen as a small token of our appreciation.*

*Your response will insure that we provide BlueLincs members with the information they find interesting and informative.*

*Thanks in advance for your input.*

*Linda Sponsler*

*Vice President*

*Advertising and Communications*

## APPENDIX D

## Appendix D

### Respondents' Comments

Other comments or suggestions:

- We are no longer members of BlueLincs. Please remove our name from your mailing list
- Doctors should be given more freedom when to refer to another doctor.
- I retired January 1, 1999. I liked the service I received.
- We're no longer BlueLincs
- I have never received a newsletter.
- I wish the state wasn't losing this company from its list.
- Our PCP refuses to refer us to specialists we have been using even after returning illnesses!
- Thank you for the pen.
- new member
- have not been to BlueLincs doctor yet
- I would rather take my family to any family doctor instead of only one assigned doctor because there are too many inconveniences.
- The benefits are good. The time it takes claims to get paid is terrible.
- started new job September 1, 1998 with this medical plan
- The BlueLincs Dental Plan stinks! The choice of dentist is nothing short of pitiful.

- When I changed doctors last year I had to pay the total of first visit and haven't been reimbursed by BlueLincs.
- no flexibility of doctor choice, specialist doctors that is
- spouse is on Medicare Part A & Part B
- I don't receive Member News
- I don't like being told what doctor to use, we're no communists.
- wish we could go to any doctor instead of being bound to just one.
- VA medical care
- I feel your company doesn't care for the customers. You're too high priced and every doctor that I want to see takes HMO, but yours. If I had a choice I would have Cigna.
- the difficulty in prior approvals – scripts disallowed
- Too many primary care physicians have waiting lists. You need to add more doctors. I would like to see St. Johns in Tulsa an option. Additional benefits
- We have been very satisfied with BlueLincs' care, thank you.
- Give more detailed information in newsletter about different diseases that are very common ex. ulcerative colitis.
- need better eye and dental coverage in our area I would appreciate a copy of the results.
- Hold your cost down!
- The only complaint I have at all is that my husband's PSA test was considered "unnecessary" and not covered. It seems very necessary to me!
- TMJ is not covered – why?
- website for general communications very useful – prompt payment of member bills needed

-- I filled out the last survey and returned it as soon as I could!

## APPENDIX E

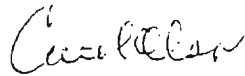
OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Date: January 5, 2000 IRB # AS-99-028  
Proposal Title: "NEWSLETTER READERSHIP SURVEY"  
Principal Investigator(s): Barbara DeSanto  
Monica Ford  
Reviewed and Processed as: Continuation  
Approval Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved

---

---

Signature:



\_\_\_\_\_  
Carol Olson, Director of University Research Compliance

\_\_\_\_\_  
January 5, 2000

Date

Approvals are valid for one calendar year, after which time a request for continuation must be submitted. Any modification to the research project approved by the IRB must be submitted for approval with the advisor's signature. The IRB office MUST be notified in writing when a project is complete. Approved projects are subject to monitoring by the IRB. Expedited and exempt projects may be reviewed by the full Institutional Review Board.



## VITA

Monica A. Minjares

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: A READERSHIP SURVEY OF BLUELINCS MEMBER NEWS  
TULSA, OKLAHOMA

Major Field: Mass Communications

Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 19, 1969, the daughter of Joe and Patricia Minjares.

Education: Graduated from Jenks High School, Jenks, Oklahoma, May 1987; received Bachelor of Science in Broadcast Journalism from Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, Oklahoma, May 1991; completed requirements for Master's of Science degree in Mass Communications at Oklahoma State University in December 2000.

Professional: part-time reporter/fill-in anchor, KOSU-FM, February 1990 to July 1991; Enid Bureau Chief, KOCO-Channel Five, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, July 1991 to March 1992; account manager, Hartman Communications, Inc., March 1992 to September 1994; associate publisher Premier Bride magazine, September 1994 to July 1996; promotional writer, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Oklahoma, July 1996 to July 1999; field sales representative, Ortho McNeil Pharmaceutical, July 1999 to present.