

IFAJ Web Feature  
#4 in a series on Building Readership  
January 2008

### Advice from IFAJ members

## Using color today to boost your rural readership

### **A half century of dramatic change**

Recently we invited IFAJ members to respond to some editing and design guidelines that Donald R. Murphy and associates identified 45 years ago through two decades of readership studies among U. S. farm men and women.

Here you will find reactions from seven IFAJ members about some of those guidelines (in bold type) that involve use of color to boost readership. You will see how changes in technologies and economics during the past half century have dramatically influenced guidelines for using color.

John Greig of Ontario Farmer Publications put it this way:

"In these days of inexpensive colour printing and amazing publishing technology, I'm not sure the guidelines from 45 years ago are that practical - it's a whole different world."

Greg Lamp of *Corn and Soybean Digest* noted:

"I think you could almost eliminate this entire section. Color is commonplace here in the U. S. and abroad. The cost differences between B&W and color are minimal. These items below seem antiquated."

### **Also recognizing some enduring principles for using color**

At the same time, in these responses from IFAJ members - and in the live-link resources provided below - you will find some enduring principles for using color effectively. Take a close look, for example, at suggestions offered here about the importance of legibility/color contrast, harmony, meaning, consistency, restraint and aesthetics.

### **And how about using color in web communications?**

In the live-link resources you will also see some guidelines for using color effectively in designing web sites. How do they compare with guidelines for print media?

---

**Sincere thanks to the response panel:**

John Greig, Editor, Ontario Farmer Publications  
Donovan Harris, Director, Design and Production, *The Progressive Farmer*  
Tom Henry, Editor, *Small Farm Canada*  
Greg Lamp, Editor, *Corn and Soybean Digest*  
Jack Odle, Editor-in-Chief, *The Progressive Farmer*  
Rod Swoboda, Editor, *Wallaces Farmer*  
John Vogel, Editor, *American Agriculturist*

---

## **Guidelines for use of color in type and design**

- **A head printed in color won't raise the readership score.**

### **Responses:**

Donovan Harris: I personally don't think color makes a big difference. The main issue relates to the length of the head along with how well the word arrangement works."

Tom Henry: "Colour [Canadian spelling!] does not make a difference."

Rod Swoboda: "If you look at *Wallaces Farmer's* competition there is a lot of color being used, even in headlines. We did that when *WF* was in the 8.5 x 11 inch magazine mode for 6 to 8 years or so, but now that we've gone back to the big format magazine we no longer use color in headlines, etc. We don't use spot color. So now we actually follow Murphy's rules regarding "how the stories look to the reader" more closely again. Regarding color in photos vs. black and white, our art director wants us to use all color photos."

John Vogel: "Still true today."

John Greig: "This depends on the type of publication. In newspapers, colour headlines are generally a poor idea. I prefer to keep them black and clean. With full colour magazines, good graphic designers can make nice use of colour as part of a larger, integrated layout."

- **A head in reverse (white letters on color background) will not raise the score and may actually lower it.**

### **Responses:**

Tom Henry: "Ugly!"

John Vogel: "True. And, dark reversed-out screens repel readership."

John Greig: "I'm not a fan of white type. It's almost always difficult to read. However, in some cases, the use of the infinite gradients of colour available to a good graphic designer can work on a calm background."

Donovan Harris: "I don't see how this could be true. Still, it is essential that the reversed out type be placed in a true negative area of the photo's composition. Trying to read reversed typography over a busy background can be extremely difficult."

- **A head using black overprint on color may work once in a while.**

**Responses:**

John Greig: "This is rarely used these days, because of the many colours available."

Donovan Harris: "The same rule as above applies in this instance too."

John Vogel: "The key is head size, not color."

Tom Henry: "Totally agree."

- **Color in a department headline, used on a spread without other color, may do some good.**

**Response:**

Donovan Harris: "The main rule in regard to department heads should be a consistent typographic and color treatment throughout the entire publication. Don't vary from department to department. It makes the reader unsure of what's going on in the publication."

John Greig: "This would scream early desktop publishing days to me. Keep department heads consistent."

- **Decorative artwork in color usually doesn't work.**

**Response:**

Donovan Harris: "Using art as decorative feature needs to relate to the overall color scheme of the page or pages. The objective is to allow this visual element to mesh with the entire page, not to stand out or look out of place.

Tom Henry: "Disagree. As long as the decorative artwork is in concert with the other elements of the page colour can be a powerful addition."

John Greig: "Rare would be the artwork which doesn't have colour these days. It should be integrated with the look of the rest of the page. The best artwork, however, is a photograph."

- **An overprint of black type on yellow may do some good.**

**Response:**

Donovan Harris: "This color combination will stand out, but a little out of date these days."

Tom Henry: "Agree. Our goal isn't always to look good or pleasing to the eye. We want ATTENTION. Think of ad jingles—the goal is to deliver a message, not to sound like Celine Dion.

John Greig: "Yuck. We're no longer limited to a few spot colours."

- **Color may pull in a few readers who are indifferent to the theme of the copy.**

**Responses:**

John Vogel: "But subheads and graphics are far more effective in doing so."

John Greig: "I rarely like spot colours in newspapers. Photos and graphics and a nice headline are better."

Donovan Harris: "Color when used judiciously is always a positive."

- **A second color is a long shot. If used, try it on a section of the book where color is scarce.**

**Responses:**

John Vogel: "In 4-color publications, some of these suggestions are irrelevant. But second-color screens do help draw attention to sidebars and break-out info."

Donovan Harris: "I would agree with this."

John Greig: "Second colours work, if used in limited fashion and only to highlight something important. In process colour magazine layouts, a second colour is almost always used."

## **What suggestions would you add about using color to boost readership?**

Send them by e-note to Jim Evans at [evansj@uiuc.edu](mailto:evansj@uiuc.edu). We will share them.

### **Coming next:**

**What advice would you offer about how use of photographs can boost rural readership? Please sent it to [evansj@uiuc.edu](mailto:evansj@uiuc.edu)**

## **Some online resources you may find helpful in choosing and using color**

"Color works: a practical guide to business desktop color"

<http://web.qx.net/herrick/pdfs/colorwks.pdf>

"Color theory"

<http://www.annex-it.ru/colortheory.php>

"Use of colour and readability"

<http://webrichtlijnen.overheid.nl/archive/version1.1/english/manual/development/product/production/color-usage/readability>

"Newspaper content: what makes readers more satisfied"

[http://www.readership.org/content/editorial/data/what\\_content\\_satisfies\\_readers.pdf](http://www.readership.org/content/editorial/data/what_content_satisfies_readers.pdf)

Proceed to pages 7-10 for results about topics in which color adds satisfaction.

"Using color to bring harmony to photographs"

<http://www.graphic-design.com/photoshop/harmony/index.html>

"Color text on the Web"

[http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/research/text\\_color.shtml](http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/research/text_color.shtml)

"Color test results"

<http://hubel.sfasu.edu/research/survreslts.html>

"Impact of web page text-background color combinations on readability, retention, aesthetics and behavioral intention"

[http://sigs.aisnet.org/sighci/bit04/bit\\_hall.pdf](http://sigs.aisnet.org/sighci/bit04/bit_hall.pdf)

(Note: This professional development feature is provided through a partnership of IFAJ and the Agricultural Communications Documentation Center, University of Illinois.)