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NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING MANAGERS
AND ACTION LINE COLUMNS

by

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B.J., University of Missouri, 1971

A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

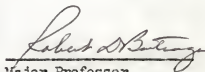
MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

1978

Approved by:


Major Professor

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to thank Dr. Robert Bontrager, Dr. Carol Oukrop, and Dr. James Morris, all of whom offered valuable assistance in their individual areas of expertise. I also wish to acknowledge the support of my husband, Dr. Maurice E. Stark, who contributed many useful suggestions throughout the course of the study.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The newspaper Action Line column arose along with the consumer movement of the 1960s. The movement heightened public awareness of business's responsibilities toward its customers and, as a result, customers became more adamant in their demands that business carry out these responsibilities.

Through the Action Line column, newspapers were able to further develop their public service role, and increase circulation, by assisting readers who had experienced problems with business firms as well as government agencies. They could serve as a voice for readers and get action where individual efforts had failed.

Although a number of reader service columns were in existence prior to the 1960s, William B. Steven, then editor of the Houston Chronicle, is credited with setting the pattern for the Action Line column, with the institution of WATCHEM in July 1961.¹ The idea spread, and by the mid-1970s, more than 300 American dailies were listed in Editor & Publisher International Yearbook as carrying an Action Line column. The number of columns has dropped since then.

Action Line columns have proven popular with readers, but they have not been without their critics. In his 1973 master's thesis, David Lee Beal of Syracuse University² found that dissatisfaction comes primarily from newspaper advertisers, who often are the targets of complaints or problems aired in the Action Line column.

The Problem

The relationship between a newspaper and its advertisers is a subject widely discussed in journalism literature. Ideally, the role of the advertiser is limited to the purchase of space for a message, allowing no control by the advertiser over material that appears elsewhere in the newspaper. In practice, because they are a vital factor in the financial health of a newspaper, advertisers often are able to exert influence over editorial decisions.

The question of advertiser pressure took on a new dimension with the growth in the number of newspaper Action Line columns. A firm that becomes the subject of an Action Line problem or complaint would understandably be concerned about the effect this might have on the business. Beal found that advertisers sometimes direct their complaints about the column to the newspaper's advertising department.³ As the person charged with the responsibility for protecting the paper's major source of revenue, the ad manager would understandably be concerned about complaints by advertisers because of the possible effect on accounts. He also would be a likely target for any attempts to influence the content of a column.

The Study

This study will examine the newspaper advertising manager's experiences with and attitudes toward the Action Line column. It will attempt to determine the extent of advertiser pressure on the ad manager, including complaints, threats to cut off advertising, and actual cutoffs. It also will explore possible advertiser satisfaction with the columns, and new accounts that might have been gained as a result. Attempts by ad managers to influence the Action Line staff will be another area of study.

General information about the columns will be analyzed, including data on publication of complaints against advertisers, use of names, and threats of legal action against the paper. Ad manager attitudes toward the columns will be examined in such areas as use of names, consumer news reporting, Action Line reporting, ad manager role in starting an Action Line, and satisfaction with own column.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Action Line columns have been the subject of numerous articles in mass and specialized publications. They were most widely discussed during the 1960s, when they were in their growth period. Journalism literature contains few references to studies on Action Line columns. The subject of ad manager experiences with the column has not been specifically addressed.

Beal⁴

The Beal study⁵ was completed in 1972 and was designed to measure changes in Action Line columns since a 1968 survey by Associated Press Managing Editors. A correlation analysis was done on data gathered from editors of 346 newspapers carrying Action Line columns. The study traced the growth of the columns and also described their characteristics in terms of content, money spent, query load, and policies on naming names of commercial firms. The data included advice from editors on how to run the columns as well as information on the extent of dissatisfaction with the column on the part of government officials, professionals, and business firms.

Summing up changes in the columns from 1968 to 1972, Beal noted that the predominant change reported was a shift toward more complaints against commercial firms than against government agencies, i.e., more stress on consumerism. Columns that emphasized items about business firms generally drew more complaints from advertisers than columns which did not, Beal found.

Of 222 newspapers responding, 170 reported some level of dissatisfaction with the column by advertisers, professionals, or government agencies. Of the 170 papers, 95 (56%) reported advertisers as the main source of dissatisfaction; 39 (22%) said dissatisfaction came mainly from professionals; and 38 (22%) said government was the main source of dissatisfaction.

The survey asked whether names of commercial firms were used in published complaints of problem-solving items; if so, whether any companies had expressed dissatisfaction about this policy; and how the firms opposed to naming names had expressed their unhappiness.

Beal found that 108 (49%) of 219 newspapers in six circulation categories usually or always used names of commercial firms in their columns; 38 (18%) did so sometimes; and 73 (33%) seldom or never did. Findings indicated that papers with more than 100,000 circulation were likely to use names and those under 15,000 likely did not. Beal stressed, however, the many variations in basic policies on naming names and the fact that at least a few large papers, with well-regarded columns generating relatively large query loads, seldom named company names.

Ten papers said names were used only for out-of-town or out-of-state companies. Several said names were used when a company was uncooperative, and two used names when a firm did cooperate.

Samples of responses to the question concerning policy on naming names are as follows:

Not used in routine computer goofs.

Used only in obvious fraud or cases involving government action.

'Since the purpose is to resolve a problem that may be due to a breakdown in communications, we feel that not using names helps resolve the consumer complaint.'

Used only if firm has been charged in court.

Used only when consumer allows his or her name to be used.

Used in information items, but not in problem-solving.

Reactions to advertiser dissatisfaction were categorized as follows: firm complained to column; firm complained to a higher department at paper; firm threatened to drop, dropped ads, threatened or took legal action. Some editors reported advertisers took their complaints to the advertising manager or to the ad salesman handling the account.

Other comments elicited:

Big firms seldom object to policy of naming names, but 'smaller ones react, sometimes by filing lawsuits, withdrawing ads or both.'

Firms object when fraudulent practices uncovered.

Complaints come usually 'from merchants who think they deserve better treatment because they advertise in our papers.'

Most businesses say they appreciate knowing of problems but prefer to take care of them without newspaper publicity.

Advertisers feel column causes public to generalize against them.

Four papers reported dropping the policy on naming names. One of the largest columns said query load dropped 30 percent after the no-name policy when into effect. Another reported use of names was highly effective in getting results, but because of concern expressed by advertisers and newspaper lawyers, names were dropped, with some harm to the column.

Few papers specified sources of threats of legal action or advertising cutoffs, but when cited, local auto dealers were mentioned most often, Beal reported.

The effect on advertising was noted in the following comments:

No loss of advertising, though in one three-month period, about 40 big advertisers were named.

Two canceled advertising contracts, 'which was fine with management, since both were failing to live up to their ad claims.'

Several dropped ads, but most eventually came back.

Mobile home dealers stopped advertising for 45 days after column exposed shoddy practices.

Beal cited the example of the mobile home dealers who in 1971 pulled their advertising from the Gainesville (Florida) Sun after the paper's Action Line column ran a special investigative report on poor service and coercion in the business.⁶

Kavanagh-Beal

Data for this research⁷ were a portion of the data gathered by Beal for the master's thesis cited above. The study attempted to find a relationship between readership and: money spent on column; stress on problem-solving; and use of company names.

The researchers found no relationship between readership and use of company names in the Action Line column. The authors suggested that although newspaper editors judge the use of company names as an activist practice because of possible loss of advertising, readers may not. They noted that naming names may affect readership response over time, but that this was not testable from the data because of the cross-sectional rather than longitudinal nature of the study. They also noted that mention of a local company would be expected to have a stronger impact on readers than mention of a distant little-known company, but that the data did not distinguish between types of companies.

Findings indicated that columns which stressed problem-solving as well as those which reported a high percentage of success in problem-solving had a high response by citizens to the column. The authors surmised that readers who were distressed with faulty goods or services would likely turn to a column stressing problem-solving rather than to one carrying mainly informational items.⁸

The relationship between readership and money spent was found to be influenced by circulation size, and the data were not useful in understanding differences between reader response rates, according to the authors.

Bellay

In his master's thesis, "A Content Analysis of Three Action Line columns,"⁹ John T. Bellay explained the demise of the Action Line columns

carried by the two St. Louis papers and described reasons for the success of the Akron Beacon Journal column.

Bellay reported that the St. Louis Post Dispatch column was started May 30, 1966, at the urging of the circulation department, but was dropped after five months because of what editors described as the high incidence of "nut calls," repetitious questions, and the handling of the same questions in the St. Louis Globe column. The Globe column began June 1, 1966, and also was discontinued five months later. Globe editors cited high manpower requirements as the major reason for dropping the column.

According to Bellay's findings, the Globe utilized up to 19 staff members in answering more than 50,000 questions during the column's operation. Costs had been projected at \$100,000 a year. All questions were answered, either by phone, postcard, letter, or in the newspaper. The Post limited its answers to what was printed in the newspaper. One editor and two researchers staffed the column, at a projected cost of \$40,000 a year.

In his content analysis, Bellay classified answers to Action Line queries according to whether the problem was solved, a solution promised, or whether just information was provided. The number of queries from readers, column formats, and art work were studied, and items were categorized as to topic.

Bellay found that the Beacon Journal had fewer inquiries from readers than the other two papers, but solved more problems than the Post, and with fewer staff members. The column's success was attributed to its success in problem-solving and the attitudes of editors toward the column, including its placement on page one of the paper.

DiJulio

In a study of the Washington Star's Action Line column,¹⁰ Carol Ferruso DiJulio analyzed how information from reader inquiries to the column

was utilized by the newspaper. Her research indicated that story ideas are not utilized, that readers need information in order to cope with their problems, and that the mass media have not been providing this information. She found that the problems expressed in inquiries to the column were similar to those expressed by the general population in other surveys.

Bowers

A study by David R. Bowers¹¹ of Texas A&M University indicated the extent to which publishers were seen as influencing the content of news involving advertisers. The study focused on the activity of publishers in directing newsroom operations, as observed by managing editors or their equivalent. A portion of the research dealt with publisher activity in topic areas which might affect revenues and in areas involving social issues.

Findings indicated that publisher activity was higher when use or non-use, content or display or news might affect revenues than when the news concerned social issues, such as politics, race, religion, or war. "Important advertisers" was listed under topic areas that might conceivably affect revenues. Other topic areas in this category included business conditions, government regulation or taxation, and image of the community.

According to Bowers, a sizable number of respondents commented that they had received directions from their publishers to print news concerning advertisers as well as news about their own papers. In the under-15,000 circulation category, more than 15 percent of publishers influenced the handling of news all the time or often when the news concerned major or important advertisers. No papers in the 75,000 and over circulation range reported activity in this area all the time or often.

Related Findings

A study by Hubbard of the University of Missouri found that a newspaper's own advertising department was the most effective source of pressure in obtaining business news favorable to advertisers. Of 162 financial editors surveyed, 22 percent indicated that they were compelled as a matter of routine to alter or downgrade business stories at the request of advertisers, mainly as a result of ad department pressure.¹²

The adversary relationship between business and the press has always been recognized, and the adversity is not likely to diminish, according to James C. Ferguson, chairman and president of General Foods Corporation. However, Ferguson has pleaded for a balanced account in presenting news about business:

The businessman believes there should be a presumption that he at least might be telling the truth in what he says, and could even be concerned about the public interest in what he does. The journalist appears to presume that the businessman is guilty until proven innocent, and shows no great inclination to give him his day in court.¹³

The Action Line column places itself in an adversary role by its very nature. The threat of being held up as an example of "unfair" business practices may prompt a firm to remedy a consumer complaint. Even though the company does respond to an appeal by the Action Line column, it still may see itself as the object of unfavorable publicity when the problem is aired in the newspaper, however.

The Action Line staff of a large Southern newspaper was ordered to drop the use of company names temporarily after a complaint by one of the paper's advertisers, though a problem with the firm had been worked out earlier by the Action Line researcher. Executives insisted that the decision had nothing to do with advertising pressure, although the paper had been the target of numerous complaints by advertisers.¹⁴

Newspapers have reacted in various ways to real or threatened loss of advertising as a result of consumer news reporting.

A survey of chain supermarket prices led to the firing of the executive editor of a Texas paper. One of the paper's big advertisers, which had purchased \$115,000 worth of advertising in 1976, was reported in the story as having the city's highest prices. Another chain, whose ad budget in 1976 was \$192,000, was found to have slightly lower prices, but still threatened to sue if the newspaper's figures were in error. The paper's publisher said he resented the fact that he had not been made aware of a story that could have such a financial impact on the paper.¹⁵

An editorial in a large midwestern daily explained the paper's position after a department store cancelled its ads for two weeks because of dissatisfaction with coverage of a consumer credit bill:

We do not question the right of anyone to withdraw advertising for any reason. We would hope that advertising decisions regarding this newspaper would be made on the pragmatic basis of whether our columns attract potential customers. Still, if editorial decisions were keyed to advertising purchases, significant questions would be raised about the usefulness of the American press....Their [newspapers'] financial health rests ultimately on their ability to hold the interest and confidence of their readers.¹⁶

After a Florida paper lost restaurant and mobile home advertising as a result of stories which were unfavorable to these businesses, the editor summed up his paper's policy on consumer reporting by stating that the value to the community was worth more than the revenue lost as a result of the stories. The paper's vice president and advertising director, however, reacted as follows:

I have the interest of the advertiser at heart. While I don't want to run the editorial department, I will state the advertiser's case if I think the news department has been unfair. As our publisher says, the wall between the advertising and editorial department is 15-feet thick.¹⁷

Studies of Action Line columns, as cited, have focused on editorial personnel and their perceptions of the columns. While not necessarily involved in editorial decisions which affect Action Line columns, the ad department would be expected to have an interest in the decisions that are made. Because of the relationship with the advertiser, ad department perceptions of the Action Line column may therefore differ from those of the editorial side.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Newspaper advertising managers were selected as information sources because of their familiarity with their papers' policies and the decision-making process. Names were taken from the personnel list of daily newspapers named in The 1977 Editor & Publisher International Yearbook as carrying Action Line columns. Although 275 columns were listed, directory information, such as address and other data, was included for only 252 of these papers. Questions were directed to retail advertising managers, where listed, since they are the most directly involved with business firms that advertise in the paper. In other instances, questions were directed to the advertising manager or director. It was decided to include in the study all daily papers carrying Action Line columns.

The Data-Gathering Method

Because of the cost advantage, a mail questionnaire was used to gather data. Newspapers carrying Action Line columns are located in various parts of the United States, therefore personal interview costs would have been prohibitive. Telephone interviews also were rejected because of the costs involved.

In addition to cost savings, mail questionnaires have other advantages, including lack of interviewer bias; better chance of a truthful and thoughtful reply; and time savings.¹⁶

Wiseman¹⁹ studied the quality of information gathered from mail questionnaires when compared to personal and telephone interviews. His findings suggest no sacrifice in quality depending on the interview method, although respondents were likely to be more liberal in their answers to mail questionnaires when questions were of a personal nature.

The mail questionnaire is a less effective instrument than personal contact in one major respect, however, the ease with which the subject can refuse to respond. The results might be biased, therefore, because respondents might give different answers than those who do not respond. The problem of non-response can sometimes be alleviated by repeated mailings.²⁰ One appeal to non-respondents was made after questionnaires for this research were mailed.

Construction of the Questionnaire

Steps taken in constructing the questionnaire followed those suggested by Kornhauser and Sheatsley:²¹ decide what information should be sought; determine what type of questionnaire should be used; write a first draft; re-examine and revise questionnaire; pre-test; edit questionnaire; and specify procedures for use.

ErDOS²² has stated the main considerations in writing the questionnaire: questions must cover all subjects which are essential to the project, and none which are not purposeful; the questionnaire should appear to be easy to complete; it must capture the reader's interest and give him a feeling of importance in participating in the project; and no questions should be included which would result in biased answers.

The author relied on her experience as an Action Line editor in formulating questions for the study. Past research on Action Line columns also was helpful in choosing types of questions to be included.

The basic areas of study were categorized as follows: characteristics of the columns; advertiser satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the columns as perceived by the advertising manager; ad manager involvement with column; and ad manager attitudes toward the columns.

The original questionnaire contained 17 items, plus a set of attitude questions. A pre-test was done on an area advertising manager whose paper carries an Action Line column, though it is not listed in Editor & Publisher Yearbook, and was not included as a subject paper. The ad manager's suggestions and those of members of the research committee were incorporated into the final questionnaire, which was then edited for brevity and clarity. A major change was the placement of the attitude measurements at the beginning of the questionnaire in an effort to make the project more interesting to the ad managers.

The final questionnaire contained 21 items designed to gather factual information. Several open-ended questions were included on most items to solicit additional information which might prove useful to the study and also to satisfy any desire on the part of the reader to provide additional comments. The questionnaire contained eight items designed to measure attitudes toward the columns.

A major portion of the study focuses on advertiser dissatisfaction with Action Line columns. Managers were first asked whether the column publishes complaints or problems involving business firms that advertise in the paper and whether names are used. Respondents whose papers do not publish problems or complaints involving advertisers were important to the study, however, because of the desire to measure other items not connected with advertiser dissatisfaction.

In requesting information on ad manager experiences with the Action Line column, responses were sought on the occurrence of events within the past year. It was believed this was a reasonable time span for any of them to have taken place and might help establish trends when compared to possible future research.

Circulation size was thought to be the area in which the major differences might be found. Managers were asked to check one of six circulation categories specified on the questionnaire. However, after the questionnaires were returned, it was decided to collapse the circulation variables into three groups: small, medium, and large.

As an assurance of anonymity, the name of the newspaper was not placed on the questionnaire, but an identification number was used on each to determine which paper had responded so that a follow-up could be made. Names were checked off as the questionnaires were returned.

The Cover Letter

Suggestions by Yarbrough²³ were utilized in constructing a cover letter to accompany the questionnaire. The letter included an explanation of why the study was being conducted; why the respondents were chosen; why the response was important; how the data were to be used; assurances of confidentiality; and a closing plea for cooperation. The letter was reproduced on Kansas State University Department of Journalism and Mass Communications stationery. A stamped, self-addressed envelope was mailed with the questionnaire and letter.

Mailing

The original mailing was made in early December 1977. The follow-up card was sent to non-respondents, about one-half of the original population, in early January.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Response to Questionnaire

Of the 252 questionnaires mailed, responses were received from 166. Of the 166 responses, 27 were eliminated from the study as disqualified because, according to the respondents, the paper did not carry an Action Line column or had dropped the column. The response rate was 61.87 percent, based on 139 usable questionnaires. Twenty three (16%) of the usable questionnaires were returned after the follow-up card was mailed. The percentage response to the questionnaire was calculated on the basis of number of newspapers responding rather than number of ad managers responding.

In summarizing data, adjustments were made in three instances in which one advertising manager was serving in that position for two newspapers, but returned only one questionnaire. Responses to attitude questions and questions dealing with the ad manager's personal experiences and observations were treated as one questionnaire. Questions dealing with characteristics of the column were treated as two, since in at least one instance, characteristics of the columns in the two papers differed. In analyzing responses to questions concerning personal opinion or observation, and those concerning the column itself, the former were treated as two responses.

Responses were grouped into three circulation categories: small, or papers up to 29,999 circulation; medium, up to 99,999 circulation; and large, 100,000 or above. The categories appeared reasonable, since there were a

fairly comparable number of respondents in each. Whether the number of responses in each category accurately reflects the number of Action Line columns in that circulation group was unknown, however.

For purposes of reporting the findings, responses to questions are grouped below according to characteristics of the column; advertiser dissatisfaction; ad manager involvement with column; dropping of advertiser; advertiser satisfaction; and ad manager attitudes toward column.

Characteristics of Action Line Columns

Ad managers were asked to respond to questions concerning frequency of publication of column; location of column in the paper; average number of questions used per column; whether the column publishes problems involving advertisers; and whether names are used. Comments were sought on reasons why advertiser-related problems or names are not used.

As shown in table 1, 83 ad managers (61.94%) said their newspapers publish their Action Line columns five or more days per week. A number of respondents indicated on the questionnaires that the column is published daily or, in some instances, six or seven days a week. Because frequency of publication of a daily paper ranges from five to seven days a week, the category "five or more days" was used. Columns are published weekly in 30 (22.39%) of the respondents' papers, and 17 (12.69%) publish their columns from two to four days a week. Four (2.98%) publish the column once a month or infrequently. One paper reported the column is carried "infrequently of late."

Frequency of publication increases with the size of the newspaper, not an unexpected finding, since space and query load would likely be greater. Forty respondents (86.96%) from large newspapers said the column is carried five or more days per week, compared to 27 (57.44%) from medium-sized papers and 16 (39.02%) from small papers.

TABLE 1

RESPONSE TO: HOW OFTEN DOES YOUR NEWSPAPER PUBLISH ITS ACTION LINE COLUMN?
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
5 or more days/week	16	39.02	27	57.44	40	86.96	83	61.94
2-4 days/week	4	9.76	10	21.28	3	6.52	17	12.69
Weekly	18	43.90	9	19.15	3	6.52	30	22.39
One a month or "infrequently"	3	7.32	1	2.13	0	0.00	4	2.98
Total	41		47		46		134	
No answer	4		1		0		5	

More of the small papers (18, or 43.90%) publish the columns weekly than do medium-sized papers (nine, or 19.15%) and large papers (three, or 6.52%). More medium-sized papers (10, or 21.28%) publish the columns two to four days a week than do other groups.

Data on placement of the column in the newspaper are listed in table 2. Page 1, the major display area, was listed by 29 (22.14%) respondents as the page on which the column appears. Twenty (47.62%) small papers said the column appears on page 1, compared with six (13.04%) medium-sized papers, and three (6.98%) large papers.

Page 1 of an inside section, or the back page, was listed by 18 ad managers (13.74%) as the location for the column. The medium-sized papers most often place the column on a page in this category. Thirty five papers (26.72%) reported that the column appears on a page inside the main section. The larger the paper the more likely the column appears on a page inside

this section. One respondent, from a medium-sized paper, said the column used to appear on page 1.

TABLE 2

RESPONSE TO: WHERE DOES THE COLUMN APPEAR IN THE PAPER? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Page 1	20	47.62	6	13.04	3	6.98	29	22.14
P. 1 other section, or back	4	9.52	8	17.39	6	13.95	18	13.74
Inside main section	8	19.05	13	28.26	14	32.56	35	26.72
ROP	7	16.67	4	8.70	4	9.30	15	11.45
Other	3	7.14	15	32.61	16	37.21	34	25.95
Total	42		46		43		131	
No answer	3		2		3		8	

Run of paper was listed by 15 respondents (11.45%) as the location for the column, with the small papers (seven, or 16.67%) reporting this category most often, compared with four (8.70%) medium-sized papers and four (9.30%) large papers.

Results clearly show that small papers give the maximum display, page 1, to the column. The percentage (47.62%) for this category also was the largest in any of the categories. More small papers than others also publish the column weekly, and thus might wish to give maximum prominence at this time. Whether small papers place more emphasis on the column could be argued either way in light of results for other categories.

Page 1 of an inside section, or the back page, are considered the next major display areas after page 1. Although the findings show fewer small

papers place the column on these pages, they could support more emphasis by small papers, since the smaller the paper the less likely it is to publish more than one section on which to display the column.

Thirty four papers (25.95%) place the column regularly on various other pages. Other pages specified include women's, "lifestyle," "people," features, editorial, local, op-ed, and comics, as well as pages inside sections other than the main section.

Placement inside the main section and placement on other pages also increase with circulation. Inside main section would be more prominent than inside other sections. However, no data were available on which sections some columns appeared or whether any, except editorial pages, were on the inside or front of a section. Run of paper was listed by more small papers than larger papers, which would indicate less emphasis on the column by these papers.

Table 3 contains data on average number of questions used per column.

TABLE 3

RESPONSE TO: WHAT IS THE AVERAGE NUMBER OF QUESTIONS USED IN THE COLUMN?
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
1-4	26	63.41	25	58.14	17	37.78	68	52.71
5-8	12	29.27	15	34.88	24	53.33	51	39.54
9 or more	3	7.32	3	6.98	4	8.89	10	7.75
Total	41		43		45		129	
No answer	4		5		1		10	

Sixty eight papers (52.71%) reported using from one to four questions in the column; 51 (39.54%) use from five to eight questions; and 10 (7.75%) use nine or more questions. One paper, in the small circulation category, reported using 30 to 35 questions in the column, which is published weekly.

Table 4 lists data on publication of problems involving advertisers.

TABLE 4

RESPONSE TO: DOES YOUR PAPER'S ACTION LINE COLUMN PUBLISH COMPLAINTS OR PROBLEMS INVOLVING BUSINESS FIRMS THAT ADVERTISE IN THE PAPER?
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	35	79.55	45	93.75	43	95.56	123	89.78
No	7	15.91	1	2.08	0	0.00	8	5.84
Sometimes	2	4.54	2	4.17	2	4.44	6	4.38
Total	44		48		45		137	
No answer	1		0		1		2	

One hundred twenty three ad managers (89.78%) said their Action Lines publish problems involving advertisers; eight (5.84%) said they do not; and six (4.38%) said they sometimes do. The larger the paper the more likely items of this nature are used. Among the small papers, 35 ad managers (79.55%) said their papers publish such problems; 45 medium-sized papers (93.75%) do; and 43 large papers (95.56%) use such items.

In the small circulation category, seven papers (15.91%) do not publish problems involving advertisers, and in the medium-sized group, one paper (2.08%) reported such items are not used. All papers in the large circulation group reported using advertiser-related problems all or at least some of the time.

Few comments were elicited on the reasons why problems with advertisers are not published. One respondent, from a medium-sized paper, said such problems would be published, but "all have been resolved before that becomes necessary, as all are reviewed by the advertising manager." An ad manager from a small paper said the column had received no complaints from advertisers. Another commented, "As an advertising man I see it as no advantage."

The following comments came from ad managers whose papers sometimes publish problems involving advertisers:

SMALL--If complaint is found to be legitimate.

MEDIUM--Complaints in most cases are given to us to clear up first and do not appear in paper; advertiser is contacted prior to publication so they have an opportunity to respond.

LARGE--Generally resolved through ad department; apparently most of our advertisers are straight arrow.

Data on identification of advertiser in published complaints are listed in table 5.

TABLE 5

RESPONSE TO: ARE ADVERTISERS REFERRED TO BY NAME IN THE COLUMN?
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	22	53.66	26	55.32	33	71.74	81	60.45
No	11	26.83	9	19.15	5	10.87	25	18.66
Sometimes	8	19.51	12	25.53	8	17.39	28	20.89
Total	41		47		46		134	
No answer	4		1		0		5	

Eighty one ad managers (60.45%) said their papers use the name of the advertiser in published Action Line complaints; 25 (18.66%) said names are

not used; and 28 (20.89%) said names are sometimes used.

Few ad managers commented on the paper's policy against using advertiser identification, although one noted that complaints are sometimes lodged because of a "grudge" against the business. Another reported, "We do not want to give the wrong impression, especially if a complaint is a one-time problem." A third said only general terms are used for identification, such as "a department store," since many complaints arise as a result of communication problems and a business "may be guilty of just not listening."

In commenting on the reasons why names are sometimes used, five ad managers said names are used when a problem cannot be resolved and three said they are used when the response is favorable to the business. On one large paper, problems are resolved through the advertising department. Comments are as follows:

SMALL—Not in rare cases when we felt it would unfairly damage firm; depends on factuality of complaint; business names contacted to give chance for response or clarification; only when there is a constant problem or one that occurs to a lot of readers.

MEDIUM—If response is favorable and advertiser does not object; as long as it is not critical; only when guilt or fault are proven; if satisfactory solution cannot be reached without running name; if business continues to operate in an unethical manner; if solution is favorable or complaint is unjustified; only legitimate complaints are used.

LARGE—When legitimate complaints are not satisfied; if justified complaint is not corrected; general answers given whenever possible to help others with similar problems; if resolution cannot be reached through advertising department; when advertiser is given opportunity to respond; only after our editor has talked with merchant, but was not able to solve problem.

Advertiser Dissatisfaction

In order to determine the extent of advertiser dissatisfaction, ad managers were queried on complaints directed to them and the possible effect on advertising. Nature of complaint was specified as adverse publicity. They also were asked whether legal action had been threatened or taken as a result of dissatisfaction with the column. Comments were sought on the types

of businesses that had expressed dissatisfaction and on the nature and disposition of legal action taken. Another area of inquiry was the number of times expressions of dissatisfaction had occurred in the past year.

TABLE 6

RESPONSE TO: HAVE YOU RECEIVED ANY COMPLAINTS FROM ADVERTISERS WHO FEAR ADVERSE PUBLICITY AS A RESULT OF A PROBLEM OR COMPLAINT DIRECTED TO THE PAPER'S ACTION LINE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	20	52.63	26	56.52	25	59.52	71	56.35
No	18	47.37	20	43.48	17	40.48	55	43.65
Total	38		46		42		126	
No answer	6		2		2		10	

Seventy one ad managers (56.35%) said they had received complaints from advertisers as a result of a complaint or problem directed to the Action Line column. Respondents whose advertisers had complained were asked the following questions: If so, approximately how many complaints in the past year? and What types of businesses?

Of the 71 who said they had received complaints, 64 reported advertisers had complained in the past year. They included 18 ad managers in the small circulation group, 21 from medium-sized papers, and 25 from large papers. The number of complaints averaged about four for small and medium-sized papers and more than nine for ad managers of large papers. The data on number of complaints were inconclusive, however, because a number of respondents specified "few" or "many" complaints or did not indicate the number. Also, it is possible some did not supply supplementary information on the number of

complaints in the past year, though some might have been received.

Businesses most often mentioned as having lodged complaints were department and discount stores, automotive, appliance, and furniture dealers.²⁴

Dissatisfaction with the Action Line column took the form of threats to cut off ads for 32 respondents (25.40%). Of the 32, 13 (30.23%) worked for large papers, 12 (26.67%) for medium-sized papers, and seven (18.42%) for small papers.

TABLE 7

RESPONSE TO: HAVE ANY BUSINESSES CONTACTED YOU WITH THREATS TO CUT OFF ADVERTISING BECAUSE OF A PROBLEM OR COMPLAINT DIRECTED TO THE PAPER'S ACTION LINE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	7	18.42	12	26.67	13	30.23	32	25.40
No	31	81.58	33	75.33	30	69.77	94	74.60
Total	38		45		43		126	
No answer	6		3		1		10	

The 32 ad managers who answered yes to the question on threats to cut off advertising were asked to respond to the questions: If so, approximately how many in the past year? and What types of businesses?

Twenty eight ad managers indicated threats were received in the past year and all but one specified number of threats. Of the 28, seven were from small papers, 10 from medium-sized papers, and 11 from large papers. Number of threats averaged slightly more than one for small papers, slightly less than two for medium-sized papers, and about four for large papers.

Types of businesses most often mentioned were automotive (5), furniture (4), grocery (3), discount store (3), and various other retailers including department stores, appliance dealers, a fabric store, jeweler, and carpet dealer. Others included service businesses, such as a bank and a savings and loan association, home repair, and contractors.

As shown in table 8, 15 ad managers (11.81%) said they had experienced ad cutoffs as a result of advertiser discontent with the column. They included two respondents (5.13%) in the small circulation group, five (10.87%) in the medium-sized group, and eight (19.05%) from large papers.

TABLE 8

RESPONSE TO: HAVE ANY BUSINESSES DROPPED THEIR ADVERTISING BECAUSE OF DISSATISFACTION WITH THE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	2	5.13	5	10.87	8	19.05	15	11.81
No	37	94.87	41	89.13	34	80.95	112	88.19
Total	39		46		42		127	
No answer	6		2		4		12	

Of the 15 ad managers who had experienced ad cutoffs, 14 said they had lost advertising in the past year. Two worked for small papers, four for medium-sized papers, and eight for large papers. Small and medium-sized papers averaged about one cutoff and large papers slightly more than one apiece.

Businesses most often mentioned as having dropped advertising were automotive (4), grocery (2) and swimming pool sales (2). Also mentioned were jeweler, stereo sales, insulation dealer, travel agency, carpet dealer,

and TV repair. It was unknown whether the same businesses which were mentioned as threatening to pull ads were the same ones which followed through, although it seemed clear that in some cases this was true.

Nineteen respondents answered yes to the question: Have you ever attempted to regain an advertising account that was lost as a result of an Action Line item? The number responding exceeded the number who said they had lost accounts. The discrepancy apparently stems from misunderstanding or misreading of the questions concerning lost accounts and accounts lost within the past year. This also would indicate that more accounts were lost over time than were reported.

Of the 19 ad managers who said they had tried to regain lost accounts, seven said they were successful all or most of the time; three were successful about half of the time; and five were seldom or never successful. Four did not respond to the question: If yes, how often were you successful?

Table 9 contains data on threats of legal action against the paper.

TABLE 9

RESPONSE TO: HAVE ANY ADVERTISERS THREATENED TO TAKE LEGAL ACTION AS A RESULT OF DISSATISFACTION WITH THE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	6	15.38	7	15.60	7	17.07	20	16.00
No	33	84.62	38	84.40	34	82.93	105	84.00
Total	39		45		41		125	
No answer	6		3		5		14	

Twenty ad managers (16%) said their papers had received threats of legal action by advertisers dissatisfied with the column. Only one

respondent, from a large paper, reported legal action taken against the paper, but the case was dropped.

Of the 20 respondents who reported legal action threatened, 18 said threats had been received within the past year. The 18 represented six ad managers from each circulation group. The number of threats averaged more than one for small and medium-sized papers and about three for large papers. Some ad managers, however, did not specify the number of threats. One, from a medium-sized paper, said many advertisers threatened legal action, but that papers were never served. One respondent, from a large paper, reported six threats of legal action in the past year.

Businesses most often mentioned were auto (4), home improvement (3), grocer (2), discount store (2), and appliance (2). Others included jeweler, photographer, fabric store, health food store, and furniture.

These data might not reflect the actual number of threats of legal action, since threats received by the editorial staff would not necessarily all have been reported to the advertising manager. The question did not specify threats to the advertising manager. That automotive-type businesses were most often mentioned as expressing dissatisfaction of any sort would, however, support Beal's findings²⁵ that auto dealers are the primary sources of threats of legal action or ad cutoffs.

Ad Manager Involvement with Action Line Column

The majority of advertising managers have been the targets of some type of dissatisfaction from advertisers. Far fewer, though still a sizable percentage, indicated they had attempted to influence the Action Line staff out of concern for an account, as shown in table 10.

Sixteen ad managers (12.60%) said they had asked to have an Action Line item changed or killed. Four (10.26%) from small papers said they had

made such an attempt, compared with eight (17.39%) from medium-sized papers, and four (9.52%) from large papers.

TABLE 10

RESPONSE TO: HAVE YOU EVER ASKED THE EDITORIAL STAFF TO CHANGE OR KILL AN ACTION LINE ITEM BECAUSE OF PRESSURE FROM AN ADVERTISER?
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	4	10.26	8	17.39	4	9.52	16	12.60
No	35	89.74	38	82.61	38	90.48	111	87.40
Total	39		46		42		127	
No Answer	5		2		2		9	

Of the 16 ad managers who had asked for a change or kill, 13 said they had made such a request in the past year. Two were from small papers, seven from medium-sized papers, and four from large papers. Most respondents made two requests, although one, from a large paper, made six.

Ad managers were asked how often the Action Line staff had complied with the request to change or kill an item. Four reported total compliance, seven said they were never successful, and two did not answer the question. Rate of success by individual, and by number of requests made, was less than 25 percent for the large circulation group. Based on incomplete data, rate of success might have ranged from 34 percent to 57 percent for medium-sized papers and from 0 to 66 percent for small papers.

Ad managers made the following comments on their involvement in Action Line decisions:

SMALL-Editor usually consults with ad manager on touchy problems; I have asked them to be more factual; I do ask to be informed of any

unusual complaints on advertisers.

MEDIUM---Have consulted only.

Of the 16 ad managers who asked to have an Action Line item changed or killed, seven worked for papers which have no policy concerning advertiser interference. As shown in table 11, most papers do have such a policy, with medium-sized papers most often reporting presence of a policy.

TABLE 11

RESPONSE TO: DOES YOUR PAPER HAVE A POLICY CONCERNING ADVERTISER INTERFERENCE IN NEWSROOM DECISIONS? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	29	72.50	32	84.21	35	77.78	96	78.05
No	11	27.50	6	15.79	10	22.22	27	21.95
Total	40		38		45		123	
No answer	5		10		1		16	

A total of 96 respondents (78.05%) reported their papers have a policy concerning advertiser interference. Among medium-sized papers, 32 (84.21%) reported presence of a policy, compared with 35 (77.78%) large papers, and 29 (72.50%) small papers.

Of the 82 respondents who commented on their papers' policies, about 80 percent stated flatly that interference by advertisers is not tolerated. Others qualified this position somewhat by saying that the advertiser's suggestions are considered before publication of a story. One respondent said advertisers are referred to the advertising department with complaints or suggestions, which are then brought to the appropriate party. Another respondent said the advertising and editorial departments discuss matters

before publication. A sampling of comments follows:²⁶

SMALL—Never happens!; at this writing we have lost (at least temporarily) a large account because of a page 1 story and I agree with editor, even though we lose lineage; in the area of complaints it is the general opinion of advertising and news that we are no longer a newspaper when an advertiser dictates news or reporting.

MEDIUM—Advertiser (or non-advertiser) is often given opportunity to comment or reply or even to assist in determining authenticity of material where there may be a serious question; the newsroom is run locally, by the editor, with no outside interference, either from advertisers or from corporate offices; 'Without offense to friend or foe, we sketch your world exactly as it goes' - Byron on masthead.

LARGE—Newsroom decisions are based on newsworthiness, human interest, etc., not on volume or size of an advertiser; no interference, and I am in agreement with that; we are first a newspaper and secondly an advertising vehicle.

Comments by those whose papers have no policy were similar. One ad manager said there is no formal policy, "but we try to do the right and fair thing whether it pleases a specific advertiser or not." Another commented that although there is no policy, "we don't try to run their business and they don't run ours."

Ad managers were asked whether, to their knowledge, an Action Line item had ever been changed or withdrawn as a result of advertiser pressure on the editorial staff. Only two, both from large papers, responded in the affirmative. One commented that the Action Line reporter "discussed a matter with me and we found out other side, consequently, the item was dropped."

Dropping of Advertiser

A 1971 Supreme Court decision gave newspapers the right to refuse advertising for any reason, and without stating their reasons for doing so. The consumer movement, evidenced in one form by Action Line columns, has resulted in more pressure on business to act responsibly. Ad managers therefore were asked whether an advertiser had ever been dropped because of "unethical" practices uncovered by the Action Line column. Responses are listed in table 12.

TABLE 12

RESPONSE TO: HAS YOUR PAPER EVER DROPPED AN ADVERTISER BECAUSE OF AN "UNETHICAL" PRACTICE UNCOVERED BY THE ACTION LINE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	4	10.81	8	18.60	11	26.83	23	19.00
No	33	89.19	35	81.40	30	73.17	98	81.00
Total	37		43		41		121	
No answer	8		5		5		18	

A total of 23 respondents (19%) said advertisers had been dropped for unethical practices uncovered by the Action Line. The larger the paper the more often advertisers were reported as having been dropped.

One respondent, from a medium-sized paper, commented that the paper does not run ads for advertisers who conduct their businesses unethically, and that "accounts are checked out through the Better Business Bureau." An ad manager from a large paper said Action Line complaints had led to suits filed by the state attorney general's office. Another said one advertiser had been dropped because of numerous complaints, plus ad manager knowledge about the business.

Businesses mentioned as having been dropped are as follows:

SMALL-- 'Mail stuffers,' mail order.

MEDIUM--Seasonal or transient; Hong Kong tailor; discount meats; carpet cleaner.

LARGE--TV repair (high prices, poor service); swimming pool dealer (bait and switch); transient appliance dealer; beef sides; carpet dealer.

Advertiser Satisfaction with Column

In an effort to measure possible positive effects of the Action Line column from the advertiser's point of view, ad managers were asked whether

non-complaint items concerning businesses are published and whether advertisers ever make favorable comments about the column. They also were asked whether in their opinion the column had ever been responsible for bringing in a new account.

TABLE 13

RESPONSE TO: DOES YOUR PAPER'S ACTION LINE EVER PUBLISH NAMES OF BUSINESSES IN CONNECTION WITH ITEMS THAT DO NOT INVOLVE PROBLEMS OR COMPLAINTS ABOUT THE BUSINESS? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	20	51.28	31	72.09	18	41.86	69	55.20
No	19	48.72	12	27.91	25	58.14	56	44.80
Total	39		43		43		125	
No answer	6		5		3		14	

A total of 69 respondents (55.20%) said their papers publish names of businesses in non-complaint items. The number reporting publication of items of this nature was highest in the medium circulation group, with 31 (72.09%) positive responses, compared with 20 (51.28%) for small papers, and 18 (41.86%) for large papers.

Information on "where to buy" was most often mentioned as the reason for using the name of a business. This category was listed by 14 medium-sized papers, six small papers, and four large papers. Other categories included information, reader assist, noteworthy acts, such as donations and community service, and advice. One paper mentioned that names are used in connection with local restaurant cleanliness ratings. A respondent from a large paper commented that "any business mentioned in the column in any way is unsatisfactory to the business."

Table 14 lists frequency of favorable comments by advertisers.

TABLE 14

RESPONSE TO: DO YOUR ADVERTISERS EVER MAKE FAVORABLE COMMENTS ABOUT THE PAPER'S ACTION LINE COLUMN? BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Yes	26	70.27	17	40.48	19	46.34	62	51.67
No	11	29.73	25	59.52	22	53.66	58	48.33
Total	37		42		41		120	
No answer	7		6		3		16	

A total of 62 ad managers (51.67%) said they had received favorable comments about the column, with the highest percentage reported in the small circulation group. It would seem that papers most often reporting use of non-complaint items would most often report favorable comments by advertisers. The reverse was true. While 72.09 percent of medium-sized papers said non-complaint items are used, only 40.48 percent said they had received favorable comments by advertisers, compared with 46.34 percent for large papers, and 70.27 percent for small papers.

According to the ad managers, favorable comments most often made by advertisers are that the Action Line promotes honesty among businesses and that it is interesting, thus helping to boost readership. A sampling of other comments:

SMALL—Good tool to talk to distributors; like column, if comments are about competition; lends credibility to business; likes publicity on achievements, etc.; watchdog.

MEDIUM—Happy to have confusion straightened out, since usually not at fault; next to position sought; weeds out undesirables; discourages false or shoddy advertising; keeps competition honest.

LARGE—Competitors comment, 'Don't want to be written up'; keeps business honest; reputable dealers welcome column if someone else's ox is being gored.

When asked, Do you believe the Action Line column has ever been responsible for bringing in a new advertising account? only eight ad managers (6.90%) replied in the affirmative.

One respondent from a small paper said the column had brought in many accounts and another said it had been responsible for several small accounts. Three ad managers, two from medium-sized papers and one from a large paper, said businesses had purchased advertising space after being mentioned in the column as a source of where to buy goods or services.

Ad Manager Attitudes Toward Action Line Columns

In their attitudes toward Action Line columns, ad managers as a group tend to agree on all aspects of the columns on which they were questioned, with the exception of one. The larger the newspaper the more likely is the ad manager to disagree that the ad manager should have a role in deciding whether the paper should start an Action Line column.

Other differences were noted in attitudes toward publication of consumer news compared to publication of consumer news as reported via an Action Line column. Although 92 percent of the respondents agree that newspapers have a duty to report consumer complaints and problems, only 69 percent agree that Action Lines are the best means.

In answering a set of eight attitude questions, ad managers were asked to respond to statements by indicating Strongly Agree, Agree, No Opinion, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree. Responses are listed in tables 15 through 22.

A total of 49 ad managers (36.02%) strongly agreed that newspapers should report consumer complaints and problems, and 77 (56.62%) agreed with this statement. The mean scale response (on a scale of 1 to 5) was 1.78,

indicating agreement.

TABLE 15

RESPONSE TO: NEWSPAPERS HAVE A DUTY TO REPORT NEWS CONCERNING CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND PROBLEMS, BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	17	38.64	18	37.50	14	31.82	49	36.02
Agree	24	54.55	26	54.16	27	61.36	77	56.62
No Opinion	1	2.27	2	4.17	0	0.00	3	2.21
Disagree	0	0.00	2	4.17	3	6.82	5	3.68
Strongly Disagree	2	4.54	0	0.00	0	0.00	2	1.47

Table 16 contains data on attitudes toward Action Line columns.

TABLE 16

RESPONSE TO: ACTION LINE COLUMNS ARE THE BEST MEANS OF REPORTING CONSUMER COMPLAINTS AND PROBLEMS, BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	12	27.28	5	9.18	9	20.45	26	19.12
Agree	22	50.00	23	47.92	23	52.27	68	50.00
No Opinion	5	11.36	12	25.00	4	9.10	21	15.44
Disagree	3	6.82	7	14.58	6	13.64	16	11.76
Strongly Disagree	2	4.54	1	2.08	2	4.54	5	3.68

One-half of the ad managers agreed that Action Lines are the best means of reporting consumer complaints and problems, and 19.12 percent registered

strong agreement. Mean scale response was 2.31, indicating a generally favorable attitude. Respondents from medium-sized newspapers were less enthusiastic than those in other circulation groups, with 57 percent indicating agreement with the statement, compared with 69 percent for all circulation groups. Medium-sized papers also registered the highest percentage of "no opinion" answers — 25 percent, compared to 15 percent for all groups. Mean scale response for medium-sized papers was 2.50, compared with 2.11 for small papers, and 2.29 for large papers.

TABLE 17

RESPONSE TO: ACTION LINES SHOULD NOT HESITATE TO IDENTIFY BY NAME ANY BUSINESS WHICH HAS BECOME THE SUBJECT OF A COMPLAINT OR PROBLEM, BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	4	9.09	5	10.42	8	18.60	17	12.60
Agree	15	34.09	16	33.33	16	37.21	47	34.81
No Opinion	4	9.09	3	6.25	2	4.66	9	6.67
Disagree	14	31.82	15	31.25	13	30.23	42	31.11
Strongly Disagree	7	15.91	9	18.75	4	9.30	20	14.81

Response was about equally divided on whether or not Action Lines should use names of businesses involved in complaints. A total of 47.41 percent indicated agreement or strong agreement with the statement, with 45.92 disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Mean scale response was 2.98, indicating a neutral position. By circulation group, mean scale response was 3.11 for small papers, 3.15 for medium-sized papers, and 2.6 for large papers.

TABLE 18

RESPONSE TO: NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING MANAGERS SHOULD HAVE A ROLE IN DECIDING
 WHETHER THE PAPER WILL START AN ACTION LINE COLUMN,
 BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	9	20.45	6	12.77	1	2.27	16	11.85
Agree	15	34.09	11	23.40	7	15.91	33	24.44
No Opinion	2	4.55	1	2.13	5	11.36	8	5.94
Disagree	13	29.55	17	36.19	16	36.37	46	34.07
Strongly Disagree	5	11.36	12	25.53	15	34.09	32	23.70

More than one-half of the respondents (57.77%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that ad managers should help decide whether the paper should start an Action Line column. Agreement or strong agreement was registered by 36.29 percent, and 5.94 percent had no opinion. Thirty one ad managers (70.46%) from large papers took a negative position on the ad manager role in starting a column, compared with 29 (61.72%) from medium-sized papers, and 18 (40.91%) from small papers. Agreement or strong agreement on the role was registered by 24 small papers (54.54%), 17 medium-sized papers (36.17%), and eight large papers (18.18%). Mean scale response was 3.33 (3.84 for large papers, 3.38 for medium-sized papers, and 2.77 for small papers).

As shown in table 19, respondents generally agreed that Action Line columns help circulation, although 22 percent had no opinion on this matter. A total of 62 ad managers (45.59%) agreed that the columns help circulation, and 27 (19.85%) strongly agreed. Disagreement or strong disagreement was

expressed by 17 ad managers (12.50%). Mean scale response was 2.29 (2.29 for small papers, 2.23 for medium-sized papers, and 2.34 for large papers).

TABLE 19

RESPONSE TO: ACTION LINE COLUMNS HELP INCREASE CIRCULATION,
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	10	22.73	9	18.75	8	18.18	27	19.85
Agree	18	40.91	25	52.09	19	43.18	62	45.59
No Opinion	10	22.73	9	18.75	11	25.00	30	22.06
Disagree	5	11.36	4	8.33	6	13.64	15	11.03
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27	1	2.08	0	0.00	2	1.47

Table 20 contains data on attitudes toward difficulty in selling advertising.

TABLE 20

RESPONSE TO: PUBLICATION OF THE ACTION LINE COLUMN IN MY PAPER HAS MADE IT
DIFFICULT TO SELL ADVERTISING, BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	0	0.00	1	2.08	3	6.82	4	2.94
Agree	0	0.00	1	2.08	1	2.27	2	1.47
No Opinion	3	6.82	1	2.08	0	0.00	4	2.94
Disagree	25	46.82	23	47.92	23	52.27	71	52.21
Strongly Disagree	16	36.36	22	45.84	17	38.64	55	40.44

Few ad managers indicated existence of the Action Line column had made it difficult to sell advertising. Six (4.41%) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, while 126 (92.65%) disagreed or strongly disagreed. Mean scale response was 4.26.

As shown in table 21, the majority of ad managers (89.70%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their Action Line columns should be dropped. Seven (5.15%) expressed agreement or strong agreement with this statement, and another 5.15 percent had no opinion. Mean scale response was 4.32 (4.20 for small papers, 4.37 for medium-sized papers, and 4.39 for large papers).

TABLE 21

RESPONSE TO: MY PAPER'S ACTION LINE COLUMN SHOULD BE DROPPED,
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small No. %	Medium No. %	Large No. %	Total No. %
Strongly Agree	2 4.55	1 2.08	2 4.55	5 3.68
Agree	1 2.27	1 2.08	0 0.00	2 1.47
No Opinion	2 4.55	3 6.25	2 4.55	7 5.15
Disagree	20 45.45	17 35.42	15 34.09	52 38.23
Strongly Disagree	19 43.18	26 54.17	25 56.81	70 51.47

Table 22 indicates that most ad managers (85.29%) are satisfied with their papers' Action Line columns, close to the same percentage who disagreed that their columns should be dropped. No opinion was expressed by 5.88 percent of the respondents. Mean scale response was 2.02 (1.79 for small papers, 2.06 for medium-sized papers, and 2.07 for large papers).

TABLE 22

RESPONSE TO: I AM SATISFIED WITH THE ACTION LINE COLUMN IN MY PAPER,
BY CIRCULATION GROUP

Responses	Small		Medium		Large		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Strongly Agree	12	27.27	11	22.91	10	22.73	33	24.26
Agree	27	61.37	29	60.42	27	61.37	83	61.03
No Opinion	1	2.27	4	8.33	3	6.82	8	5.88
Disagree	3	6.82	2	4.17	2	4.54	7	5.15
Strongly Disagree	1	2.27	2	4.17	2	4.54	5	3.68

Upon reflection, it appeared that responses to the last two statements would yield opposite results, i.e., those who would drop the column would generally be dissatisfied with the column. That percentage responses were not exactly parallel might be explained by an ad manager's desire that the column be improved, but not necessarily dropped. However, it seemed clear in analyzing responses that some ad managers had, probably because of lack of time, misread the questions. Several indicated that they would drop the column, but also indicated they were satisfied with the column, and vice versa.

Ad managers were asked to state, in their own words: What do you consider to be the role of a newspaper Action Line column?

The majority of respondents said the columns should assist readers in solving problems or serve as a vehicle or voice for readers who have complaints or problems. Consumer problems was specifically mentioned by about one-half of the respondents, about an equal number in each circulation group. Others mentioned assistance of a general nature or assistance with consumer

complaints as well as those involving government agencies or other persons in the community.

Several ad managers would confine the role of Action Line columns to answering complaints about public officials and two, both from small papers, said the columns should not be used to settle arguments with private business.

About 12 percent of the ad managers stressed unbiased reporting or thorough investigation of both sides of the controversy before publication of an item in the Action Line column. One commented that the columns should not be used to "satisfy cynical reporter's anti-business bias." Reader interest, or feature, was mentioned by another 12 percent. A sampling of comments follows:²⁷

SMALL—To help consumers get what they pay for; to alert proper authorities to the various problems in the community; provide readers who feel powerless, or suspicious about government actions, or simply in need of hard-to-find information, with a recourse; outlet for readers' frustrations with business; help average consumer get action.

MEDIUM—Cut red tape, get action where reader has failed; fortify a 'BBB' or act as arm of 'BBB' for city without one; help vindicate retailer of misunderstandings, protect consumer, keep retailers on their toes; ombudsman; reader service, and indirectly an advertiser service; intermediary between consumers who don't know where to turn and businesses that may not be aware of problem.

LARGE—Help make local merchants accountable; community news medium that should be of interest to majority of readers; expose unfair business practices; public service; impartial communication link between individual and business, government; service to readers and reputable dealers; means for consumer to present his side of business transaction.

Additional Comments

Ad managers were given an opportunity to make additional comments, and 35 did so.²⁸

About one-third of the respondents expressed the belief that an Action Line complaint should be thoroughly investigated before publication and that the advertiser's side should be taken into consideration. Others

commented on their roles in Action Line decisions, the effect on readership and advertising, and what they considered to be the future of Action Line columns.

One ad manager, from a small paper, said his paper's column met with immediate opposition from businesses when it was established. Dissatisfaction resulted in some loss of advertising and a serious split with the local Chamber of Commerce. In his opinion, the majority of business firms are honest, and consumer complaints are sometimes unjustified, "but newspapers seldom if ever publicize the businessman's problems with the consumer."

Another respondent, also from a small paper, said his experience in retail management had convinced him also that many consumer complaints lack foundation. In his opinion, Action Line columns too often make accusations without giving merchants a chance to answer. Several ad managers echoed this sentiment. Others commented that their papers always, or almost always, give the business firm an opportunity to explain.

One ad manager suggested that at times a personal vendetta might be involved and, in such a case, "We certainly do not intend to be a party in trying to bring an unfavorable reaction upon a business." Several ad managers said that in many cases the reader has not personally contacted the business before lodging a complaint with the Action Line column. "We feel this step should be taken before possibly damaging the business. In nearly every case, nothing need get printed because the problem gets resolved," one of them commented.

About half a dozen ad managers said their columns had helped circulation, but one stressed that the purpose of the columns "should be to correct improper business practices and not a witchhunt to air unjustifiable demands from chronic bellyachers." Another respondent commented that he was certain

the column was "helpful to our ad department to sell the product."

One ad manager said that although he did not believe the column was a circulation builder, it "obviously is a service." He added, however, that after the column moved from page 1 to inside, the number of letters dropped dramatically. Several others said they deplored the use of mail order complaints as a majority of Action Line items, since they are of little interest to the local reader.

Ad managers representing all three circulation groups commented on their roles in Action Line complaints:

SMALL—Most consumer complaints are phone complaints to me, the advertising director. I follow these up personally and make attempts to rectify the problem.

MEDIUM—Ad department is contacted by news department before any consumer complaint is published, in order for ad department to try to settle the complaint first and to get both sides of problem before publication.

LARGE—Editorial department has submitted questions on advertisers to me and we have tried to get complaint handled without being published in paper. They also have asked my opinion on publishing store names....

According to one respondent, "no pressure should be brought by the advertising department to restrain the news department unless the news department is clearly in the wrong."

One ad manager from a medium-sized paper said he was greatly concerned about the paper's Action Line column when it was first established but that the person handling the column exercises care in handling consumer complaints and "checks with me on letters that appear to be questionable." A joint agreement on procedure is then arrived at. In most cases, he said, the consumer has not contacted the business personally.

The ad manager said he also was concerned about syndicated consumer columns, including those which do product comparisons. One syndicated Action Line column carried by his paper ran complaints about national firms which had stores in the community. Local store managers complained to the

newspaper. "They felt it was unfair to tag them with inferences of bad service or treatment," though they were cooperative in resolving local complaints. He said he feared "advertiser reaction and legal considerations" if a column publishing product comparisons were to be used by his newspaper.

Several ad managers commented that the presence of an Action Line column can benefit the advertiser, either directly or indirectly. Commented one, "...I firmly believe [column] has acted as a detriment to shady accounts. It has also made our good accounts be responsive to the public."

One ad manager stated his paper's general policy on advertisers: "If the owner of a store gets in trouble, story is likely on front page, not buried inside. If good customer (advertiser) in trouble over product or service, we print the news...."

According to another respondent, "Some consumers threaten to write our column if merchant doesn't satisfactorily adjust complaint....As a result, many merchants would be happier if we didn't have such a column. Merchants also think it's unfair to name store but only use initials of consumer."

One respondent said, "If the reporter does not get all the facts from all the parties involved, the report can be biased, and cost the newspaper advertising dollars, and therefore a possible loss of income and jobs." Another ad manager stated the case for the advertiser in stronger terms: "You have to realize that the advertising department of any newspaper should favor the advertisers — even though the editorial department doesn't think so."

An ad manager from a large newspaper said the column had hurt his business to a small degree. He added, however, "I do realize we're a newspaper first and it's our responsibility to print the news that our readers

want, good or bad."

Two ad managers stated their opinions on the possible future of Action Line columns:

I believe in time consumer complaints will be handled more effectively and satisfactorily by such agencies as local department of consumer affairs. Only they can bring both parties 'face to face' to resolve the differences.

...fine for awhile when you first put it in but soon after, readers lose interest, other papers copy it, radio and TV are now using it. Consumer issues now receive wide coverage in the financial section — many papers have a consumer column or editor.

One of their counterparts said he believes his paper's Action Line column, as one of the strongest features in the paper, is indicative of the "growing trend nationally of consumer awareness."

Length of Service as Advertising Manager

Ad managers were asked how long they had served in the position. Six years was the median length of service reported by small papers, three years by medium-sized papers, and five years by large papers.

Statistically Significant Relationships

Although no hypotheses were formed, it was believed differences might be found in responses by papers of the various circulation sizes. When chi-square tests were made on comparison of responses by circulation group, statistically significant differences were found at the .025 level or lower in six instances, as shown in table 23.

Comparison of circulation size and frequency of publication of column was statistically significant at the .001 level. The larger the paper the more often the Action Line column is published.

Statistically significant differences were detected at the .001 level also in comparing circulation size and location of column in the paper. More small papers place the column on page 1 than do medium-sized or large

papers. More small papers, however, listed run of paper as the location for the column than did papers in the other two categories. The larger the paper the more likely the column is placed on a page inside the main section.

Results were statistically significant at the .025 level in comparing circulation variables with frequency of publication of problems involving advertisers and with use of business names in non-complaint items. The larger the paper the more likely it publishes problems or complaints involving advertisers. Medium-sized papers most often reported using names of businesses in connection with items not involving problems or complaints. More small papers than medium-sized or large papers reported that advertisers had made favorable comments about the column, a difference statistically significant at the .025 level.

Statistically significant differences were noted at the .025 level in comparing circulation size with attitudes toward role in starting an Action Line column. The larger the paper the more likely the ad manager disagrees that the ad manager should have a role in deciding whether the paper should start a column.

TABLE 23

Variables	Significance Level
Circulation size and frequency of publication of column001
Circulation size and location of column in paper001
Circulation size and publication of problems involving advertisers025
Circulation size and use of names in non-complaint items025
Circulation size and favorable comments by advertisers025
Circulation size and attitudes toward role in starting column025

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY

Conclusions

Characteristics of Action Line columns are determined to a certain degree by the size of the newspaper. The larger the paper the more often the column is published. Larger papers also are more likely to handle complaints against advertisers all the time or at least some of the time. Small papers, however, seem to place more emphasis on the column insofar as placement in the paper. Circulation size seems not to be a factor in identity of advertisers in published complaints.

Almost one-half of small newspapers display their Action Line columns on page 1, a significantly larger percentage than those in the medium-sized and large circulation groups. The majority of papers use names of advertisers in published complaints all or at least some of the time. Fewer than 20 percent never use the names.

More than 61 percent of the papers publish the column five or more days per week. More small papers (44%) publish the column weekly than do those in the other circulation groups. Most papers use from one to four questions per column. More than 89 percent publish problems or complaints involving business firms that advertiser in the paper, all or at least some of the time. More than one-half use names of businesses in connection with items that do not involve problems or complaints.

More than one-half of the ad managers have received complaints from advertisers who fear adverse publicity as a result of a problem directed to

the Action Line column. One-fourth have received threats to cut off ads, and about 12 percent have lost advertising as a result of dissatisfaction with the column.

None of the papers reported legal action taken as a result of advertiser discontent with the column, although 16 percent said advertisers had threatened to take such action.

Businesses most often mentioned as expressing dissatisfaction in one way or another were automotive dealers, grocers, discount stores, and department stores.

About 12 percent of ad managers have reacted to advertiser pressure by requesting that the Action Line staff change or kill an item. Rate of success in getting the staff to comply appears to be less than half. Many of the ad managers do, however, take an active role in making decisions about Action Line items involving advertisers, from actual problem-solving to serving as a channel through which problems are processed.

About 78 percent of the papers have some type of policy concerning advertiser interference in newsroom decisions. Most observe a "hands off" policy.

About 55 percent of the papers use names of businesses in non-complaint Action Line items, with more medium-sized papers (72%) publishing items of this nature than the other two groups. Names are used most often to provide information on where to buy goods or services, but all non-complaint items appear to be of a nature that would create positive publicity for the business. Few ad managers, however, believe the Action Line has ever been responsible for bringing in a new account.

More than one-half of the ad managers have received favorable comments about the column from advertisers, with small papers (70%) most often

reporting that favorable comments were made. Medium-sized papers, which most often use non-complaint items, reported favorable comments less often than large papers or small papers. According to the ad managers, advertisers who like the columns do so because they promote honesty among business and are popular with readers, thus helping to boost circulation.

Ad managers as a group tend to hold the same general attitudes toward the columns, although they differ in one respect. The larger the paper the more likely the ad manager disagrees that the ad manager should have a role in deciding whether the paper should start a column. More than one-half of all ad managers take this stand, but the figure rises to 70 percent for large papers.

Although 92 percent of the ad managers believe newspapers have a duty to report consumer complaints and problems, only 69 percent believe Action Lines are the best means of reporting this type of news. Opinion was about equally divided on whether Action Lines should identify businesses in published complaints.

Few ad managers believe presence of an Action Line column in the paper had made it difficult to sell advertising. There was general agreement that the columns help increase circulation, although 22 percent of the ad managers have no opinion on this matter.

A sizable majority (85%) of ad managers say they are satisfied with the Action Lines carried by their papers.

In stating their opinions about what the role of an Action Line column should be, the majority of ad managers said the columns should assist readers in solving problems or serve as a voice for readers who have complaints or problems. About one-half of the ad managers specified consumer problems or consumer/government and general problems. Others specified

reader service, public service, community problems, or problems with public officials. Several would eliminate business complaints from the columns.

A number of the ad managers stressed unbiased reporting or thorough investigation of the controversy before publication of an item involving business.

The ad manager's concern for the advertiser is reflected in a number of the comments expressed in this study and in certain attitude measurements. Yet it seems clear that there also is an awareness of the responsibility of the newspaper to remain free of advertiser influence.

Some ad managers reject the notion that an Action Line column should represent the consumer in dealings with business firms. While the majority appear to accept this role, there seems to be a general fear that advertisers might not always be treated with the same consideration as the consumers. One complaint is that the business is not always given a chance to explain its side before an Action Line item is published.

Some ad managers perceive an anti-business attitude on the part of Action Lines in handling complaints, particularly where the advertiser is called to account for an act which ad managers see as blameless. Attitude measurements indicate that about one-half of the ad managers would prefer that names of advertisers not be used in published complaints, a practice that would reduce or eliminate any notoriety inflicted on the firm in cases in which it is held up as an example of unfair business practices.

Most ad managers say they are satisfied with the columns in their papers and, according to comments, they appear to be willing to uphold the newspaper's right to act independently of the advertiser. It appears that the policy on most newspapers regarding advertiser interference would

guarantee the ad manager the freedom to reject attempts by advertisers to influence the content of Action Line columns. Yet some ad managers do act on behalf of the advertisers to have items changed or withdrawn. Many also regularly work with the editorial department in resolving consumer complaints. This would indicate the lack of a division between the advertising and editorial departments. Or it could indicate the non-existence of the common type of Action Line column which places responsibility for solving consumer complaints on the editorial staff.

Several ad managers indicated that their papers are giving less emphasis to the columns than in the past, possibly because of lack of reader interest. Perhaps as one respondent suggested, consumers have more resources available today to settle grievances against business, and therefore are less dependent on Action Lines. It appears that for the present, however, the columns stimulate enough interest among readers to provide a forum in which consumers complain about advertisers, in turn provoking complaints by advertisers to the ad managers and ad manager complaints about the columns.

Suggested Studies

The number of Action Line columns listed in Editor & Publisher International Yearbook has declined from about 320 several years ago to 275 in 1977. The reason for the reduction in the number of columns might be studied, as well as possible de-emphasis on the columns by some papers.

A number of respondents indicated that advertisers are not always contacted about a problem before an Action Line item is published. It would be useful to study how often this is the case, what type of investigation is carried out before an item is published, and what methods are used by the Action Line staff in resolving complaints.

It is apparent that some advertising managers are actively involved in the resolution of consumer complaints, but it would be useful to know how others, when faced with advertiser dissatisfaction, handle the problem. Primary research on advertiser attitudes toward Action Line columns and a study of the amount of revenue lost as a result of advertiser discontent with the columns could serve as other areas of research.

Possible trends might be established if future studies were compared with this research in terms of numbers of expressions of advertiser dissatisfaction over time.

FOOTNOTES

¹"How to Get Some Action," Newsweek, 1 August 1966, p. 76.

²David Lee Beal, "Newspaper Action Lines: A National Survey of Their Development, Characteristics and Effects" (master's thesis, Syracuse University, 1973).

³Ibid.

⁴This study was the most comprehensive one the author found.

⁵Beal, *ibid.*

⁶A. H. Horton, "Consumer Advocacy at the Gainesville Sun: The First Six Months of Action Line, September 15, 1971, to March 15, 1972" (unpublished paper, University of Florida, 1972), cited by Beal.

⁷Michael J. Kavanagh and David L. Beal, "The Relationship Between Reader Usage and Attributes of Action Line Columns," Journalism Quarterly 52 (Autumn 1975): 485-92.

⁸No mention was made of possible lack of reader knowledge or access to more than one column, as might be the case in a one-newspaper city.

⁹John T. Bellay, "A Content Analysis of Three Action Line Columns" (master's thesis, Kent State University, 1970).

¹⁰Carol Ferruso DiJulio, "A Content Analysis of the Washington Star's Action Line and an Analysis of its Integration into the News-Gathering Process" (master's thesis, University of Maryland, 1975).

¹¹David R. Bowers, "A Report on Activity by Publishers in Directing Newsroom Decisions," Journalism Quarterly 44 (Spring 1967): 43-52.

¹²John C. Merrill and Ralph D. Barney, ed., Ethics and the Press: Readings in Mass Media Morality (New York: Hastings House, Publishers, 1975), p. 150, citing The Press: A Critical Look from the Inside (Dow Jones Books, 1967).

¹³James C. Ferguson, "Business and the News Media: Can We Find a Better Channel," Editor & Publisher, 23 October 1976, p. 28.

¹⁴"Action Line Gets Answers," Atlanta Journalism Review (July/August 1971), supplement to Columbia Journalism Review 10 (July/August 1971): 29.

- 15 Tom Curtis, "A Clash of Philosophies," Columbia Journalism Review 16 (May/June 1977): 64.
- 16 "Paper Tells Readers About Advertiser Pressure," Media & Consumer (October 1974), p. 12
- 17 John W. English, "Putting Consumer News on the Line in Lakeland," Media & Consumer (Summer 1974), p. 13.
- 18 Paul L. Erdos, Professional Mail Surveys (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1970), pp. 5-6.
- 19 F. Wiseman, "Methodological Bias in Public Opinion Surveys," Public Opinion Quarterly 36 (1972): 105-8.
- 20 Julian L. Simon, Basic Research Methods in Social Science: The Art of Empirical Investigation (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 249.
- 21 Arthur Kornhauser and Paul B. Sheatsley, "Questionnaire Construction and Interview Procedure," Appendix C to Research Methods in Social Relations, by Claire Selltitz, et al. (U.S.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston for The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, 1959), pp. 546-52.
- 22 Erdos, p. 37
- 23 Paul Yarbrough, "Mail Surveys," paper presented at NCR-90 workshop, Des Moines, Iowa, 14-15 April 1977.
- 24 A complete list of businesses mentioned as having complained, and number of complaints received, is supplied in Appendix B.
- 25 Beal, *ibid.*
- 26 A complete list of comments on newspaper policy is supplied in Appendix C.
- 27 A complete list of comments on role of Action Line column is supplied in Appendix D.
- 28 A complete list of additional comments is supplied in Appendix E.

BRITISH

ENGLISH WORDS

AND

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Please indicate extent of agreement or disagreement with the following statements (1 - Strongly agree; 2 - Agree; 3 - No opinion; 4 - Disagree; 5 - Strongly disagree):

1. Newspapers have a duty to report news concerning consumer complaints and problems.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
2. Action Line columns are the best means of reporting consumer complaints and problems.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
3. Action Lines should not hesitate to identify by name any business which has become the subject of a complaint or problem.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
4. Newspaper advertising managers should have a role in deciding whether the paper will start an Action Line column.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
5. Action Line columns help increase circulation.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
6. Publication of the Action Line column in my paper has made it difficult to sell advertising.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
7. My paper's Action Line column should be dropped.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___
8. I am satisfied with the Action Line column in my paper.
1 ___ 2 ___ 3 ___ 4 ___ 5 ___

What do you consider to be the role of a newspaper Action Line column?

The following questions are an attempt to gain factual information about your paper's Action Line and the extent of advertiser satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the column. If asked to comment, please do so briefly.

1. Does your paper's Action Line column publish complaints or problems involving business firms that advertise in the paper?

Yes ___

No ___ Please comment, then skip to Question 12 _____

Sometimes ___ Please comment _____

2. Are advertisers referred to by name in the column?

Yes ___

No ___ Please comment _____

Sometimes ___ Please comment _____

3. Have you received any complaints from advertisers who fear adverse publicity as a result of a problem or complaint directed to the paper's Action Line column?

No ___

Yes ___

3a. If so, approximately how many complaints in the past year? _____

3b. From what types of businesses? _____

4. Have any businesses contacted you with threats to cut off advertising because of a problem or complaint directed to the paper's Action Line?

No ___

Yes ___

4a. If so, approximately how many in the past year? _____

4b. What types of businesses? _____

5. Have any businesses dropped their advertising because of dissatisfaction with the column?

No ___

Yes ___

5a. If so, how many businesses in the past year? _____

5b. What types of businesses? _____

6. Have any advertisers threatened to take legal action as a result of dissatisfaction with the column?

No ___

Yes ___

6a. If so, approximately how many threats in the past year? _____

6b. From what types of businesses? _____

7. Have any advertisers taken legal action as a result of dissatisfaction with the column?

No ___

Yes ___ Please comment on nature and disposition _____

8. Have you ever asked the editorial staff to change or kill an Action Line item because of pressure from an advertiser?

No ___

Yes ___

8a. If yes, how often in the past year? _____

8b. How often did the editorial staff comply? _____

9. To your knowledge, has an Action Line item ever been changed or withdrawn as a result of advertiser pressure on the editorial staff?

No ___

Yes ___ Please comment _____

10. Has your paper ever dropped an advertiser because of an "unethical" practice uncovered by the Action Line column?
- No _____
- Yes Please comment _____
-
11. Have you ever attempted to regain an advertising account that was lost as a result of an Action Line item?
- No _____
- Yes _____
- 11a. If yes, how often were you successful? _____
12. Does your paper's Action Line ever publish names of businesses in connection with items that do not involve problems or complaints about the business?
- No _____
- Yes Please comment _____
-
13. Do your advertisers ever make favorable comments about the paper's Action Line column?
- No _____
- Yes Please describe _____
-
14. Do you believe the Action Line column has ever been responsible for bringing in a new advertising account?
- No _____
- Yes Please comment _____
-
15. Does your paper have a policy concerning advertiser interference in newsroom decisions?
- No _____
- Yes Please comment _____
-

16. How long have you been advertising manager of this paper? _____
17. How often does your newspaper publish its Action Line column? _____
-
18. What is the average number of questions used in the column? _____
19. Where does the column appear in the paper? _____
20. What is the circulation of your newspaper?
- | | |
|---------------------|-----------------------|
| Under 15,000 _____ | 50,000-99,999 _____ |
| 15,000-29,999 _____ | 100,000-299,999 _____ |
| 30,000-49,999 _____ | 300,000 or over _____ |

21. Additional comments:

Would you like a copy of the results of this study?

Yes ___ No ___

Thank you for your cooperation.

Please return to Carolee Stark, Department of Journalism and Mass Communications, Kedzie Hall, Manhattan, Kansas 66506

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications
Kedzie Hall
Manhattan, Kansas 66506
(913) 532-6890

December 1977

As a former editor of a consumer "Action Line" column, I am undertaking a research project designed to answer some questions concerning these columns, and I need your help.

The study, which will be the subject of my master's thesis, is being made to determine how advertising managers feel about their papers' Action Line columns and how advertisers react to them. Because of your close relationship with your paper's advertisers, I believe you would be in the best position to voice any concerns they might have.

Although your paper may not use the title "Action Line," I have used the term to describe columns which generally deal with consumer complaints and problems. Only a relatively small number of papers carry such a column. Therefore, it is important that you fill out and return the enclosed questionnaire in order that the findings be truly representative.

Each questionnaire contains an identification number for mailing purposes only. Names will be checked off when the questionnaires are returned, to determine which papers have not responded. Results will be used in such a way that names will not appear in the final report.

I ask your cooperation in completing and returning the questionnaire. A stamped, self-addressed envelope is enclosed.

Thank you.

Carolee Stark
Graduate Teaching Assistant

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications
Kedzie Hall
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas 66506

January 1978

In December I mailed you a questionnaire asking for your opinion on "Action Line" columns. I would appreciate it if you would fill out and return the questionnaire if you have not already done so. If it has been misplaced, please contact me and I will send you a new one.

Thank you.

Carolee Stark
Graduate Teaching Assistant

BRIGGS & BOWEN

of River

APPENDIX B

BRIGGS & BOWEN

BRIGGS & BOWEN

Types of businesses mentioned by advertising managers as having lodged complaints against Action Line column during past year, and number of complaints received

Small newspapers

Auto (1)
 Auto, dept. store (2)
 Auto, furniture, appliance (6)
 Jewelry, discount, auto (5)
 Discount (1)
 Repair, upholstery, auto (5-10)
 Furniture (1)
 Furniture, discount store (3)
 Furniture, jewelry (2-3)
 Furniture, grocery (2)
 Chain stores, appliance (6)
 Hardware, appliance (2)
 Service, TV & appliance (2)
 Software, hardware (3-4)
 Retailers (25)
 Food (2)
 Construction (very few)
 (2)

Medium-sized newspapers

Grocery (2)
 Auto, discount store (3)
 Dept. store, tire, auto, fabric (5)
 Appliance, auto, primarily (12)
 Furniture, appliance, clothing (4)
 Clothing (1)
 Furniture (4-5)
 Appliance, clothing, drug (10)
 Dept. store (1)
 Dept. store (2)
 Dept. store, savings & loan (2)
 Appliance (1-2)
 Fast food chain (1)
 Retailers (6)
 Regional, national advertisers (3-4)
 Home improvement, nursery (3)
 General (3-4)
 Retailers (4-5)
 (4)
 (1-2)
 (3)

Large newspapers

Automotive, dept. store, tires (5)
 Auto, discount, chain dept. store (10)
 Dept. stores (few)
 Appliance (1-2)
 Discount (3)
 Discount drug, swimming pool sales, carpet (3)
 Bank, appliance, dept. store, food, furniture, storm door firm (6)
 Dept. store, car dealers, home improvement
 Home improvement (2)
 Apartment, travel agency (2)
 Variety, aluminum siding (5)

Service (2-3)
 All types (12)
 Retailer (1)
 Various (3)
 Various retailers (6)
 Retailers (3)
 Varied (5-6)
 All types (40-50)
 All types (7)
 Few
 (4)
 (5)
 (50-75)
 (15)

APPENDIX C

Ad manager comments on newspaper policy concerning advertiser interference

Small newspapers

(Those with policy)

Advertisers and/or their stories or complaints are considered just like anyone else's!

We print what is news!

Advertising and editorial departments discuss such matters before publication of items.

The policy mainly deals with items on DWIs or legal notices which an advertiser would like to have withheld. Our policy is to publish same regardless.

We have a good relationship with news, but advertising sells and the newsroom writes.

We won't let advertising enter our news columns unless it is newsworthy.

They do not interfere unless rare exception arises and is mutually discussed between advertiser and editor.

They don't interfere.

We never attempt to influence news.

Never happens! At this writing we have lost (at least temporarily) a large account because of a page 1 story and I agree with editor even though we lose lineage.

Newsroom decisions are not influenced by advertisers.

Never.

It is never permitted.

No interference tolerated.

It's not done.

Not allowed.

No interference whatsoever!

Advertisers do not have any say in newsroom policies.

Not allowed.

There is to be none.

No interference whatsoever!

No interference allowed in newsroom.

We do not allow advertisers to dictate our news content. Our decisions are made by newspaper management judgment.

Editor has the final decision.

No written policy, but advertisers have no influence on news handling.

Editorial department makes own decisions.

In the area of complaints it is the general opinion of advertising and news that we are no longer a newspaper when an advertiser dictates news or reporting.

(Those without policy)

However, we don't try to run their business and they don't run ours.

Not formally. We will listen to anybody, but we try to do the right and fair thing whether it pleases a specific advertiser or not.

Ad manager comments on newspaper policy concerning advertiser interference

Medium-sized newspapers

(Those with policy)

I'm not sure what it is or to what degree it is imposed.

Except for exceptional circumstances where advertiser appears to have valid point.

We discuss as it comes up.

We report opinion, but will not change decision based upon unsubstantiation.

Will listen, then report facts.

News is news/ads are paid for.

We'll listen to both sides before we use story.

We normally do not allow advertiser interference in newsroom decisions.

Advertising gives input to news. News makes its own decisions.

'Without offense to friend or foe, we sketch your world exactly as it goes' --
Byron on masthead.

Newsroom decisions are made on the basis of newsworthiness and common sense.

Advertiser (or non-advertiser) is often given opportunity to comment or reply or even to assist in determining the authenticity of material where there may be a serious question.

We stay out! They stay out of advertising.

Never done.

The newsroom is under the sole direction of executive editor and publisher.
We don't tolerate any interference by advertisers.

We would not tolerate it.

They do not let them influence their decisions.

The newsroom is run locally, by the editor, with no outside interference, either from advertisers or from the corporate offices.

No interference.

Newsroom is autonomous.

Not allowed.

The newsroom will not be influenced whatsoever by advertiser interference!

Decisions made in newsroom should and are made without consideration of advertising lineage.

Advertiser input is not considered in any newsroom decisions.

Never the twain shall meet.

Strict non-intervension!

(Those without policy)

Not to the fullest extent.

They may contact editor if they wish.

We work as autonomous departments.

Ad manager comments on newspaper policy concerning advertiser interference

Large newspapers

(Those with policy)

We recommend that advertisers go through advertising department channels with complaints, suggestions, etc., and let us bring this to the attention of the proper party.

Policy is newsworthiness.

No advertising department interference if claim is valid.

No interference permitted, although suggestions are listened to by newsroom personnel.

Advertiser, as a reader, is listened to but not followed because he/she is an advertiser.

Newsrooms insist on 'absolute' news integrity.

No interference.

Newsroom decisions are based on newsworthiness, human interest, etc., not on volume or size of an advertiser.

None is tolerated.

Not permitted. However, ad department may make requests for coverage of some business events.

They do not allow any interference!

Advertiser cannot interfere with editorial decisions.

Separate functions.

The advertising department has no real voice at my paper, and I agree!

To do so would violate our editorial integrity.

No interference.

No interference — and I am in agreement with that.

No interference from advertising re newsroom decisions.

They don't do it!

None allowed!

We are first a newspaper and secondly an advertising vehicle.

The reader first, always.

Advertising and news are separate departments.

Editorial is autonomous.

Not allowed at all, ever!

Interference is not tolerated.

Complete and unequivocal separation.

We do not allow advertiser influence in any way!

No interference!

APPENDIX D

EXHIBIT 10

POSITIVE

Ad manager comments on role of Action Line columns -- Small newspapers

Settle complaints and disagreements between consumers and business.

An outlet for our readers' frustrations re complaints and problems with businesses that fail to acknowledge orders -- complaints and questions from consumers.

Voice consumer complaints.

Education of readers -- active voice of complainers -- real or imagined.

To help the average consumer get action.

Assist individuals in cutting 'red tape' in getting answers to problems or questions.

Provide assistance to readers, and/or solve consumer-oriented problems.

To answer consumer's questions and follow up on complaints concerning advertising carried by the newspaper.

It is a column that is open to our readers for their complaints against retailers and manufacturers. The use of this column generates good will and faith from our advertisers and manufacturers. It gets instant results for the consumer which sometimes isn't in their favor.

A means for consumers to ask questions or register complaints on every facet of the community, with an opportunity for explanation from subjects. Through unbiased reporting of problems or complaints that community members might have.

To report the facts as they are, being sure to thoroughly examine the statements of both parties.

Sounding board for consumer complaints, BUT merchant should be allowed to answer in print.

To get to the bottom of subscriber complaints -- BUT both sides of the problem should be included, not just the consumer side.

Helping readers solve problems -- not necessarily consumer complaints.

To help the public resolve problems with business and governments.

The role of our column is much broader than consumer complaints. It serves as a column for general information much more than one for consumer complaints, but we welcome all questions.

Readership service. Some newspapers have this column as strictly consumer information. Our paper handles and answers a variation of questions from the public.

Assist our readers in solving problems involving consumer complaints and city or county government.

Helping taxpayers and consumers with needed information.

To help consumers get what they pay for.

Certainly helps to keep people honest and a good reader service — it carries a lot of 'clout' that an individual might not be able to obtain for himself.

To help solve the reader's problem or consumer complaint, but to not be too hasty to accept that complaint as gospel truth until all information is obtained.

Give the consumer an opportunity to put complaints into print in an effort to get positive reaction — hopefully resolving the complaint by the store or person involved.

To report consumer as well as community problems including editorial stories.

To assist public in getting action or answers from public agencies such as government agencies. Not to battle out personal business arguments, which could be considered libelous in a jury trial if names of parties are published.

To report the feelings of the community through its citizens, but stay out of private business.

Provide readers who feel ripped off and powerless, or suspicious about government actions, or simply in need of hard-to-find information, with a recourse.

To bring problems that could or do affect the general community.

Keep the public in touch with public officials.

To maintain local control of complaints and to provide a service to our readers which would be lacking otherwise.

To alert proper authorities to the various problems in the community.

Good readership feature.

To inform and assist readers in the type of service they deserve.

It serves as a public input medium.

Reader service.(2)

Ad manager comments on role of Action Line columns — Medium-sized newspapers

Good readership item; should not be used to instigate controversy or satisfy cynical reporter's anti-business bias.

To help solve readers' problems, cut red tape, get action where reader has failed.

To help protect the consumer to a degree. It seems the column turns into a catalog column a great deal of the time.

Sounding board for consumer complaints. They should be investigated before publication and possible solution reached before publishing. If complaint is not resolved, then publish business name.

Reader interest; public service; increases the readers' confidence in newspaper advertising.

A feature.

A service to aid consumers with complaints not resolved by the businesses involved and to expose problems of interest about the businesses.

To assist our readers in solving problems.

Answer complaints.

The role of our column is to solve all types of readers' problems; it gets answers and cuts red tape. It stands up for our readers' rights.

Informative, impartial reporting of facts in cases involved.

Our column is used to handle consumer complaints as well as answer questions of interest to our readers. It's one of our best-read columns.

To fortify a 'BBB' in a city or certainly to act as an arm of a 'BBB' for a city without one.

To assist the consumer in straightening out problems.

Newspapers should play active role as consumer advocate in this community.

To explain and clarify problems that are of major concern to our readers.

Readership.

To generally deal with consumer complaints and problems.

To publish complaints which are widespread enough to help many other readers.

To investigate both sides of story thoroughly and to report the pertinent factual information.

To help protect the consumer; keep the retailers on their toes; to help vindicate the retailer of misunderstanding or consumer taking unfair advantage of the retailer; referee the two.

Broader than consumer complaint role; ranges from inquiries about age of movie stars to how to raise tomatoes. Simply stated, to give reader an opportunity to communicate with their newspapers on a non-editorial basis.

If it is an advertiser of the paper, then the court of last appeal, after all other efforts (local department of consumer affairs, Chamber of Commerce, BBB have failed).

Ombudsman.

To be the intermediary between consumers who don't know where else to turn and businesses that may not be aware of the complaint or problem through any other means.

Publishing cases that have been solved as well as those that cannot be solved because of the intentional lack of interest or unwillingness of a business or service where the fault can be put on the doorstep of that business or service.

Public service to readers and general citizenry.

To root out causes and resolve (if possible) legitimate complaints about bureaucracies or businesses.

Readers' problem-solving, interesting readership feature, helpful to community.

Reader service (and indirectly an advertiser service).

To act as an ombudsman for our readers, be it a complaint or consumer problem.

To represent the consumer in situations which have been ignored by the retailer.

Another good newspaper service.

Create reader interest -- build circulation.

Warn public of possible pitfalls and their rights.

Let the consumer know that someone will help them.

It is a reader feature. It should not attempt to play prosecuting attorney or defender of the public.

To try to reach a solution to problem between subscribers and retail business.

To report consumer complaints factually in an effort to correct the problem.

Ad manager comments on role of Action Line columns — Large newspapers

The solution of problems that individual efforts cannot resolve.

Good means of reporting consumer complaints and problems.

Help make merchants accountable.

Informative.

To help resolve problems or questions of readers that would be of interest to the general readership as opposed to segmented interests.

Help solve (consumer/seller, citizen/government) complaints but only after regular channels of complaints have been exhausted and no equitable solution offered.

We do not identify the advertiser or store concerned. I feel this is fair, as many situations are a one-time shot or complaint from a constant complainer.

A community news medium that should be of interest to a majority of readers.

To expose any unfair business practices.

To report consumer complaints and problems after thoroughly interviewing each party involved in the complaint — and only if the complaint is not satisfactorily solved.

To give readers an outlet for their complaints and to help them get answers to their problems with the city, their neighbors, etc. without having to contact some official in the city hall or their own lawyer. Also to give them answers to questions which are common to all subscribers. Entertainment as well as enlightenment.

Voice of the reader for action.

Public service.

To help individuals solve merchandise problems and to assist with information regarding when and where of merchandise availability.

Protect the reader against any business or agency which does not fairly adjust a legitimate complaint.

Impartial communication link between individual and large organization (business, government, institutions).

To present fairly both sides of a consumer complaint — the business side as well as the consumer side.

A service to our readers and our reputable retailers.

An opportunity for the reader to communicate with policy makers of business.

A means for consumer to be heard and get some answers to problems that no one else can help with.

To assist readers in whatever problems they may have.

Source of education for consumers in general.

Quasi-ombudsman.

Factual reporting after very thorough investigation.

To protect the consumer, but to also present the merchant's side of the story.

Serve readers by helping them correct the mistakes or shortcomings of businesses or anyone with whom they deal.

Get action for legitimate complaints where person complaining can't go through the proper channels.

Provide information of use to readers. It should help people to a greater understanding of a complex society.

Help our readers get problems resolved without delay and without fanfare.

Report the facts to the consumer.

It is almost like a gossip column -- we help on so few complaints it is meaningless -- we get 2,000 complaints/week and solve 25.

Solving consumer complaints -- a go-between.

Forum for customer information and complaints.

To answer those problems in which there seems to be no other recourse.

Reader interest.

A means for the consumer to present his side of business transactions.

To expose fraud or unethical business practices -- however, it should thoroughly investigate both sides of the problem to assure fair reporting and not just voice one side of complaint.

Consumer interest column, question and answer.

THE
ENGLISH BOARD

APPENDIX E

Additional comments by ad managers — Small newspapers

Certainly one of the 2-3 most popular features in the paper. Ranks with letters to the editor.. Has cut a lot of red tape without making too many people angry. We try to be as courteous and diplomatic as we can, and assume that a genuine misunderstanding has occurred until we learn otherwise. Generally, this is the case.

Column on page 1 almost every day, but not always on business complaints. Complaints on merchants are few. We answer a variety of questions on local city government to organizations. Often referrals are made if questions are not answered. No businessman or city official likes negative feedback, especially on page 1, but they do have an opportunity to explain.

Most consumer complaints are phone complaints to me, the advertising director. I follow these up personally and make attempts to rectify the problem.

Column covers wide area of interest, from consumer complaints to recipes and gripes about politicians, etc.

We are probably one of the smallest dailies to have an Action Line column and it is costly, but I believe it is one of our best-read features. I am sure that it is helpful to our ad department to sell the product.

Our column is not designed to handle customer complaints; instead it offers information on where to find things or how to do things.

I think no pressure should be brought by the advertising department to restrain the news department unless the news department is clearly in the wrong.

You have to realize that the advertising department of any newspaper should favor its advertisers — even though the editorial department doesn't think so.

Good share of complaints against businesses in regard to orders made to out-of-town companies; thoroughly researched; many times complainer who turns out to have caused problem. Feel Action Line researched in highly competent manner to find out exactly what facts are. Have checked with sales people; only comments they received favorable and most find it to be informative.

Brief news events, complaints, etc. Just our way of letting our readers get something 'off their chest.' It certainly helps to sell newspapers.

I think all newspapers should hesitate to print names until all facts are available. We almost always contact the person or company being complained about and get their response before printing accusations.

Having spent 20 years in retail management before joining newspaper, I know that many customer complaints not justified. Problem I have with Action Line columns is that many, many times they make accusation (right or wrong) without giving merchant chance to answer. Becomes sort of guilt by association. Get great many complaints on mail order businesses which are not of much interest to local readers.

Motive of complaint checked: is it legitimate complaint? Should advertiser be given opportunity to respond before it is printed? Individual may have motive that might affect business. Personal vendetta involved? We certainly do not intend to be a party in trying to bring an unfavorable reaction upon a business. We get both sides of story.

Column initiated nine years ago, met with immediate opposition from large numbers of business people, which resulted in partial boycott, decline in advertising from one category of business...serious split with Chamber of Commerce. Vast majority of retailers and business people are honest. Action Line forced no one out of business, or occasioned any apparent change in modes of operation. Approve concept of column, but now degenerated to handling topics such as unreceived mail subscriptions, mail orders. Frequently unjustified complaints, but newspapers seldom if ever publicize businessman's problems with consumer.

Additional comments by ad managers — Medium-sized newspapers

In strictest terms, not really an Action Line...answers to questions on variety of subjects...recipe swapper.

Action Line one of strongest columns in paper, according to surveys taken externally and by our own promotion department, indicating growing trend nationally of consumer awareness.

Action Line very efficient. Most complaints concern municipal problems.... When advertisers are involved the editor calls them and gets their side of story. Most (99%) of the advertisers are cooperative and take immediate steps to correct complaint. Editor does not run name of advertiser involved but would not hesitate to do so if we felt there was actual fraud intended in the advertising.

Extreme care has to be exercised by newspapers to establish validity of complaint. In many cases, consumer complaints are found to be not as first represented....In dealing with advertisers, newspapers have to use care in presenting the case. Since newspapers don't have judicial powers, I believe in time consumer complaints will be handled more effectively and satisfactorily by such agencies as local department of consumer affairs. Only they can bring both parties 'face to face' to resolve the differences.

I am curious -- are there newspapers in this country which will allow advertisers to SWAY editorial? We are very objective. We print the news, good or bad. We turn down lots of ads, but not because of editorial. If advertising is poor, such as cure for baldness or other medical cure, we do not accept...or copy about prize for doing nothing, or funny looking financial offers, etc. Editorial has no influence on business side. If the owner of a store gets in trouble, story is likely on front page, not buried inside. If good customer (advertiser) is in trouble over product or service, we print the news -- never buried.

Depending on the nature and seriousness of complaint or problem, news features or even editorials may be advisable or even necessary.

If an Action Line does cause undo community or advertiser problems it is usually because consumers are allowed to 'use' the column as an effective means of 'getting back' at business. Only a wholehearted effort by the columnist to determine honesty and validity of a complaint and a complete understanding of normal business practice plus a willingness to discuss both sides can make the column as useful and effective as it should be.

In many cases reader has not attempted to contact proper individual at the business. We feel this step should be taken before possibly damaging the business. In nearly every case, nothing need get printed because the problem gets resolved.

Action Line in any newspaper is of benefit to both reader and other advertisers, as long as both sides of story are given and reasonable amount of time is given before complaint is published.

Ad department is contacted by news department before any consumer complaint is published, in order for ad department to try to settle complaint first and to get both sides of problem before publication. We try to be fair to retailer as well as consumer.

Should be clarification that complaint is valid and thoroughly researched. Our Action Line well-read, respected, plus for paper.

Initially greatly concerned with column. Fortunately, person handling column maintains objectivity, checks with me on letters that appear to be questionable. In those cases (overstating situation, inaccurate statements) we arrive at a joint agreement on procedure. In some cases we call advertiser and arrive at a solution. Most involve situations where complainant has not contacted firm himself. Feel if person has not attempted to resolve problem, unfair to publish letter. Greatest problem was with use of syndicated column. National column contained complaints about national firms and local stores of those firms felt it was unfair to tag them with inferences of bad service or treatment. Don't believe AL a circulation builder, but obviously is a service. After column moved from front page to inside, number of letters dropped dramatically. Columns which deal with product comparisons disturb me. I fear advertiser reaction and legal considerations if such a column were used.

Additional comments by ad managers -- Large newspapers

A newspaper has a duty to print news as long as it is factual. Action Line reports must also be factual. If reporter does not get all the facts from all the parties involved, the report can be biased, and cost the newspaper advertising dollars, and therefore a possible loss of income and jobs.

We have had this feature for over 10 years, and I firmly believe it has acted as a detriment to shady accounts. It has also made our good accounts be responsive to the public. In advertising, our only desire is that the advertiser be contacted before publication to make sure he gets his chance to tell his side of the problem.

As a manager, the column has hurt my business to a small degree. However, I do realize we're a newspaper first and it's our responsibility to print the news that our readers want, good or bad.

An Action Line column can be of great reader interest and reader value if conducted properly. The object should be to correct improper business practices and not a witchhunt to air unjustifiable demands from chronic bellyachers.

The procedure should be and I believe is, here, that every complaint is checked out before publishing details. Names of businesses should not be used unless this is done. Verification of facts is paramount in any news handling. There are unreasonable and unscrupulous consumers as well as unreasonable and unscrupulous business people. Accuracy in our news columns is a 'must.'

Action Line is fine for awhile when you first put it in but soon after, readers lose interest, other papers copy it, radio and TV are now using it. Consumer issues now receive wide coverage in financial section -- many papers have a consumer column or editor.

I very much like our column and think it serves the public (and business firms indirectly) in a very beneficial manner.

Some consumers threatened to write our column if merchant didn't satisfactorily adjust complaint (in other words, blackmail). As a result, many merchants would be happier if we didn't have such a column. Merchants also think it's unfair to name store but only use initials of consumer.

Editorial department has submitted questions on advertisers to me and we have tried to get complaint handled without being published in the paper. They also have asked my opinion on publishing store names, but we do not get advertiser pressure.

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NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING MANAGERS
AND ACTION LINE COLUMNS

by

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B.J., University of Missouri, 1971

AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S THESIS

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

MASTER OF SCIENCE

Department of Journalism and Mass Communications

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Manhattan, Kansas

1978

The study explored the newspaper advertising manager's experiences with and attitudes toward the Action Line column. Much of the project dealt with advertiser reaction to the columns as perceived by the ad manager.

A five-page questionnaire was sent to advertising managers of the 252 newspapers in the United States which carry an Action Line column. Response rate was 62 percent.

The study found that more than 94 percent of the columns publish problems or complaints involving advertisers all or at least some of the time. The larger the paper the more likely items of this nature are used. More than 80 percent use the name of the advertiser in published complaints all or at least part of the time.

More than half of the ad managers said they had received complaints from advertisers who feared adverse publicity as a result of a problem directed to the Action Line column. One-fourth had received threats to cut off ads, and about 12 percent had lost advertising. Reports of ad cutoffs rose with the size of the newspaper. None of the papers reported legal action taken as a result of advertiser discontent with the column, although 16 percent said advertisers had threatened such action.

About 12 percent of the respondents said they had asked to have an Action Line item changed or dropped as a result of pressure from advertisers. Rate of success appeared to be less than half. Many of the ad managers reported, however, that they are actively involved with the Action Line column, either in solving complaints against advertisers or serving as a consultant to the Action Line staff on advertiser-related complaints.

More than half of the papers use names of businesses in non-complaint items, most often to provide information on "where to buy." More medium-sized papers use items of this nature than do large or small papers. More

than half of the ad managers had received favorable comments about the column from advertisers, with small papers most often reporting favorable reactions. According to the respondents, advertisers comment most often that the columns promote honesty among businesses and are popular with readers, thus helping to boost circulation.

Respondents in all three circulation categories tended to hold the same opinions about Action Line columns, although the larger the paper the more likely the ad manager disagrees that ad managers should have a role in deciding whether the paper should start a column. More than half of all respondents took this stand.

Although 92 percent of the ad managers believe newspapers have a duty to report consumer complaints and problems, only 69 percent believe Action Lines are the best means. Opinion was about equally divided on whether Action Lines should identify businesses in published complaints.

Few ad managers believe presence of an Action Line column has made it difficult to sell advertising, and there was general agreement that the columns help increase circulation. General satisfaction with their own papers' Action Line columns was expressed by 85 percent of the respondents.