Is This Your *Last* Issue?

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Since launching free-range thinking™ in August 1999, I have intended for this publication to stimulate a conversation about the way our sector communicates. Each month, I profile best practices and resources that can help you reach more people more effectively, and I welcome your feedback, story ideas, and even the occasional flame. At barest minimum, though, I ask readers to check in once each year to let me know they're alive, well, and still interested in receiving regular visits from the grazing cows.

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So if you'd like to remain on the mailing list, please send an email to andy@agoodmanonline.com with the message "Keep Me On." (You can simply enter those words in the subject line and skip the message, because if the email bears your name I'll have all the information I need.) If you cannot send email, just call 213.386.9501, say "Keep me on!" and leave your full name. Thanks (in advance) for taking a few moments to check in, and I look forward to continuing our conversation in the months to come.
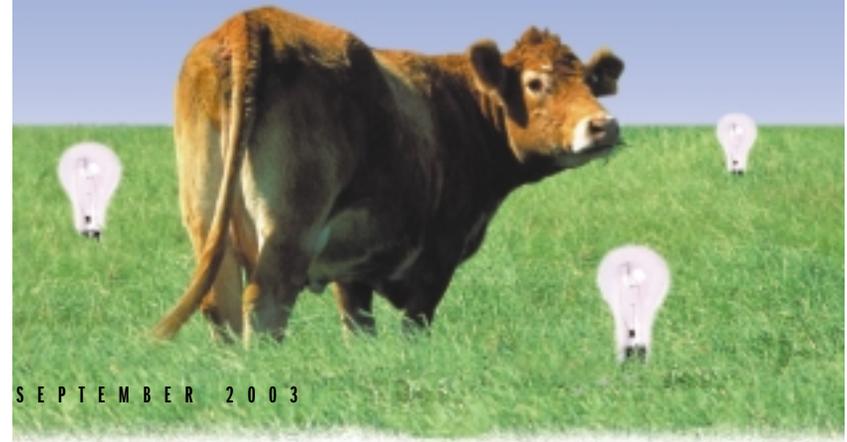
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free-range thinking™

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They oversimplify, ignore nuance, and reduce complex issues to arguably arbitrary rankings. So how can a list be the best friend your issue ever had?

The Thing About Lists

There's something irresistibly attractive about lists. Whether scratched on paper as reminders of tasks that need to be done today, or etched in stone as moral guidelines for *every* day, lists have a unique way of taking the complex and making it orderly and understandable. The media inundate us with lists— of box office leaders, top performing stocks, sexiest men alive—precisely because editors recognize their consistent appeal.

Jack Miller suspected that a list would bring attention to his field of interest, but he never imagined how much. A former professor of education and current chancellor at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, Miller believes that the quality of life in American cities is intrinsically related to their levels of literacy. To further this contention, he assembled data that allowed him to rank the 64 largest US cities from most to least literate. Miller released his list in July, and the resulting torrent of stories about his study is impressive, but what is even more eye opening is the amount Miller spent to publicize his findings: *nothing.*

The Thing About Lists

► "I've made a life of studying literacy from the standpoint of children's test scores," says Miller, "but I've always thought that beyond these scores was a larger quality of life issue." Consider the young couple that's thinking about moving to a particular city, he suggests. They can find published information on crime rates, tax levels, the job market—all sorts of factors affecting the quality of life there. But where, Miller asks, is the measure of how much *reading* is going on in that city? Isn't that worth knowing, too?

Miller says these questions kicked around inside his head for about ten years, but in April 2003 he finally decided to stop cogitating and start calculating. Working in his spare time, he first set about the task of identifying key characteristics that would define a truly "literate city." Since his research budget was zero, he had to confine his search to characteristics that could be quantified with publicly available data. *(See List #1.)* And to keep the project's scope wide enough to attract attention but narrow enough to be handled in off hours, Miller limited the field of US cities to those with populations of 250,000 or more.

"The first measure that came to mind was bookstores," Miller says, so he combed the records of the American Booksellers Association. He also scanned the Yellow Pages to get an accurate count of all the stores in each city, from the largest full-service chains to the tiniest vendors of rare and used books. For each city, Miller divided the total number of stores by population to derive a booksellers per capita figure—the first number that could be plugged into his literate city formula.

Miller went through a similar process with libraries, taking into account the number of school libraries and public branches, the total number of books these facilities housed, and the number of books actually in circulation. Again, these numbers were indexed against population to derive a figure for the final formula. Newspaper circulation rates, the number of periodicals published within the city, and the educational attainment of each city's residents were also factored in, and after three months of research and number crunching, Miller had his list of "America's Most Literate Cities." *(See List #2.)*

On Thursday, July 10th, Brian Mattmiller, the university's director of news and public affairs, sent a press release announcing the new study to media outlets in the top 15 US cities, along with national outlets such as NPR and *USA Today.* The release explained the study's methodology, highlighted the most literate cities, and pointed journalists to a web site *(www.uww.edu/cities)* for the full report. "Then what happened was something that amazed all of us," Miller recalls. "By Monday, we had received 14,000 new visitors to the web site, and all kinds of calls from reporters."

A business journal in Kansas City picked up the story, and sister publications in 22 cities quickly followed suit. In less than a week, over 75 stories appeared in newspapers, on local television news, radio talk shows, and on a variety of web sites. *(See List #3.)* "I've been involved in enough stories with national impact that I knew the potential was there," says Mattmiller. "But did I think it would take off this much? I really didn't think so."

Based on the success of this project, Miller is planning to update the "America's Most Literate Cities" list annually. Within the next few weeks, though, he will publish yet another thought provoking list: twelve steps that cities can undertake to become more literate (and, presumably, improve their standing before Miller's number-crunchers strike again.) With this list of recommendations, Miller crosses over from academia to advocacy, and he is a welcome role model for our sector.

By compiling a literate cities list, Miller captured the attention of the media, which in turn asked millions of Americans to consider the importance of reading in their daily lives. And Miller started this chain reaction with absolutely no budget, reminding us that even when you don't have millions of dollars at your disposal, you can still find a way to convince a national audience to think about issues that matter. ■

List #1
Free Data Sources

1. United States Census 2000
2. Audit Bureau of Circulations
3. American Booksellers Association
4. Yellow Pages, Inc.
5. American Library Directory (55th Edition)
6. The National Directory of Magazines 2002

List #2
Top Ten Most Literate Cities

1. Minneapolis, MN
2. Seattle, WA
3. Denver, CO
4. Atlanta, GA
5. San Francisco, CA
6. Pittsburgh, PA
7. Washington, DC
8. Louisville, KY
9. Portland, OR
10. Cincinnati, OH

List #3
Top Ten Media Hits

1. Los Angeles Times
2. Newsday
3. Boston Globe
4. San Francisco Chronicle
5. Dallas Morning News
6. Minneapolis Star Tribune
7. WXIA-TV, Atlanta
8. KOMO-TV, Seattle
9. KGW-TV, Seattle
10. WNBC, New York (TV web site)