"""""current comments"

Will the Real Current Contents® Reader Please Stand Up!

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At ISI® we take pride in keeping informed about our subscribers' needs and wants. The latter doesn't present too difficult a challenge. On the whole our subscribers are forthright and articulate. Much of Current Contents-its format, its coverage, its special features-is the gradual accumulation of ideas and suggestions developed from close interaction with readers. To find out what readers really need, however, as contrasted with their expressed desires, is not so easy. Every trick and tool available must be used. Ultimately risk-taking and judgment must be involved.

Last year we decided to survey our U.S. subscribers. We sent out about 1100 two-page questionnaires. We omitted from the sample the "anonymous" subscribers who receive CC® under a group subscription or some type of corporate address. The response was a phenomenal 75%, which must be some kind of record for a mail survey. But, as you will see, CC readers are an exceptional group.

So, CC subscriber, who are you.

demographically speaking? You are a male, about 40 years old. You are a Ph.D. engaged in basic research in an educational institution. You earn more than \$20,000 a year. Some of your work is supported by grants.

How do you use CC? You go through every CC issue page by page. Once you've done that, you pass your copy along to five or six colleagues, who for one reason or another haven't yet subscribed to CC themselves. Surveying that huge group of "pass-along" readers is not easy, but the group is as important to CC's future as is the present list of subscribers. Many of these readers, as distinct from subscribers, are post-doctoral students.

This profile of the average CC subscriber in the U.S. will hardly seem particularly revealing to the average subscriber! What else did we expect? Was it necessary to go to so much trouble to learn the obvious? Was the outcome so predictable as to make the survey unnecessary in the first place? That's a moot point. No surveyor should be disappointed that his survey con-

firms apparently inescapable logic. But too often survey data is used to confirm bias. I have never had much faith in surveys and I shudder when I think of the millions spent by governments to conduct surveys which produced the most obvious information.

There were, nevertheless some interesting and surprising variations from the expected in ISI's survey. It is not surprising that most CC readers are men. But the CC edition with the most female subscribers is not CC/Behavioral, Social & Educational Sciences, but CC/Engineering & Technology! On the other hand, there were no women at all among respondent subscribers to CC/Agriculture, Food & Veterinary Sciences.

Subscribers to CC/BS&E tend to be younger than subscribers to other editions, with CC/Physical & Chemical Sciences a very close second. Grant support is most frequently found among subscribers to CC/Life and CC/BS&E, and least often among subscribers to CC/E&T. That last fact may account for CC/E&T having by far the most pass-along readers per copy. The average CC/E&T subscriber has 10 friends and colleagues waiting for his issue of CC each week. CC/Life has the lowest passalong readership, and these "facts" may reflect an atom of truth in the old saw that "research" scientists

write but don't read, while "applied" scientists read but don't write. One might also say that those who read a lot, write a lot, and those who write little read little! Not surprisingly, CC/Physical & Chemical Sciences has a high pass-along readership reflecting the budget problems of the chemical profession.

Interpreting survey results is an interesting game. One can be easily misled by preconceptions, with even the best designed of questionnaires. One sees too quickly what one wants to see ("... even this small sample confirms . . .") or too facilely dismisses what one doesn't (". . . the sample is only a sample, after all . . ."). To adapt a famous pronouncement from Orwell, average readers are much more average than others, and that is true of our CC reader. The most interesting thing about our readers is this. No matter how interesting other data may be, to me the 75% response in return of the questionnaires correlates well with the finding that an equal number find CC very helpful or indispensable. Perhaps this assurance is the greatest benefit derived from the survey. Lest you worry, however, about complacency on my part. I am still worrying about that other 25%.