*FINDERS, KEEPERS?: AN ANALYSIS
AND VALIDATION OF A FREE-FOUND-AD POLICY*

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A survey of Lost and Found classified sections in metropolitan and smaller newspapers revealed disparate rates between Lost ads and Found ads: Lost ads greatly outnumbered Found ads, probably because newspapers usually require the finders of lost personal property to pay for Found advertisements. The effect of a Free-Found-Ad policy on the rate of Found advertisements placed in the Lost and Found sections of three community newspapers was investigated using a multiple-baseline design. The results suggested that the Free-Found-Ad policy was effective in increasing the rates of Found ads in all three newspapers. To determine whether increases in Found ads resulted in increases in recovered property, a sample of individuals who placed Found ads were surveyed in both baseline and treatment conditions and asked if the found items had been claimed by their owners. The Free-Found-Ad policy appeared to be effective in increasing the amount of personal property returned. The study concluded that community newspapers can provide incentives to increase such help-giving or altruistic behaviors. The implications of this study for a general policy-research strategy are discussed.

DESCRIPTORS: altruism, newspapers, response cost, policy-research strategy, multiple baseline

People are often placed in situations where behavior that can assist other people is restrained by certain variables. Korte (1974) labelled these environmental situations "altruism dilemmas". Society sometimes has recognized such situations and taken action to remove the restraints. For example, most state legislatures have enacted so-called "Good Samaritan" statutes, which diminish a physician's liability when providing emergency medical care (Fehlberg, 1964). Similarly, several communities have implemented crime-prevention programs that encourage citizens to inform police of the commission of a crime while maintaining their anonymity (Citizens' War on Crime, 1970). The

benefits or disadvantages of these interventions often are difficult to assess at a distance, because they have been implemented without methods to evaluate their effectiveness (*cf.* Schnelle, Kirchner, McNees, and Lawler, 1975).

However, many researchers have been able to make direct studies of help-giving behavior. For example, Bryan and Test (1967) found that the prior observation by a subject of one motorist helping another change a flat tire increased the likelihood of that subject assisting another motorist in the immediate future. Darley and Latane (1968) reported that subjects are more likely to help when an opportunity to assist is "focused" on an individual, rather than "diffused" within a group. That is, as the number of bystanders to an emergency increases, they become less likely or more hesitant to provide emergency aid. Hackler, Ho, and Urquhart-Ross (1974) found a relationship between community composition and the stated willingness of community members to provide help-giving behavior: individuals in homogeneous neighborhoods with high rates of social interaction are

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more likely to offer help-giving behavior to others in emergency situations.

Several researchers have investigated some of the contingencies that control help-giving responses. Boren (1966) found that a pair of laboratory monkeys alternately supplied each other with food if reinforcement opportunities were made contingent on this mutual help-giving response. When similar contingencies were placed on institutionalized schizophrenic children, they too cooperated to obtain food. One subject was rewarded with a coin that could be exchanged for snacks when the other subject completed an FR schedule. Often, the children increased the rate of other, slower subjects by slapping, hugging, frowning, smiling, or exhorting them to "Get the coin" (Hingtgen, Sanders, and DeMyer, 1965). This suggests that some help-giving responses are based on the mutual ability to reinforce or punish.

In other situations, altruism may be based simply on the removal of punishment. For example, newspapers usually require finders of lost property to pay for advertisements in Lost and Found classified sections. In effect, they punish the reporting of found property. And indeed, observations of the Lost and Found classified sections of several small-town and metropolitan newspapers show that Lost ads greatly outnumber Found ads. Presumably, the response cost of placing Found ads inhibits large numbers of finders from advertising found property; if so, this constitutes an altruism dilemma.

Another dilemma might exist: analysis of a policy problem does not necessarily guarantee that institutional policy makers will initiate research into improvement of the problem (*cf.* Campbell, 1972). Nevertheless, several behavior analysts have conducted research with public agencies demonstrating that the effects of policy can be measured, and that possible policy changes can be evaluated and subsequently implemented (*e.g.*, Schnelle, Kirchner, Macrae, McNeese, Eck, Snodgrass, Casey, and Uselton, 1978; Stokes and Fawcett, 1977). In these studies, the policy problem was apparent and

troublesome to the decision makers, and they (presumably) had strong motivation to attempt policy changes. In the present study, the disparity between Found and Lost ad rates was not of particular concern to the newspapers; consequently, procedures to initiate policy change had to be devised.

Thus, the purpose of this study was to analyze the effects of a policy of free Found ads as a method of solving an altruism dilemma and promoting higher rates of placing Found ads in newspapers. The social value of this policy was analyzed by determining the resultant rates of personal property returned to owners.

METHOD

Newspapers

The *University Daily Kansan* (U.D.K.) is a daily newspaper, published at the University of Kansas, weekdays during the fall, spring, and summer semesters. Although 12,500 daily copies are printed for a student population of 20,000, precise circulation figures are unknown, because the paper is distributed free at various locations throughout the university. The U.D.K. is a non-profit organization. Funds for the publication come from student fees and university endowment funds.

Kansas State University at Manhattan, Kansas, publishes the *K-State Collegian*. The Collegian prints 13,000 copies daily for a student population of approximately 15,000. Publication schedules for the Collegian are similar to those of the U.D.K. This paper too is distributed free at various places on the university campus. Like the U.D.K., the Collegian is operated on a nonprofit basis.

By contrast, Telegraphics Incorporated (T.I.) has at present a paid circulation of 6,000. It publishes a weekly (Thursday) paper for each of four rural communities in eastern Kansas (*The Baldwin Ledger*, *The Wellsville Globe*, *The Overbrook Citizen*, and *The Eudora Enterprise*). Although the news content of each T.I.

newspaper is varied, the same classified section is prepared for all four publications.

Lost and Found ads are included in the classified sections of all the newspapers. To place these ads in the U.D.K. and Collegian formerly required individuals to write out their ads at the newspapers' business office. Persons placing ads with the U.D.K. had to pay in cash for each Lost or Found ad: each 15 words or less cost \$1.50 for one issue, \$2.00 for two, and \$2.50 for the entire week (five). Advertisers at the Collegian were charged 5¢ a word but a dollar minimum for one day; 10¢ a word but a \$2.00 minimum for three days; and 15¢ a word but a \$3.00 minimum for five days. In fact, there was no charge for a person advertising a Found item through the Collegian—but this fact was unannounced and largely unknown. T.I. Lost and Found ads could be telephoned to the business office, to be billed at a later date. Classified ads cost 8¢ a word, \$1.52 per week up to 19 words.

Procedures

A multiple-baseline design (Risley and Wolf, 1972) across the three newspapers was used to investigate the effects of a Free-Found-Ad policy on the rates of Lost and Found advertisements placed by individuals.

Baseline data were collected on the total number of new Lost and Found ads placed per week in each newspaper. (A week was defined as five successive issues.) A Found or Lost ad was considered new if it had not appeared the previous week. These data were retrieved from the business office of each paper. Information describing each item reported as Lost or Found, as well as the telephone numbers and addresses of all losers and finders, were recorded.

A telephone survey was conducted during baseline and intervention conditions, approximately one week after the final appearance of each person's ad in the newspaper. Observers attempted to survey *all* of the people who had placed Found and Lost ads in the U.D.K. and Found ads in the Collegian, to determine

whether items were recovered by their owners. Those surveyed also were asked to respond to the question, "Should Found ads be free?"

Recovery data for Lost items were not collected for the Collegian, due to the expense of additional long-distance telephone calls. This expense also made it prohibitive to obtain both Found and Lost recovery data for T.I. However, Found-ad recovery data were collected for a 1-yr followup for the U.D.K.

Recovery rates were calculated by dividing the number of items reported returned, by a total including the number of items reported returned plus the number of items reported unreturned.

An observer was successful in contacting and surveying 88% of the U.D.K.'s finders during baseline, 93% during intervention, and 90% during the followup conducted 1 yr later. At the Collegian, 46% of finders were located and surveyed during baseline, and 29% during intervention. Seventy-two percent of U.D.K. losers were surveyed during baseline, and 97% thereafter.

No independent assessment was possible of whether owners actually did recover the property that finders said they had, because finders often did not know or remember the names of those who claimed lost items; thus, losers responding to Found ads typically could not be reached for confirmation of returns.

Intervention

When retroactive rates for the number of Found ads placed in the U.D.K. were obtained, these data were plotted and graphed, and presented to the business manager of the U.D.K. They showed the disparity between the high rate of Lost ads and the very low rate of Found ads. The investigators then proposed that the newspaper change its policy for Found advertisements, on the grounds that there might be a large pool of finders in the community who would advertise their finds if the cost in money and special trips to the business office were eliminated. This suggestion was supported by in-

formation obtained from the telephone survey form, in which many individuals stated a preference for a Free-Found-Ad policy.

Subsequently, the U.D.K. directors voted to approve this change in classified advertising. Found ads were then free of charge for their first three days, and the finder needed only to telephone the business office. It was agreed that this change in policy might not last beyond the duration of this investigation. The policy for placing a Lost ad remained the same (cash payment made in person and in advance), for two reasons: (1) there is already strong motivation for losers to advertise their losses, and (2) a policy of free Lost ads could be abused by individuals falsely claiming to have lost vaguely described personal property (*e.g.*, gold watch) in the hope that such an item would be found and "returned" to them.

The readership of the U.D.K. was notified of this change in policy by a 5-cm by 10-cm ad placed directly above the classified section (See Figure 1). Accompanying this ad were smaller notifications within the classified section. One was placed in the masthead, one under the Employment section, and one under the Business Opportunities section. The large ad ran for one

issue; the smaller notifications appeared throughout the study.

Baseline data were collected and presented to the business manager of the Collegian, following the same procedures employed with the U.D.K. In addition, the U.D.K. data (baseline and treatment effects) were shown. The Collegian staff then informed the investigators that their paper already had a policy of free Found ads. Although this policy had been in effect 11 yr, it had never been publicized. (Typically, finders discovered the policy only if they went to the business office to place advertisements of Found items.) The business manager decided to publicize the Free-Found policy, exactly as the U.D.K. had done.

To analyze the effect of a Free-Found-Ad policy on a nonuniversity population, the commercial newspapers of Telegraphics Incorporated were contacted. Their business manager was shown the T.I. data as well as the U.D.K. and Collegian data. Although skeptical about having a similar effect in their communities, the T.I. staff decided to implement the Free-Found-Ad policy for the duration of the study.

All three business managers stated that the public relations benefits of free Found ads could

Found Ads Free

It doesn't cost anything to be a good Samaritan, because the U.D.K. runs Found ads free. If you've found a lost item, come to 111 Flint or call 864-4358 and we'll run the ad free for three days.

Fig. 1. Ad notifying U.D.K. readership of Free-Found-Ad policy. Similar ads appeared in the Collegian and T.I.

more than offset the cost in lost Found-ad revenue. For example, the 16 Found ads placed in the U.D.K. during 14 weeks of baseline brought in revenues of only \$37.00. In contrast, any one-issue, medium-sized display ad (12.5 cm by 17.5 cm) would earn \$38.00 in revenue. If a Free-Found-Ad policy could in fact increase the amount of Found ads placed, the business managers believed that the resultant costs in terms of additional newsprint space could be absorbed by space previously allotted to "house ads". (House ads are not a source of income for a newspaper; they serve to fill space gaps created when setting each issue in print. Typically, these spaces are used to advertise the paper, *e.g.*, "Read Gazette Classifieds".)

RESULTS

Reliability assessments across all three newspapers were conducted by an independent observer who retroactively recorded the number and descriptions of Lost and Found items placed every sixth week for the U.D.K. and Collegian, and every sixth issue for T.I. To determine if the items were unique to that week, the reliability observer had to check the previous week's issues. Reliability was calculated by dividing the number of agreements (occurrence of the specific Lost and Found ads) by the number of agreements plus disagreements, multiplying that ratio by 100. Occurrence reliability was 100% for each sixth-week/issue.

The reliability of the return rate data was assessed by having an independent observer telephone a randomly selected 15% of those surveyed, to check their previous responses. That is, telephone surveys for baseline and treatment conditions at the U.D.K. and Collegian were shuffled separately, and 15% in each condition were checked again. Occurrence agreement was 100% for this measure.

Figure 2 shows the number of new Found and Lost ads placed per week in each newspaper. Each data point represents a total of five successive issues. Sixteen Found ads were placed during the 14-week baseline of the U.D.K., a

rate of 1.14 per week. Ninety-one Lost items were placed during the same period, a rate of 6.50 per week. The Collegian readership placed 26 Found ads and 84 Lost ads during a 2-week baseline, rates of 1.24 and 4.00 respectively. During the six-point baseline at T.I. (30 successive Thursday issues), eight Found ads and 18 Lost ads were placed (rates of 1.33 and 3.00 respectively).

After the Free-Found-Ad policy was instituted at the U.D.K., 136 Found and 72 Lost advertisements were placed during the next 13 weeks, rates of 10.46 and 4.54 respectively. Sixty-four Found ads and 41 Lost ads were placed during the eight weeks of treatment at the Collegian, rates of 8.00 and 5.13 respectively. T.I.'s readers placed 14 Found and 12 Lost ads during three weeks of treatment, rates of 4.67 and 4.00 respectively.

After a three-month period, followup data were collected for all three newspapers. At the U.D.K. the Found rate was 12.50, and the Lost rate was 7.50. The Collegian Found rate was 7.67; its Lost rate was 2.67. T.I.'s readers placed Found ads at the rate of 7.67 and Lost ads at a rate of 5.67.

Institutional finders, such as university departments and local business enterprises, showed increased rates of placing Found ads when Found ads were free. The mean of such institutional ads rose from approximately 6% during baseline to approximately 12% during intervention. Of the total Found ads recorded during treatment, only two individuals placed ads a second time. Several institutional ad-placers, however, advertised repeatedly.

During baseline, 43% of the finders surveyed reported that owners recovered their property through the U.D.K., and 46% through the Collegian. When the Free-Found-Ad policy was in effect, this recovery rate at the U.D.K. was 35% (46% during a 1-yr followup), and 45% at the Collegian. Table 1 categorizes the most frequently placed Found ads and indicates the quantity of those items reported as returned to their owners.

Fig. 2. Rates of Lost and Found ads for the three newspapers. One week equals five consecutive issues. (Each T.I. data point represents five consecutive Thursday issues.)

Table 1

Highest frequency Found items in the U.D.K. and Collegian.*

<i>Item</i>	<i>Baseline Totals</i>	<i>Free Found Ads Total</i>
Glasses	0	24 (14)
Dogs	3 (1)	23 (9)
Clothing	0	16 (5)
Keys	3 (2)	15 (4)
Cats	3 (1)	9 (0)
Books	0	8 (3)
Jewelry	3 (1)	15 (5)
Office Supplies	0	4 (2)

*Numbers in parentheses represent number of items returned to owners.

Recovery rates for Lost items also were calculated for the U.D.K. Thirty-one per cent of all Lost items were recovered during baseline and 35 % during intervention.

In the telephone survey, almost all those who responded stated that Found ads should be free. In addition, when finders were asked (during intervention) to comment on the policy, 35 % of those who responded said they advertised the item only because the Found ads were free.

DISCUSSION

Analysis of a publicized Free-Found-Ad policy showed dramatic and durable increases in rates of Found ads placed in three community newspapers. Perhaps the effects were due to the removal of punishment by the newspapers on the altruistic behavior of those who would not otherwise advertise the finding of lost property. Manipulating rate increases in the amount of Found ads placed does not by itself, however, attest to the social value of this intervention.

Since it is possible that increased Found ads could be attributed to an increase in the amount of frivolous ads placed, return rates of lost personal property were considered critical to validate effectiveness of the Free-Found-Ad policy. The absence of substantial differences in recovery rates during baseline and treatment conditions suggests that the greater number of ads

placed increased the amount of lost personal property returned to owners. For example, there were approximately seven instances in which items of personal property were returned as a result of U.D.K. ads during baseline; approximately 48 items were returned during intervention.

Nevertheless, in the absence of an independent assessment of property owners, it is still possible that many of the ads were frivolous; people listing frivolous ads might be likely to give frivolous responses to a telephone survey. The fact that almost all noninstitutional ads were placed by different individuals, however, provides supplementary evidence to support the contention that the Free-Found-Ad policy generated sincere helping responses and was not the result of frivolous listings by pranksters. It is also highly unlikely that such similar recovery percentages across the U.D.K. and Collegian could occur through the efforts of pranksters.

Placement rates of Lost ads remained stable throughout all baseline and treatment conditions, suggesting that newspapers will not suffer a loss of Lost-ad revenue when Found ads are free.

Publicizing the policy in the Collegian, which had a long standing but unpublicized Free-Found-Ad policy, resulted in rate increases comparable to those at the U.D.K. and T.I. However, the importance of daily notification of the policy was not analyzed. Intermittent notification might be shown to be equally effective, but the negligible costs to the newspapers of daily publication suggest its continuation.

The staff of each newspaper indicated that the nominal costs of the procedure were offset by public relations benefits derived from providing community service. For example, the business manager at the U.D.K. reported that many readers stated their approval of this policy change. (This same business manager also found that a local bank could be convinced to pay the full cost of the Free-Found-Ad policy and of the advertisement that it was doing so, as a public-relations technique of its own. Sometimes altruism can be sold.)

Another measure of the feasibility of the Free-Found-Ad policy was the fact that all of the newspapers continued the policy after notification by the experimenters that the study was terminated. Had the policy been impractical or uneconomical, the notification should have served to end the policy. (At last check, the Free-Found-Ad policies were still in effect almost 3 yr later. And T.I., starting a fifth newspaper 3 yr later, extended its Free-Found-Ad policy to it.)

The approach taken to convince newspapers to try this policy change may have implications for a general policy-research strategy. In the present study: (1) data were shown to establish the social problem, (2) close working relationships were developed between newspaper staff and the researchers, (3) formal adoption of the policy change was made contingent on positive results, and (4) the researchers invited the newspaper staff to think through the cost-benefit ratio (whereupon the newspaper staff realized ways to reduce or recover the costs).

An initial presentation of graphed data showing the magnitude of the problem may be an important procedure when recommending social policy change to decision makers. This procedure may be critical in helping investigators initiate public-policy research in a setting where the problem behavior is controlled by institutionalized variables (*i.e.*, formalized policies that are unlikely ever to be scrutinized because they do not seem to be a problem). Presentation of graphically displayed base rates in the present study was thought to have a powerful effect on decision makers, who had only a casual awareness of the large discrepancy between Found-and-Lost-ad rates. Conversely, awareness by policy makers of existing problems might help researchers to enter a setting to conduct formal pilot testing of procedures designed to eliminate or minimize the problems (*e.g.*, Stokes and Fawcett, 1977).

Once in the setting, it may be important to establish professional relationships with decision makers in order to develop effective intervention procedures. In the present study, the proposed

experimental design was discussed in terms of time and projected costs. The staffs were encouraged to feel that they were part of the experimental endeavor by providing them with intermittent feedback on the status of the data. Staff cooperation may have been enhanced by the straightforward and easy-to-understand logic of a multiple-baseline experimental design. Indeed, staff members of each paper often asked to see the data collected at the other participating newspapers.

Following the study, research findings were discussed with the staff of each newspaper, but no recommendation to retain or discontinue the policy was suggested by the authors. It was left to the decision makers of each of the newspapers to evaluate the cost-benefit characteristics of the intervention.

It is concluded that newspapers, primary sources of public communication, can provide incentives to increase personal help-giving behaviors. Thus, this demonstration may represent an approximation toward the identification of the pertinent contingencies that control help-giving or altruistic behaviors—behaviors critical to the maintenance of any group of interdependent individuals or any society. Future research might well investigate other environmental or institutionalized variables that inhibit, elicit, or maintain help-giving responses.

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