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NOVA scienceNOW
Season 4
Executive Summary

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WGBH has produced NOVA scienceNOW since 2005, with major funding from the National Science Foundation, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and the Alfred. P. Sloan Foundation. NOVA scienceNOW (NsN) is comprised of a science news and magazine television series, a companion website, and a science café outreach initiative. All NsN offerings share common goals: (a) increase public awareness and understanding of cutting edge science content, and (b) increase public engagement in science-related activities. Beginning in Season 4 of NOVA scienceNOW (NsN), WGBH increased its efforts to promote the entire NsN program – the series, website, and outreach – as a whole, and to promote it to younger audiences.

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG), a research firm specializing in the evaluation of educational programs, materials, and services, has served as the summative evaluator of NOVA scienceNOW since its first season. The current process and summative evaluation took a more integrative approach than in prior years' evaluations; we examined users' engagement with all NsN resources (series, website, and outreach). The main research questions addressed in the Season Four evaluation were:

- To what extent did the NsN resources, as a whole, reach a broad audience and increase public awareness, understanding, and engagement with science content and related activities? and
- What were the implementation and effectiveness of NsN's new promotional efforts?

METHODS

Through the use of a post-only viewing and engagement study design, the evaluation examined how NsN users, with varied levels of prior experience with the program, make use of all of the resources available and how their use of the different elements influences their overall experience.

A total of 206 people participated in this research study. Based on information they provided before the study began, participants were considered either **NsN Enthusiasts** (had a great deal of previous experience with NsN) or **NsN Novices** (had little, if any, previous experience with NsN). For the purpose of the study, NsN Novices were asked to begin their NsN use by one of the following: joining an NsN fanpage (e.g., on Facebook, Twitter), viewing NsN video clips online, or visiting and exploring the NsN website. Regardless of the first experience with NsN, all participants were asked to keep track of all experiences they had with NsN resources over a period of four weeks.

The sample was approximately two thirds female, predominately white, and ranged in age from 15 to 78 years. The median age was 34 years; with more than half between the ages of 18-34.

KEY FINDINGS

NsN continues to engage most users through its longstanding established resources; participants expressed a preference for watching episodes of NsN on TV over watching online.

All participants used, learned from, and were most engaged by watching NsN on TV and online and, next, by visiting the NsN website to browse.

The NsN website was considered a valuable resource.

The site is visited repeatedly once NsN users discover it themselves (i.e., via web search) or are made aware of it by friends or family. Most visited the site to watch video clips and nearly three quarters of participants read Science News on the site

NsN-related activities often lead to more of the same or similar activities.

Participation in an online activity most often led to another online activity, while social networking activities led to other social networking activity.

Season Four episodes were on par with the previous season in terms of viewing frequency and behavior and response to the episodes.

Participants viewed more Season Four segments on TV than online, and most viewed multiple episodes. After viewing, they indicated increases in the extent to which they seek out science-related experiences, their interest in science, and their motivation to learn more about current events in science.

Social networking media were used more as a way to connect with others than to seek out information.

While approximately half of participants used NsN-related social networking, far fewer rated such activities as either the most engaging or the aspect from which they learned the most.

The newer TV-related promotional strategies used by NsN have effectively reached potential users. Primetime and late night promotions are particularly effective.

Placement of NsN directly after NOVA on television effectively brings viewers to NsN on television. Promotional spots during primetime programming were seen by more participants than were those seen during daytime or children's programming. Neil Degrasse Tyson's appearances on late night TV were seen by more participants than his appearances on morning talk shows. Beyond the direct promotional strategies, many are still learning about NsN through word of mouth.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

GRG recommends that NsN increase efforts to highlight the presence of NOVA scienceNOW video clips on the website, the availability of science cafés, and the presence on social networking sites. Together, these efforts may increase use among those who are newer to NsN (i.e., NsN Novices, in the current study). Lower prior familiarity with NsN episodes on TV may be seen as an opportunity for the newer emerging technologies and related NsN components.

GRG recommends future research that examines ways in which one activity can be used to promote a different type of activity. If participants learn the most from viewing NsN episodes (whether it be on television or online), future research should examine how all of the other portals could lead to this ultimate end, and determine the barriers to such connections.

GRG recommends that NsN consider the topics that have been of most interest to viewers throughout prior seasons and use those as a guide for Season 5 and 6 production. Beginning with Season 5, NsN will produce episodes comprised of 4-5 segments all in the same general content area. Participants may be drawn to topics with some familiarity to them, as they are interested in learning more about areas that are already meaningful to them.

We learned in the current study that once viewers are watching, they will stay engaged. ***NsN can capitalize on this by introducing new and innovative content in an episode that viewers will already be watching due to the topic or title that has hooked them in enough to view.***

GRG recommends promoting or including on the TV episodes some of the scientists profiled in the Secret Lives of Scientists online feature. This piece may be a key factor in drawing TV viewers to the website (if their interest in a given scientist's profile can extend to seeking out more information on the website).

GRG recommends that NsN continue to have a presence on social networking sites because this phenomenon is still growing rapidly. The use of such applications may draw viewers to other NsN-related products that they find educational or engaging.

GRG recommends NsN further enhance new promotional strategies by using and highlighting specific terminology consistently across media. Knowing that many potential NsN users are reached during primetime or evening hours, promotion should continue to target those areas and introduce terminology that prospective users will recognize, remember, and act on.

In conclusion, GRG's evaluation findings from Season 4 indicate the continued success of the NsN series and website at providing an appealing and meaningful science-related experience to a wide range of the public audience.