

Special Communication:

Results of the *Monthly Energy Review* Features Readership Survey

In an effort to secure the greatest return on its resource investments, the Energy Information Administration (EIA) has been concentrating for some time on strengthening its customer focus. The backbone of this initiative is customer surveys, several of which have been conducted since 1994 to help EIA understand its customers' needs more precisely and comprehensively. The Office of Energy Markets and End Use (EMEU), as producer of EIA's flagship *Monthly Energy Review (MER)* and several other publications, has done its share of this outreach work.

A recent example is a systematic survey of the readership of the features appearing in the *MER*. *MER* readers are a diverse group that includes energy analysts in industry, government, and academia, as well as journalists, policy-makers, and private citizens. This diversity is well served by the vast and varied array of detailed data on energy production and consumption offered every month in the *MER*. However, the features—generally appearing one or two at a time and being necessarily narrower in scope, though more analytical—cannot hope to satisfy every reader all the time. The survey of the features readership was undertaken to learn whether readers found the features useful and if they felt changes were necessary.

Survey development was begun in late 1994 and the survey itself was conducted in the spring and summer of 1995 by EMEU's Energy End Use and Integrated Statistics Division. The survey sought responses from a representative sample of 378 *MER* subscribers (about 12.5 percent of the *MER* subscription population of 3,121) and achieved a final response rate of 50 percent. Respondents were asked about their awareness and use of the features, their satisfaction with the features in particular and the *MER* in general, their opinions of eight alternative *MER* format possibilities, and their strongest energy interests. In summary, the survey revealed that readers take a keen interest in the four types of features that were offered at the time (five types are now offered), especially Highlights and full-length articles; generally find them highly satisfactory; and see the need for few changes. Here are the survey results in more detail:

Awareness and uses. Eighty-seven percent of respondents said they were aware of the features in the *MER*. Of those respondents, only 2 percent said they never looked at any features. Seventy-five percent reported looking at the features "every month" or "frequently" (the other choices were "occasionally" and "never"). Respondents said that Highlights were the feature type they were most likely to look at (42 percent), followed by articles (32 percent). Markedly fewer respondents said they were most likely to look at Energy Previews (14 percent) and EIA Data News (11 percent). Highlights and articles were also the features

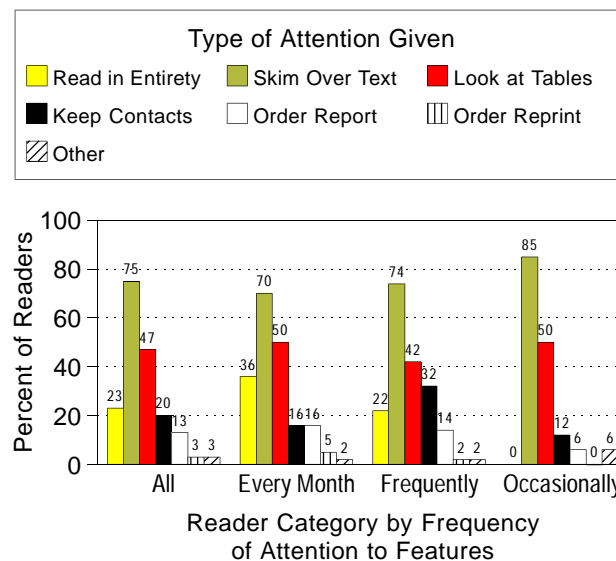
that readers named as the second most likely to be looked at (36 percent and 28 percent, respectively).

Among subscribers who looked at features at least occasionally, 75 percent reported that they skimmed over the text, and 23 percent said they read the entire feature (Figure 1). One in five respondents reported keeping in mind the EIA contacts mentioned with the features. Sixty-five percent said they used the information in features to keep generally informed, and more than two-thirds kept the information for future reference.

Satisfaction. Respondents who were aware of the *MER* features and looked at them at least occasionally were asked to rate their general level of satisfaction on a scale that ranged from -3 (very dissatisfied) to +3 (very satisfied). (Zero denoted indifference.) Eighty-five percent reported positive scores (Figure 2) and 59 percent reported scores of either +2 or +3. Only 1 percent of respondents gave the features a negative satisfaction score. Not surprisingly, satisfaction levels tended to correlate with how often readers looked at the features: 92 percent of readers who looked at features every month gave them positive scores. The corresponding numbers for frequent and occasional readers were 90 percent and 64 percent, respectively.

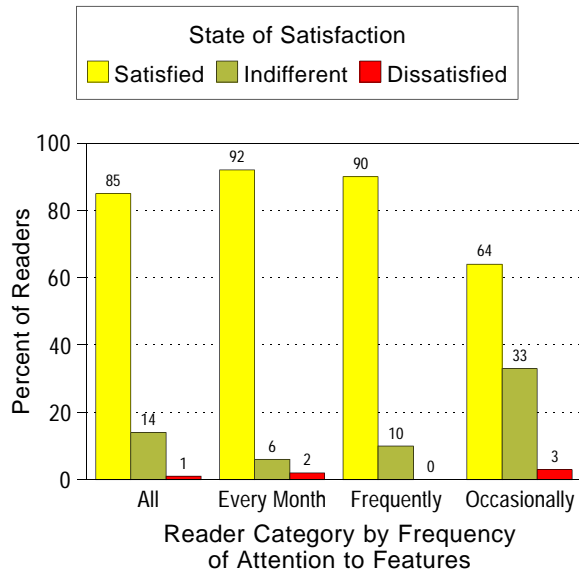
Using the same 7-point scale, respondents also rated both the features and the *MER* in general in terms of ease of access, relevance, accuracy, timeliness, readability, and comprehensiveness. On all counts, respondents generally expressed high

Figure 1. Type of Attention Given the Features by Features Readers



Source: Energy Information Administration, Office of Energy Markets and End Use, Survey of *Monthly Energy Review* Features Readership, June 1995.

Figure 2. State of Satisfaction With the Features



Source: Energy Information Administration, Office of Energy Markets and End Use, Survey of *Monthly Energy Review* Features Readership, June 1995.

levels of satisfaction with both the *MER* and the features. The lowest ratings were given for timeliness, but 71 percent of respondents still gave positive scores for the timeliness of the features and 75 percent gave positive scores for the timeliness of the *MER*.

Interest in alternatives. Survey respondents were asked to rate eight alternative features formats: more space for features; reprints of EIA report executive summaries in place of Highlights; the features section expanded and published separately from the *MER*; more, but shorter, features of various kinds; less text and more tables and graphs; more

emphasis on emerging issues, such as renewable fuels and greenhouse gases; new types of features; and no features at all. The strongest feelings were elicited by the last alternative; only 4 percent of respondents thought that eliminating the features would result in “notable improvement,” while 62 percent said it would make the *MER* “less effective.” About four out of five said that gathering features into a separate publication would either make no difference or would make the *MER* less effective. Fifty-two percent said that more coverage of emerging issues would be a notable improvement.

Respondents were also asked how, if at all, they would shift the mix of feature types from its current balance. In every case, clear majorities said they would continue to allot to each feature type about the same amount of space it currently receives.

The data collected by this survey will help EIA in its ongoing efforts to assess our customers’ needs and respond to them effectively. The data are particularly useful in view of the environment of shrinking resources within which EIA is operating. EIA will continue to concentrate on the output of high-quality energy data and analyses. In the *MER* we intend to stress timeliness more than ever and to concentrate on shorter, more tightly drawn “Energy Plugs” designed to apprise our customers of the range of recent products available from EIA. In addition, we intend to continue providing a limited number of features in the *MER* each year.

Readers may also find it valuable to make use of EIA’s World Wide Web site (<http://www.eia.doe.gov>), which is now operational. The potential of the Web site for rapid dissemination of data and other information is obvious and we plan to steadily expand the site’s capabilities in the coming months. Ultimately, we hope to be able to offer our customers the options of accessing entire features and data sets electronically and making suggestions and criticisms on line.

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