

GOODMAN RESEARCH GROUP, INC.
Program Evaluation • Consultation • Market Research

NOVA scienceNOW
Season Five
Summative Evaluation
Executive Summary

PREPARED BY

Elizabeth R. Bachrach, Ph.D.
Kate Parkinson, B.A.
Irene F. Goodman, Ed.D.

SUBMITTED TO
WGBH

August 2011

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

WGBH has produced NOVA scienceNOW (NsN) since 2005, with major funding from the National Science Foundation, the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and the Alfred. P. Sloan Foundation. Different from the hour-long documentary format of NOVA, the NsN series is designed to present multiple fast-paced, timely science and technology stories in each hour-long episode. Along with the associated web site and outreach initiative, all NsN resources share the overarching goals of: (a) increasing the public's use of multimedia resources to learn about current science research, (b) increasing public awareness and understanding of cutting edge science content and its relevance to their lives, and (b) increasing public engagement in science-related activities.

Goodman Research Group, Inc. (GRG), a research firm specializing in the evaluation of educational programs, materials, and services, conducted summative evaluation of NsN's Season 5, as we have the previous four seasons. The five-month viewing and engagement study focused on how users engage and interact with all program components and examined the extent to which NsN resources, as a whole, achieved their intended impacts on public audiences.

A total of 145 people participated in our evaluation study. The majority of them were White women, between the ages 25 and 54; average age was 42 years. Nearly two thirds had completed either a bachelor's or Master's degree.

KEY FINDINGS

NsN effectively engages viewers with the TV episodes, the website, and other related resources (e.g., Science Cafés, video clips on other websites, Facebook pages). After engaging with NsN, users turned to multimedia resources to learn about current science research, they recognized the relevance of such research to their own lives, and they reported ways in which they integrated science learning into their routines. Among the intended public audience impacts, most notably, NsN resources led users to increased interest and awareness of current events in science and an interest in learning more about them.

Participants rated NsN Season 5 very positively and reported the episodes contributed to their sustained interest in current science research.

Participant ratings revealed that they were both engaged by and learned from each of the Season 5 episodes. They appreciated content that was related to an existing topic of interest, that was innovative and exciting, and that pushed the boundaries of their thinking.

Over the course of the study, participants accessed the NsN project through multiple points of entry, particularly TV and online resources.

Participants watched NsN on TV and visited the website regularly throughout the course of the study. After viewing on TV, participants were motivated to go online to learn more about the NsN topics. They referred to the web for the schedule and upcoming TV episodes.

After all five months, participants engaged with a variety of NsN components indicating increased use of multimedia resources to learn about current science research.

Participants revealed moderately enhanced appreciation for the many aspects of their lives touched by current science research.

Prior to the study, most reported strong interest in and appreciation for science. Nonetheless, at the end of the study, they reported that the NsN-related resources and content supported and enhanced their interests.

Participants were inspired to seek out additional information about the NsN topics and to discuss stories from the series and website with family, friends and colleagues.

Participants reported engaging in discussions with colleagues, friends, and family, particularly their young children. They appreciated having the NsN content to back them up as they discussed the science topics covered this season.

Participants engaged in other science-related behaviors and activities before, during, and after engagement with the NsN resources.

In particular, participants actively searched for science cafes in their area to attend after engaging with NsN.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the five years that GRG has conducted summative evaluation of NsN, findings have consistently indicated that viewers of various ages and science-related backgrounds (including science novices and science enthusiasts) find the series and related multimedia resources to be engaging and educational.

Based on this year's evaluation, as well as those from prior years, GRG makes the following recommendations related specifically to modifications NsN staff may wish to make regarding outreach, its promotion, and evaluation.

GRG recommends that NsN capitalize on the audience of young viewers, especially those who view with their families at home and then go online to learn more about the NsN topics. NsN could achieve this by tailoring outreach and web-related resources specifically to the audience of teens and pre-teens.

- NsN should research the online behaviors of this audience and develop web activities that will engage them and encourage continued use and further exploration. For example, research can determine whether they would be more receptive to additional interactives or to innovative social networking opportunities via the NsN web pages.
- NsN should consider large-scale ways to involve youth in NsN related activities, similar to the successful efforts of the NOVA *Making Stuff* online contest.
- NsN should implement school-based NsN-related activities, such as an essay contest, submission of ideas for series topics, or nominating a local scientist, engineer, or teachers for a *Secret Life* profile.

Aside from tailoring and promoting outreach to the younger audience, GRG recommends NsN incorporate specific promotional strategies for the series that will help bridge the gap between generations of viewers.

- WGBH should consider promoting NsN as a program that not only engages both adults and youth but also presents new and cutting-edge research and content for all ages.
- NsN should use research about the interests and behaviors of youth in preparation for enhancing and targeting the way materials are promoted and presented.

In order to examine the effectiveness of these new efforts, GRG recommends new approaches to evaluation of the NsN program.

- Based on any revised focus for development and promotion of outreach initiatives to younger audiences, NsN should reassess and revise the NSF-driven Intended Impacts and Indicators of effectiveness.
- Evaluation may include a smaller-scale, in-depth case study of a number of families engaging with NsN over several months, in order to examine explicitly how families interact with NsN together, how and when they view, visit the web, and participate in additional informal science activities.
- Evaluation should be designed to follow up with past participants (i.e., participated in prior NsN season's evaluation) to examine the extent to which they have remained engaged with the NsN series and outreach, as well as with other informal science activities.

Goodman Research Group, Inc.

929 Massachusetts Avenue, Suite 2A
Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139

Tel: (617) 491-7033
Fax: (617) 864-2399

info@grginc.com
www.grginc.com

© 2012 Goodman Research Group, Inc.