

MEETING FARMER'S NEED FOR FARM MANAGEMENT EDUCATION USING MULTI MEDIA AND EDUCATOR SPECIALIZATION

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Abstract

During the past decade, there have been significant structural changes in how Ohio State University delivers farm management education. The number of state and regional farm management Extension specialists in Ohio has declined drastically until in 2008 there were no regional specialists and few state specialists. The farm management education void created by the loss of regional and state specialists has been embraced by the Ohio Ag Manager Team which is composed primarily of county based Extension Educators. There have been multiple strategies that have been adopted by the team to meet clientele education demand. One strategy was to develop an Electronic Newsletter where current farm management information written by team members is available to subscribers. This newsletter has been published for five years and in 2010 the team adding blogs and social media capabilities to enhance the newsletter. A recent survey of subscribers examined the benefit of this newsletter to Ohio farms and agribusinesses. Data showed that nearly 70 percent of subscribers saved money or increased profits through tax savings, finding ways to cut costs, or through improved marketing. Respondents indicated an average savings of \$2,400 per year. Consultants estimated their clients save an average of \$1,500 as a result of the news newsletter. Server data indicates an additional 25,289 (average) individuals retrieve the newsletter from the web each month.

A second strategy was for each team member to select a farm management specialization. Each team member provides leadership to curriculum development, research, and publishing information via the newsletter and blogs in their area of specialization. Examples of specialization include transition planning, farm policy/farm bill, estate planning, grain marketing, Annie's project and farm labour. Team members also teach at a variety of OSU Extension and industry meetings presenting on topics in their area of specialization. As a result of this approach, these county based educators are becoming recognized by their peer and industry leaders not only in Ohio, but across the country. This model of delivering farm management education can be replicated in other organizations facing reduced staff.

Keywords: Farm Management, Social Media, Curriculum Development, and Teamwork

Subtheme: Education and training

Introduction

Since 1995, there have been two driving forces affecting farm management education in Ohio. One of the forces is the reduction of state and regional farm management specialists creating and delivering educational programs to farm clientele. The other force is the adoption of Internet and social media as a source of information by the farming community. These important changes created the need to reinvent the delivery of farm management education in Ohio.

Background

In 1995, there were several faculties at the Ohio State University, Department of Agriculture, Environmental, and Developmental Economics that focused their research and teaching on applied farm management topics. Topics ranged from farm labour management, farm tax management, farm budgeting, grain marketing, farm business structures plus others. Since then there has been a shift away from traditional farm management to topics such as food supply economic, consumer economics, natural resource economics, and others that reflect the changing demographics of Ohio. With a current population of 11.5 million people, Ohio is becoming one of the more populated areas in the United States with urban expansion, resulting in issues competing for research and education resources.

During the same time period, reduced funding coupled with retirements of key personnel, OSU Extension experience a reduction from five district farm management specialists to no farm management specialists. These specialists previously provided a critical link between the University Department and the County based educator. Not only did they facilitating the flow of farm management educational material from the university to the county, but they also regularly communicated the farm management educational needs from around the state back to the department faculty. With the reduction of district farm management specialists, not only was the communication between the county based educators and the Department faculty impaired, but the direct educational teaching efforts of these specialists also disappeared.

Strategies

County based extension educators decided that the loss of district specialists and the decreased research relevant to the farm population was a trend that was not good for Ohio agriculture. In 2004, the educator banded together to create the Ohio Ag Manager Team. This team was committed to finding ways to meet the needs of Ohio farmers' farm management educational needs. Studies from that time period indicating adoption of farmers to using the Internet, along with the success of another extension electronic newsletter in Ohio, prompted the team to launch the Ohio Ag Manager Newsletter in July of 2004. The newsletter can be accessed at <http://ohioagmanager.osu.edu>.

The Ohio Ag Manager team started reconnecting to Department faculty, inviting them to write articles for the newsletter as well as find ways to participate in farm management research. This new relationship created opportunities for county based staff to connect with Department faculty, conduct research, and develop a farm management specialization. This connection was done mainly through a monthly conference call, where team members could discuss current issues affecting the

farm economy. This process allowed the team to identify resources, potential authors for articles, and needed research to address the identified issues.

With advances in technology adoption by farmers, the Ohio Ag Manager team changed the newsletter format in 2010. The newsletter moved away from being a static, monthly published newsletter to providing farm management information as it became available using a blog format. Moving to this format allowed quicker dispersion of critical information so farmer subscribers could make better informed decisions. Furthermore, the team has created a Facebook page and Twitter account so farmers more readily receive the information through their mobile devices and cell phones.

Another strategy was for each team member to select a unique farm management specialization based on the identified needs of their clientele. Within their area of specialization, each team member provides leadership to curriculum development, research, and publishing information via the newsletter and blogs. Examples of specializations selected include farm transition planning, farm policy, farm estate planning, grain marketing, farm finance, management education for farm women, and farm labour.

Outcomes

Currently The Ohio Ag Manager newsletter is emailed to 800 individuals who have personally subscribed to the electronic list serve. The newsletter is also emailed to all eighty-eight Ohio State University Extension, county offices where it can be reproduced and distributed to clientele if desired. More than 100 management articles are published annually and, in addition to the subscriptions, server data indicates an additional 25,289 (average) individuals retrieve the articles from the web each month. A survey published on the Ohio Ag Manager website examined the benefit of this newsletter to Ohio farms and agribusinesses. Data showed that nearly seventy percent of subscribers saved money or increased profits through tax savings, cost saving measures, or improved marketing. Respondents indicated an average savings of \$2,400 per year. Consultants estimated their clients save an average of \$1,500 as a result of the news newsletter.

During the past three years, Educator specialization has resulting in several excellent farm management programs. The first program developed was a farm transition workshop designed to assist farm families in determining the best method of transitioning the farm's management and assets from one generation to the next. The entire teaching curriculum developed has been used in teaching workshops across Ohio in which 1,104 persons have participated. Twenty-seven Ohio Extension Educators have participated in the train the trainer sessions sponsored by the team. A total of 48 educators from across the United States have requested copies of this transition planning curriculum.

A second program developed was Annie's Project, which was a farm management program focused on education women involved in agriculture. Topics ranged from farm finance, farm transition, effective communications, grain marketing, plus several others taught over a series of six sessions. A total of fourteen workshops reaching 282 farm women have been taught across the state in the past three years.

Changes in the United States' Farm Policy created significant confusion for farmers needed to determine which farm program was best for their farm business. Twenty-six educational workshops outlining the decision outcome for selecting the Average Crop Revenue Election or the Counter-Cyclical Program options were conducted by the team reaching 1148 farmers and governmental employees.

Conclusions

Using current technologies and a new model of program development, the Ohio Ag Manager Team members have transformed the delivery of farm management education to meet the needs of their farm clientele. Survey data indicates there is significant value of the information that is being delivered through the electronic newsletter and feedback from end users indicates that the social media outlets are convenient and useful. Since the inception of the team, the number of farm management curriculum being developed and taught by county level educators has increased substantially. This new model of farm management education has been successful in meeting the needs of today's farm managers in Ohio.