

Virginia Farmers Survey

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Recently, I was on the phone with a commercial farmer regarding a survey on farm financial management tasks; at the end he commented about marketing and how negligent the land-grant universities and extension were in providing marketing training and information.

The term *marketing* keeps popping up. What do farmers want when they say they want marketing help? What are their needs in this area and how can extension reach them? We undertook a telephone survey April 8-17, 1985 to find out.

Purpose and Methods

The survey's purpose was to: 1) determine farmers' informational needs, specifically those relating to marketing; 2) identify farmers' opinions regarding extension's allocation of effort; and 3) identify optimal media channels for reaching farmers.

The survey addressed several truisms regarding farmers, which served as unstated guidelines for development of the public profile of extension. Some truisms were confirmed, but others were refuted or questioned.

The sample frame used for the telephone survey was generated from a random sample of nearly 10,000 Virginia farmers taken from the statistical data bank of the Virginia Crop Reporting Service. Specific selection criteria relating to number of head of livestock and farm acres were used to generate 589 names, purposely skewed to overrepresent commercial-level farmers. From this sample frame, 334 completed telephone interviews were obtained.

Of the farmers surveyed 91 percent were men, 49.4 percent operated farms with more than 179 acres, and 32.3 percent of those surveyed estimated that their gross cash farm receipts in 1984 were \$40,000 or above. The largest represented age group was the 55-64 age bracket. All extension districts throughout the state were adequately represented in the sam-

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ple. The characteristics of the sample correlated well with characteristics of Virginia farmers as given in the 1982 Census of Agriculture for Virginia.

Discussion of Results: Informational Needs

Some agribusiness leaders questioned whether extension was offering enough information on marketing. This prompted questions about perceived needs among farmers. Two open-ended questions and a multiple choice question addressed this matter.

Each farmer was asked to identify the aspect of his farm business that most needed improvement in order to increase profits. The number one answer was "higher prices," which was given by over one fourth of the respondents. Twenty-two percent of the total responses referred to production improvements and nine percent referred specifically to marketing improvements. Financial management registered only two percent and general management 3.5 percent (see Graph 1).

When asked what information would be most useful to them, farmers again downplayed financial management, referred to it in only 4 percent of total responses. Nearly a third of the responses were production-oriented topics and nearly a fifth were marketing-oriented topics. Although this question was taken from a national survey of commercial farmers (Brown and Collins, 1978), we obtained a large amount of nonresponses to this question. "Don't knows" accounted for 36 percent of the total responses (see Graph 2).

In a close-ended question where the respondent was asked to choose between three types of information to dub "most helpful," 43 percent of the total sample chose marketing information over production and financial management information, which registered 26 and 21 percent respectively.

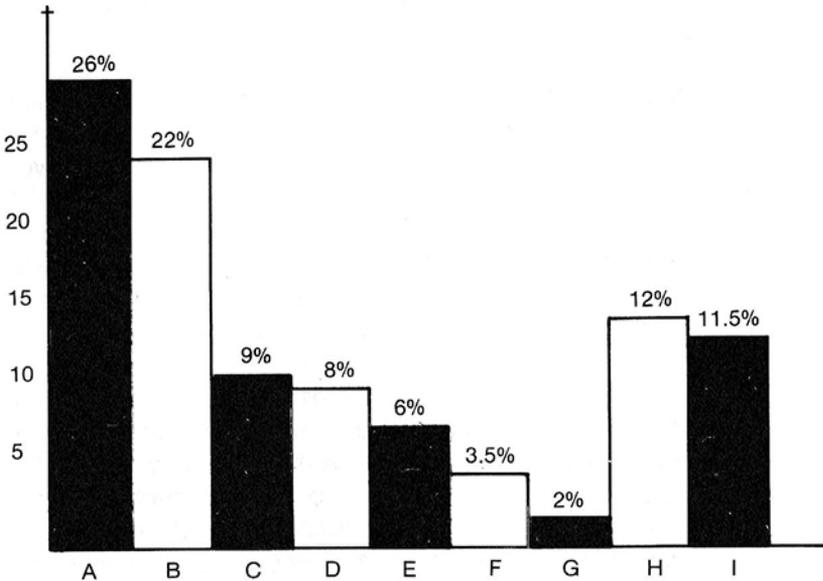
Interestingly, when the responses to this question were observed for commercial farmers only (those whose gross farm receipts were \$40,000+ in 1984), the commercial farmers were less likely to favor marketing information so heavily, as 37 percent gave it the nod over production and financial information, which registered 31 and 26 percent, respectively.

It is clear from the survey responses that the farmer has a dual need for production and marketing information. The farmers' desire to receive financial information was not of im-

Graph 1
Farm Area That Needs Improving

Q. "What aspect of your farm business needs improvement to increase profitability?" (Total Responses N = 371)

Percent of
Total Responses

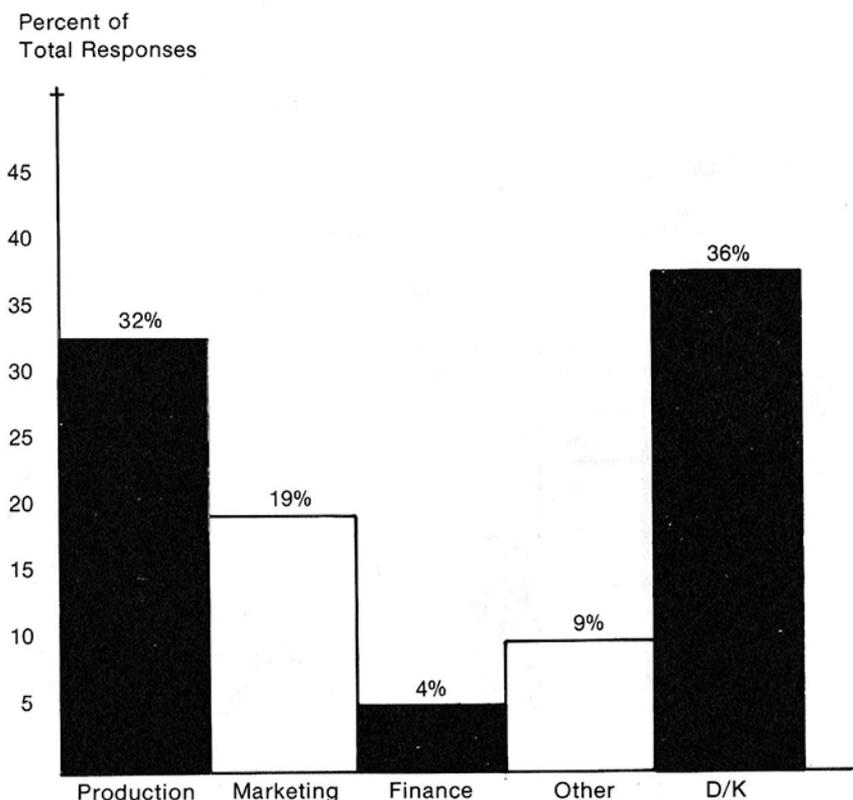


- A = Higher Prices
- B = Production Improvement
- C = Marketing
- D = More Resources
- E = Change In Policy
- F = Better Management
- G = Financial Management
- H = Other
- I = D/K

mediate interest when compared with farm production or farm marketing information. The word "marketing" is dangerously imprecise and evocative. Therefore, respondents were asked to explain what marketing assistance from extension would be most helpful. More than four of ten respondents drew blanks on this. Commodity marketing was mentioned by about 17 percent of the sample. Market development was mentioned by

Graph 2
Information of Greatest Value To Farmers

Q. "What kinds of information are of greatest value to you in operating your farm and planning for the future." (Total responses N = 388)



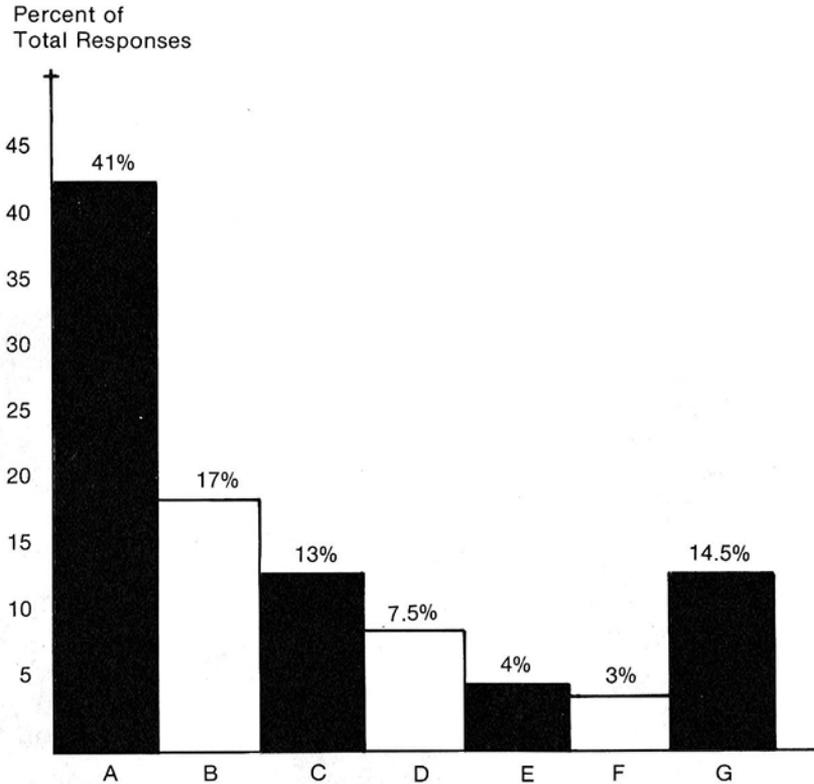
about 13 percent of the sample, usually in contact of developing markets for current products (see Graph 3).

Sources of Information

Extension showed up as a valuable source of information for farmers and was easily the leading source of agricultural production information. On this count, extension was the preferred source of information of 48 percent of commercial farmers in the survey.

Graph 3
Type of Marketing Assistance Wanted

Q. "What type of marketing assistance would be of most help to you in your farm operation?" (Total responses N = 360)



A = D/K

B = Market forecast futures and commodities

C = Market development

D = Help with sale of product

E = Exporting and dealing with foreign competition

F = Price supports

G = Other: Includes advertising, storage, transportation, packaging, set up co-ops, cutout middleman, special 800 numbers, etc.

Among all respondents, extension was rated the most sought-after source of record keeping and computer information and the second most sought-after source for financial management, government farm program, and marketing information behind banks, the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (ASCS), and customers respectively.

The mass media were the sources most often sought for commodity price information. Though extension ranked high as a source of information, it was disturbing how many sought no one's help in certain areas. Well over half of the farmers sought no one's help in record keeping. Eight of ten farmers sought no information on computerizing farm operations, though that rate was down to four of ten among young commercial farmers. Extension was consulted by 11 percent of commercial farmers regarding computerization of farm operations. The following table lists the first and second most prevalent answers given by Virginia farmers as to their source in getting various types of farm information.

TABLE 1
Sources of Information

Type of Farm Information	Top Choice	% Total Responses	Second Choice	% Total Responses
1 Farm production	Extension	41.4	Farm magazine	18.3
2 Financial management	Banks	19.6	Extension	15.3
3 Commodity prices	Newspapers	20.5	Don't know	12.8
4 Computerization of farm operations	Don't know	40.2	No one	39.1
5 Government farm programs	ASCS	39.9	Extension	16.0
6 Better record keeping	Don't know	26.4	Extension	18.6
7 Marketing farm products	Don't know	15.8	Buyer/customer	14.2

Opinions of Extension's Efforts

Extension fared well in the opinion of Virginia farmers. When given a choice to rate information received from extension as "useful," "too broad," "too specific," or "out of date" only 14 percent of the farmers chose negative answers, 77 percent of the farmers thought extension information "useful" and the remainder were noncommittal.

Negative responses as a whole were fairly consistent across receipts and age groups. Noncommittal answers diminishing and positive answers rose, however, as farm cash receipts rose.

A critical question relating to extension's image among farmers was whether or not the organization was allocating too much of its efforts to nonfarmers. Respondents were

asked if they thought extension was spending the right amount, too little, or too much time with 4-H, home economics, gardening, community resource development, or agribusiness.

In no case was there a great resistance to this programming. The number asking for more time to be spent on these programs outweighed the number wanting less time. Overwhelmingly, however, there were not a great amount of respondents who expressed an opinion. It was concluded, at least, that there was no ground swell among Virginia farmers that suggests a need to disavow nonfarmer programming.

Media Habits of Farmers

This aspect of the study was enlightening and very useful as respondent farmers' media habits were quite definable. About 88 percent of the contacted farmers were subscribers to newspapers and 90 percent read farm publications. Commercial farmers, those farmers whose annual gross cash receipts were \$40,000 or above, were particularly heavy readers. Commercial farmers averaged between three and four farm publications regularly read by each. This is in marked contrast to farmers with annual cash receipts below \$40,000, who read 1.6 farm publication on average. High readership was reported despite the fact that respondents were asked to only mention those publications that they read and not those received but not read. The survey resulted in the ability to target those publications that most often reach farmers.

Investigation of newspaper use did not support the notion that the county weekly was the major pathway for reaching farmers. In fact, in this survey, 12.5 percent of the newspapers at the top end of the circulation spectrum in the state reached three of four readers. Table 2 and Table 3 give additional newspaper readership data of surveyed farmers.

Eight of ten Virginia farmers listened to the radio regularly. AM stations were listened to most often, though at least one in four young commercial farmers listened to FM stations.

One unescapable fact was that no farm broadcast reached a major portion of farmers on a regular basis. Only 32.3 percent of those surveyed indicated that they listened to any farm radio broadcast. Strong regionalism and lack of a strong farm broadcast personality in Virginia were probably contributing factors.

Table 4 shows the data collected at the time of day that farmers in the survey listened to the radio. It confirms the notion that breakfast and lunch are primary listening times, particularly in the case of the farmer. Television habits were not studied in this survey.

The hardest part of a survey is not sampling, data collection, or writing the report. The hardest part is using the data to change programs. Hopefully, this survey will help us approach the farmer with new insight with regard to Virginia farmers' informational needs, sources, and media habits.

TABLE 2

Type of Newspaper Read by Surveyed Farmers

	Percent
Receive metropolitan or regional daily	65.5
County daily or weekly newspaper only	21.0
No newspaper	11.7
National newspaper only	1.8

TABLE 3

Number of Newspapers Read By Farmers

	Total	% of Survey Sample
Respondents who read at least one newspaper	295	88.3
Respondents who read 2 newspapers	145	43.4
Respondents who read 3 newspapers	41	12.3
Respondents who read 4+ newspapers	9	2.7

TABLE 4

When Farmers Listen To the Radio

Time	Total Response	Percent
6 A.M.-9 A.M.	148	46.0
9 A.M.-3 P.M.	67	20.8
3 P.M.-6 P.M.	23	7.1
6 P.M.-Midnight	53	16.5
Midnight-6 A.M.	13	4.0
All day	18	5.6
Total	322	100.0

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