

# A Focus Group Study Of Agricultural Marketing Programs

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Five focus group sessions were held involving over 50 agricultural producers and professionals who work with farmers. Study objectives included determining how farmers prefer to receive commodity marketing information. Results showed farmers received marketing information from many sources, and that it was most critical in spring. Marketing programs conducted by the Extension Service were deemed more trustworthy than private sources. Women should be involved in marketing plans, and selective use of new technology was encouraged. The Extension Service marketing newsletter was deemed very understandable, with useful information. Ag outlook/marketing inserts and other articles in magazines contain useful marketing information and should be continued.

## Introduction

Farmers have ranked commodity marketing programs sponsored by the Minnesota Extension Service as a high priority. Several program delivery methods have been used, including meetings, newsletters, radio, magazine inserts, and satellite conferences.

Focus groups can provide valuable qualitative information to help evaluate adult education programs (Falk, et al, 1986). Focus group sessions were scheduled as part of a larger effort to evaluate agricultural marketing programs (Grantham, et al, 1992). Focus groups involved farmers

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with experience in extension marketing programs, as well as agricultural lenders, business people and educators.

#### **Purposes**

1. Determine the types of marketing information available to agricultural producers from the Extension Service and other sources.
2. Determine how producers use marketing information and its importance in commodity marketing management.
3. Document additional marketing information needed by producers and the role of the Extension Service in providing it.
4. Determine the role of the Extension Service in enhancing the agricultural marketing skills of farmers.
5. Determine the preferred delivery methods for farmers to receive commodity marketing information.
6. Determine the potential for alternative delivery methods (satellite transmission and video tapes).

#### **Methods and Analysis**

A three-person coordination team developed questions for the focus group sessions, based on the study's objectives. The questions follow:

1. What are your sources of commodity marketing and agricultural outlook information?
2. What times of the year do you most need marketing information?
3. What kinds of marketing and outlook information do you need?
4. What kind of marketing information do you need that is not presently available?
5. How useful is the marketing and outlook information from the Minnesota Extension Service?
6. How do you use the information in the Extension Service's Marketing Newsletter?

7. How do you use the information in the Ag Outlook Insert in the *Agri-News*?
8. How do you use the information in *The Farmer* magazine?
9. What is your opinion of various extension information delivery methods, including newer technologies such as video tapes and satellite transmission.
10. What could the Extension Service do to attract other clientele to utilize marketing programs and information?
11. Do you have any other comments on marketing and information programs?

Focus group sessions were scheduled in four Minnesota counties with active extension marketing programs. County extension agents in each county hosted the focus group sessions and invited 10 agricultural producers to participate. Producers were experienced in commodity marketing and familiar with extension marketing programs.

After the five focus group sessions were completed, the coordination team analyzed the data. Each team member worked independently and listed 6 to 10 main themes, with associated "notable quotes" for each location (Krueger, 1988). The coordinating team combined their independent analyses into a final list of overall themes and representative quotes.

#### **Findings**

1. Farm producers receive commodity marketing and outlook information from many sources. Most frequently mentioned were:
  - Dataline and other transmission systems.
  - Farm publications and newspapers.
  - Radio stations, especially the Lindner Farm Network.

- The Extension Service marketing newsletter.
- Extension Service meetings.
- Marketing clubs.
- Private advisory services and newsletters.
- Adult farm management programs.

"Farmers are not looking for one source of information, but a lot of variety."

2. Grain marketing information is needed continually, but is most critical during the spring and early summer, when market rallies usually occur.

"We have time to study the grain markets in the winter months, but April, May and June are the critical times."

3. More than enough grain marketing information is available to producers. The challenge is to help them analyze and use it.

"Sometimes we get so involved in absorbing fundamental information that we do not stand back and look at the big picture."

"At this time farmers may be exposed to an excess of information. They need a good decision making model to sort the wheat from the chaff."

4. Marketing programs from the Minnesota Extension Service are of very good quality and serve a useful purpose.

"There is a high degree of trust in extension information, where there may be some bias in private information."

5. The Extension Service marketing newsletter is very understandable and contains useful information, especially on government farm programs, market trends

and analysis, basis and marketing strategies.

"Most producers are at different levels of marketing skill and the newsletter helps them individualize their marketing plan."

6. Ag outlook inserts and other articles in magazines and newspapers contain useful marketing information and are used as a base information source by ag professionals.

"The outlook booklets give an indication of what happened and why it happened."

7. Time commitment is a critical factor in getting producers to attend meetings and workshops. Attendance is determined by program quality and interest in topics addressed.

"Sometimes a small group of people, an interesting topic, and a pot of coffee are all that is needed for a good meeting."

8. The Extension Service must have closer links with private sources for getting marketing information to farmers. Both parties must become less competitive and more cooperative.

"It is important for extension to have ties with private firms to encourage attendance at marketing programs."

9. The Extension Service needs to do a better job of targeting educational programs and should consider expanding potential audiences, especially women.

"It is very important to have women involved in developing marketing plans."

10. Alternative program delivery methods (satellite technology

and video tapes) can reach many people with high quality programs. However, the Extension Service must realize the limitations of this technology and the importance of quality program delivery when using it.

"Part of U of M's responsibility is innovation in communication and information transfer."

### Conclusion

Focus group participants viewed Extension Service commodity marketing programs as high quality, useful and informative. They suggested coordinating more with private industry, targeting special programs for women and holding special meetings for agricultural professionals who work directly with farmers.

While encouraging strategies to manage and utilize satellite technology, they said the technology has limitations. Satellite programs and video tapes cannot substitute for personal contact with producers or for other delivery methods. New technologies need to fit into the entire program delivery scheme for commodity marketing programs.

### References

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