



EXTENSIONNET

March 2003
Vol. 10 No. 3

Newsletter of the Australasia-Pacific Extension Network (Inc)

A0029919P ISSN 1445-2111 Contact: 07 4160 0725 Australia Post approved PP347637000014

Business improving? Continue!

Using the Better Practices Process to improve the outcomes from working with groups of dairy farmers in Victoria

by Melinda Mann

DPI Victoria, Kyabram

Victorian dairy farmers have found ways to improve on-farm performance not only by using specific management tools but also by thinking hard about which tools they need.

As part of a strategic initiative within Target 10 (a dairy-based extension project), the Continuous Business Improvement (CBI) program was developed to complement the existing suite of programs for the Victorian dairy industry. After an initial development phase four pilot programs were trialed across the state.

The emphasis of this extension research project was to develop a program that aimed to integrate all aspects of the Dairy farm as a system and allow farmers to measure performance and make improvements to their business.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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From the editor

In an era when budgets are making it increasingly more difficult to travel, APEN chapters and members are bucking the trend by organising more events. There really is simply no substitute for face-to-face contact, and this edition is full of information about forthcoming events (we're very excited about the APEN Forum in Tasmania!). Do your best to get along to one or more of these events and help keep the professional community alive. It's guaranteed you'll meet some interesting people.

The APEN National Executive recently met in Melbourne to revisit the strategic plan and evaluate its role in making the plan happen. The strategic plan was largely left as is, but NE portfolios - the system we use to actually do the work we're asked to do - were slightly reshuffled thanks in part to the influx of some new NE members with plenty of marketing savvy. These new NE members are introduced on page 11; if you have ideas for how to market APEN more effectively, be sure to get in touch.

Darren Schmidt

APEN is pleased to acknowledge the support of:



DAIRY RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION



Horticulture Australia

Business improving? Continue! (cont'd from p1)

The expected outcome from the pilot programs was:

"Dairy farmers are continuously using improvement processes to identify and act on specific opportunities which improve the enterprise, financial, people and environmental aspects of the farm business".

Overall, there was a strong and diverse interest in the CBI program. A total of 32-farm businesses were involved across the four pilot locations, carrying out 73 group activities within 12 months. The wide range of activities were: 21 meetings, 3 farm walks, 35 farm visits, 1 two day workshop, 2 mini field days, 8 interviews, 1 bus trip and 3 phone conferences. In addition, each business committed substantial amounts of time to their own projects between group activities.

Each of the four pilot groups were delivered using a flexible approach where the farmers controlled the direction and operation of the program. Each program worked towards achieving the 6 steps outlined in the Better Practices Process (BPP) and individuals were required to have an action plan. See diagram, below.



The Better Practices Process

Key Messages from the Pilot Programs

Over time facilitating the process was more about getting the philosophy and ethos embraced rather than a rigid 6-step BPP. The time taken to go through each step depended on where the farmers were up to, individual projects and the group's technical focus.

Facilitators put less emphasis on technical information and more on empowering farmers to improve their thinking processes to find answers for themselves. The focus was on individual farmer goals, particularly in relation to individual action plans.

Process (including the BPP) is not something that everyone seeks to engage in but it has the potential to achieve significant

gains and assist change. The challenge with all the pilots has been to develop an acceptable method of using process. All pilots had difficulty with process and as a result it has been suggested that process shouldn't be pushed "too hard too early". The skill in the future will be in keeping the theory to a minimum and ground the process in practical applications.

A challenge in the pilot phase was getting individuals to document and record their progress. This required a change in mindset and needs to be encouraged in future work. At a minimum each individual needs to write a detailed action plan (step 3), which includes key performance indicators (how they will measure the changes/improvement).

Future Challenges for using the BPP with Farmers

Philosophy

Facilitators and farmers alike need to understand and be committed to the philosophy of continuous improvement and innovation. Individuals need to be committed to meeting regularly, changing practices, participating and supporting others in the group.

Better Practices Process

The BPP should be transparent (to farmers); it is a simple practical process that can be used for a broad range of issues or situations. It is essential that each step of BPP is clearly defined and grounded in practice. Early success is recommended and identifying a short-term focus will achieve this. Experience suggests that the BPP should be used up front and at the pace set by the individual groups.

Tools and Techniques

A range of tools and techniques is essential to help individuals work through the cycle, however to avoid confusion between the BPP and the tools fewer tools should be introduced. The recommended approach is to have two simple and practical tools that can be used at each step in the cycle.

Jargon

The pilot phase of CBI identified that new terminology or jargon was distracting and not widely accepted by farmers. In future the use of jargon needs to be reduced or replaced with relevant words.

For further information or a copy of the final report please contact Melinda Mann, DPI Kyabram (03) 58520 500.



"Facilitators put less emphasis on technical information and more on empowering farmers to improve their thinking processes to find answers for themselves."

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Marketing magic

You're an extension officer? You're probably also a marketer

At the APEN Qld Chapter's "Information Resources" forum in February, marketing consultant Mark Casey delivered an intriguing presentation that left some attendees scratching their heads. Some thought marketing was "purposive lying". Others suspected marketing was the answer to all of extension's problems. Who's right? Here's the lowdown on Mark Casey's presentation to Qld APEN .

Extension and marketing have a lot in common. Both enterprises are about influencing people to make a decision and then act. If extension is about change management, then extension is, at its core, a marketing exercise because this is precisely what marketing sets out to do. There are some differences in intent, to be certain, but a long hard look at the process will reveal an abundance of similarities.

So what are the differences? Extension might be thought of as an 'outreach' activity. It is often a public investment in a small section of the community with the skills and ability to communicate with as many people as possible who might benefit from 'the message'. Traditionally, 'the message' has been about managing natural resources, about learning, and about managing changing environments. Extension trades on the understanding that its outcomes are in the interests of the public good, and that the benefits from these outcomes can be accessed easily and equitably.

Marketing, however, might be thought of as an activity that 'reaches in' to the resources of the organisation in order to develop better relationships with those that it deals with. Client databases, existing client contacts and established relationships are used to obtain the maximum commercial benefit. Marketing has emerged, quite simply, to make more profit for organisations that practise it. However, that does not necessarily mean that marketing is about promoting dubious services or pushing the 'hard sell' (though sometimes it is). Good marketers go to extraordinary lengths to avoid any taint of impropriety. At its base, though, marketing is about money and market share.

Different name, same challenge

It is getting more difficult to reach people and get 'mind space'. Not only has there been an explosion over the last decade in the number of messages sent, so too have the avenues for delivery expanded, as any victim of high-volume spam can attest. There are many voices competing for 'top-of-mind' attention.

Some recent research estimates that in the United States the media spends \$1861 per person to transport messages. For some extension officers in Australia, that figure might actually represent their annual operating budget. One marketing rule of thumb has it that for some campaigns, a consumer needs to register a message eight times before it 'gets through'. In high noise environments - for example, cities like Sydney or Melbourne - it might be as much as 20 times before anyone takes the slightest notice of a message.

Marketers are desperately trying to get their message to 'stand out' from this noise. And the challenge is the same for extension officers. So what hope have we got with miserly budgets, slim resources and, sometimes, complex messages to deliver? Time to look at some 'first principles' of marketing.

Marketing concepts

Marketing has many definitions, but basically it's a process whereby individuals and groups *get what they need and want* by creating and exchanging goods and value with others. Good marketers are expert in discovering clients' needs.



Mark Casey is the CEO for *Drawbridge Communications*, a marketing, training and public relations consultancy. Contact him on (07) 4630 8440 or email the man on drawbridge@hypermax.net.au

Mark also runs a marketing course through *crri.q* - see ad on back page for details.

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“Excellence in marketing translates to knowing and understanding the customer *so well* that the product or service ‘fits’ more or less exactly with what the customer expects.”

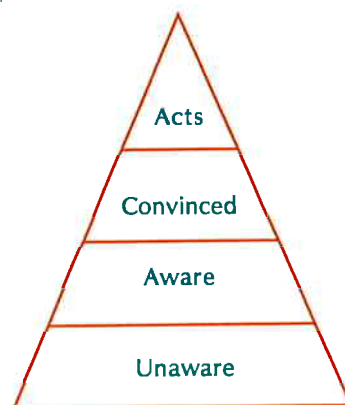
‘Selling’ is only a small component of marketing. In fact, according to Peter Drucker, the aim of marketing is to make ‘selling’ - as it is conventionally understood - virtually superfluous. Excellence in marketing translates to knowing and understanding the customer *so well* that the product or service ‘fits’ more or less exactly with what the customer expects. The product or service sells itself.

A marketing plan for extension?

How can extensionists make their message ‘sell itself’? How can we be assured that what we do and say ‘fits’ with the myriad people we’re trying to communicate with?

Ask them

What are the perceptions of clients, funders, the CEOs or their equivalents in your organisation? What do they know about your message? About you? Start asking anytime, anywhere, but start. And record the responses. Look at the ‘Promotion Pyramid’ and see where the responses fit.



Who are my clients?

There may be more than one, and they may need to hear different messages. Have you ever noticed how McDonald’s will play very different TV advertisements at different times of the day to accommodate divergent market segments? The same principle applies to extension.

What am I marketing?

This is often very difficult to answer. Are you marketing your department? Ideas? Change? Information? Or are you marketing the more conventional services and products? Sometimes, depending on the targeted segment, it is necessary to market your group or yourself. Sometimes it is extension itself that needs to be marketed. The most important thing to consider is that

marketing two or three or more of these ‘commodities’ to the one segment using the one message can get confusing for the client. Decide what you’re marketing and market it.

What are the differentiators?

Differentiators are what makes us different. They answer the question: ‘why would they use us instead of somebody else?’.

Government extension services in particular have some widely publicised and welcome differentiators that are not exploited as nearly as often as they might be.

Government-funded extension is often held to be:

- credible
- independent
- reputable
- low-cost and high value, and
- supporting and based on science.

Plan plan plan

An *ad hoc* approach to marketing is expensive. A shotgun might kill the duck, but at what price to your dinner? Draw up a marketing plan and draft a marketing budget, regardless of how tight the purse is (even more of a reason to draft a budget!).

Use a targeted approach and avoid distractions. With a good plan, dry gullies are easier to avoid. Marketing plan templates can be found anywhere these days - on the web, in graduate texts and so on. Measure results as soon as they’re available and *don’t forget to use them* to finetune your marketing strategy.

Key ideas

- *Don’t presume. Check it out.*
- *Know your clients and keep in touch*
- *Avoid the ‘same old approach’*
- *Provide an experience rather than just an event.*
- *Evaluate and improve*
- *Never never take clients for granted*
- *Use “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me?)*
- *Use “one percenters” (the little things make the difference)*
- *Customer service is marketing*
- *Put on the client’s shoes*
- *Use word of mouth - look for key influencers*
- *Lemons leave a bitter taste - doing the right thing pays off*

Appearances are everything

Avoid brand confusion. These days, even government departments have woken up to the fact that periodically changing the corporate image or hosting whole swag of sub-brands does nothing for the organisation's marketing potential. Keep brands clear and unambiguous. A good brand is seldom recognised (from within) for the asset it is, and it can add a lot of weight if it is used judiciously with an extension message. Big corporations spend lots of money developing a recognisable brand, using visual expression and a meaningful logo, and are extremely careful in how they use it. They also guard the brand's use jealously.

More bang for the buck

When resources are limited, as they often are in extension environments, a concentrated campaign approach works well.

Use combination of approaches:

- Adverts/inserts
- Direct mail
- Media releases
- Community announcements (ABC Radio).

Try to think outside the square. Have you heard of the teabag being posted out with the invitation to a meeting with the recommendation to make a cuppa whilst reading the invite? This is a cheap 'one-percenter' that can really grab the attention.

Keep the wheel turning

Marketing, like extension, is a program, not a project. Maintaining momentum will be easier if the right track has been targeted in the first place, but keep evaluating and change course if necessary. Enlist help and spread the good news about how marketing has led to success. That way, more people own or want to own the process.



Would you trust this man?
Appearances are everything!



**APEN
National
Forum**

Extending extension

Beyond traditional boundaries, methods, ways of thinking

Hobart, Tasmania

26-28 November 2003

APEN is proud to offer a first-class professional development and peer networking opportunity.

Extend your thinking about our business and how to improve practice. Expand on what extension is, how we do it, and what works. This will be the full deal ... keynote speakers, small group activities, open forums, workshops and training session. Social and professional networking all flavoured with the tastes of Tasmania. Bring your partner for a holiday!

This forum will attract a variety of like-minded professionals from different fields who'll help us refine what we think extension is. And what extension can be.

Papers will be published in a conference proceedings. Start thinking now what you'd like to share with your peers. More details in next edition of ExtensionNet. Keep an eye on the APEN website and the email listserve for more information.

Forum Convenor: Prof Frank Vanclay frank.vanclay@utas.edu.au

Chapters fire!

There's been some great activities around the traps.

WA CHAPTER

Some postponements in the fair west but some events now coming into focus ...

Australian Journal of Experimental Agriculture Roadshow: Chris Anderson, the Managing Editor of AJEA, will be back in WA in early April. AJEA publishes one issue per year showcasing extension work and the WA chapter plans to take Chris on a visit to regional WA. So far a sundowner is planned for Bunbury. Other areas will be visited according to demand, so contact a member of the state executive to register your interest and, more importantly, your willingness to organise a visit. Keep an eye on your email inbox for more details!

AGM featuring 'Networking' with Neil Drew: The AGM was held on the 4th April. The guest speaker was Dr Neil Drew, a community psychologist who is the Director at the Institute for Regional Development at UWA. More details of Neil's exceptional presentation in the next edition.

Forty people attended the WA AGM but the committee lost four office bearers to busier schedules and maternity. Prez Colin Holt is confident the vacancies will be filled shortly (Col's contact details p 12).

MEMBERS DIRECTORY

If things are running to plan, you should have been posted your APEN Membership Directory with this edition of ExtensionNet. If not, don't worry ... you'll soon receive one. Roe at the Secretariat says 'thanks' to all who've confirmed job and contact details. The Membership Directory will provide a platform for better networking and will have members listed in chapters as well as the whole A to Z listing. Why not introduce yourself on the phone or by email to a member you haven't met before?

APEN event in the pipeline? Let us know! ExtensionNet is mailed to nearly 500 subscribers so it's fantastic publicity for your event. Simply email details to the editor (details back cover).

QLD CHAPTER

The Queensland series of APEN forums continues apace. These forums were plotted during a one-off meeting (actually a belated chapter AGM) in September 2003, and two out of the three planned have been and gone. The first, back in November last year, focused on group work and how diverse sets of people can work together to bring off some spectacular results.

The dust is still settling on the second. The focus of this forum was **Information Resources** and the speakers came from a diverse set of backgrounds to provide the expertise (Qld DPI, Qld Uni of Technology, and private consultants). The topics included "groundtruthing" information products with clients, media relationships, marketing (see the report on Mark Casey's presentation, page 3), 'headspace' and online relationships with producers. These forums seem to work well as half-day events with a lunch at the end for some social interaction. For more information on the February event, contact Darren Schmidt on 07 4160 0725 or darren.schmidt@dpi.qld.gov.au.

The next forum in this series will focus on *Industry Extension programs*, July 2003, Kingscliffe. Contact: Peter McGuire, phone 02 6670 1700.

More events equals more members

Expanding membership for the mere sake of it is rarely a good idea, but APEN is still very keen to broaden its fellowship to involve as many extensionists as possible. A proven way to do this is to organise local events. Inevitably, non-members - who may not have even heard of APEN - attend the event and some will recognise the benefits of belonging to an organisation that 'walks the talk' and join on the spot. It's a good argument for organising an event in your area. Contact the NE if help is required.



Get along to an APEN event and network. With a cup of coffee, you'll also look pretty cool like these guys

NE REPORT

Each member of the NE is assigned a 'portfolio' to administer, a system that has worked well for the past 18 months. Now, each administrator also has a 'buddy' to help out.

Wouldn't know an NE member if you fell over one? Have a look at the APEN website for the NE Mugs Gallery

National Executive expands and finetunes

The APEN National Executive met in Melbourne over 17-18 February to revisit the plans they'd made in 2001. This was an opportunity to critically appraise first

principles and base assumptions about APEN and its place in the world. Below is Vice President Greg Cock's summary of the way the NE see their role in APEN

VISION for *the profession*

Remains as "people successfully managing change".

VISION for *APEN*

Remains as "the peak body for change management professionals"

Our *ROLE* in contributing to that vision

Remains as "providing a platform for networking, professional development and representation of members' and the profession's interests."

Our *GOALS* are:

1. To be recognised as the peak body for change management professionals
2. To have a vibrant and effective network of change management professionals
3. To provide professional development opportunities for change management professionals
4. To provide representation of members' and the profession's interests.

GREAT! How do we do all of that?

The following sets out the objectives for each of those goals and the portfolios established to service them.

Goal 1 (recognised as peak body)

This is largely a job for the '**management**' portfolio, whose objectives are to ensure:

- the NE management is highly effective with efficient and effective Secretariat support
- members, potential members, partners, sponsors and funders are efficiently serviced
- there are clear policies on extension / change management.

Also contributing to Goal 1 is the '**financial resources**' portfolio whose objectives are to ensure:

- robust financial systems are in place and are being used.
- APEN is financially stable and resilient through membership, sponsorship and other funds

The '**evaluation**' portfolio also helps out.

Goal 1. Objectives are:

- practise continuous improvement and innovation in developing and implementing portfolios
 - collect data efficiently and effectively to evaluate progress and impact of portfolios.
- Lastly, the '**marketing**' portfolio contributes to Goal 1. Objectives:
- Know the needs of potential members, policy makers, sponsors and funders
 - Gain a high profile amongst members, potential members, policy makers, sponsors and funders.

Goal 2 (vibrant and effective network)

This goal is partly tackled by the '**chapter support and membership services**' portfolio. Its objectives:

- chapters cultivate responsibility, a sense of belonging and APEN importance
- NE and chapters have better linkages
- chapters helped to increase chapter activity
- members are aware, informed about, and satisfied with APEN.

The '**internal communication**' portfolio also helps out with Goal 2. Objectives:

- The newsletter, web page, email discussion list provide members a platform for sharing facts, opinions, and experience
- APEN's purpose, quality and integrity reflected in hardcopy promotional materials.

Goal 3 (professional development)

The '**activities**' portfolio is the prime mover here. Objectives are:

- run one international conference every four years
- run one National Forum every four years
- facilitate program of professional development workshops for chapters.

Goal 4 (represent APEN's interests)

The objectives of the '**research/representation**' portfolio are:

- advise on contemporary principles, philosophy and practice of change management (extension)
- change management policy and practice influenced by APEN.