

The opportunity to learn: BCG's Trials Review Day 25 years on

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Abstract. Established in 1993, the Birchip Cropping Group's (BCG) initial objectives were to conduct cropping research in the southeast Mallee and then share those outcomes with local grain growers so it could be applied almost immediately. Held prior to sowing each year, Trials Review Day was, and still is, an event offering farmers the opportunity to learn about local research that they can apply in their paddocks or business. The purpose of this event has largely gone unchanged and each year it continues to fill the room with approximately 180 growers from across western Victoria. A review of past publications and an analysis of the reflections of past and present BCG team members and BCG farmer members were conducted to identify key success factors. These included involving producers throughout the development process, providing a relevant program and structure, and making adjustments such as enabling online attendance.

Keywords: collaboration, adaptation, opportunity, consultation, opportunity

Introduction

In 1992 a group of Birchip and district farmers who were keen to see agricultural research in their region, established the Birchip Cropping Demonstration Sites (later to become Birchip Cropping Group; BCG). Initially, their motivation was to see how grain varieties, pulse crops and agricultural products performed in local soils and conditions, and to share this information for the improved productivity and profitability of grain growers in the region. A local farmer donated land which hosted research trials. Canola and lentil were demonstrated in the southern Mallee for the first time and experts provided agronomic support to the group in establishing and managing agronomic trials. The initiative proved a success with over 500 people attending the first field day, demonstrating a thirst for local, farmer-driven agricultural research.

BCG membership has grown to 400 members and research trial sites are established across the Wimmera, Mallee and North Central Victoria. Trials look at all aspects of farming including agronomics, farming systems (including livestock), climate, plant nutrition, crop diseases, weed and pest management and risk management.

Held in February each year, Trials Review Day is one of many events delivered by BCG and one of two flagship events, the other being the Main Field Day held in September.

Trials Review Day began as an 'Update' in 1997. It provided the important link between conducting the research and applying it on-farm. As the then Chairman, Ian McClelland, pondered in the February edition of the member newsletter in 2000: 'It gives members the chance to really understand the important issues we are uncertain about'.

With that mindset, the purpose of the Trials Review Day is to deliver the outcomes of the prior year's research so it can be integrated into management decisions made in future years while also highlighting innovations that drives prosperity.

Method

An analysis of historic evaluations was undertaken as well as surveys targeting long-term Trials Review Day attendees and former staff. A review of BCG's internal processes, established by the extension team, was also undertaken.

Results

Timing

Establishing the date for Trials Review Day, and sticking to it, provides regularity for attendees and other event planners. Carving out time for learning opportunities in a busy production calendar is challenging for growers with 'event fatigue' an issue. Trials Review Day is typically held on the third Friday in February, indoors, after holidays and before sowing. Two past BCG staff members indicated time of year as a key success factor: It's enough time for farmers to take in the information and start to plan and implement for the next cropping season, and the time of the year (post school holidays and pre cropping) contributes to its success.

Collaboration

Collaboration is a key factor in delivering the event where other speakers are often invited to present. This ensures attendees hear from a range of people and new ideas are introduced to the

attendees. It also gives experts from other organisations the opportunity to deliver on a project milestone thus negating the need for another event.

An analysis of past programs revealed approximately 60 per cent of this research is presented at Trials Review Day by BCG staff. The remaining 40 per cent comprises research conducted in collaboration with BCG but delivered by external presenters such as representatives of Agriculture Victoria or a university.

This is reflective of one of BCG's strategic objectives, 'Collaborative Delivery' which recognises that more can be achieved by working together: 'BCG collaborates and has strong, mutually beneficial relationships with farmers, research agencies, universities, the philanthropic sector and agribusiness at a local and national level.'

The program

The topics presented in the program represent the research conducted by BCG which is shaped by its members. Topics delivered include pests and diseases, crop types, varieties, soil management, livestock, nutrition, weed management, new technology and cropping systems approaches such as time of sowing, crop sequences and row spacings. Weather, soil moisture and climate outlooks are also regular features of the program.

The program is developed in consultation with two advisory committees (Mallee and Wimmera). These volunteer committees comprise farmer and advisors who meet regularly to discuss challenges and opportunities experienced in their region. Research opportunities or extension activities are then identified by BCG staff to address, and the research shared at Trials Review Day.

A review of past programs reveals the topics to be highly responsive to the season: 'Rusts and diseases after wet seasons' (2011), 'Aerial Blackleg management' (2020) or 'Seeking solutions to the snail epidemic' (2013).

Other times, but less frequently, there is a reflective, bigger picture topic to discuss: 'Do stock have a place in the Mallee cropping systems?' (2001), 'The agronomic, environmental, economic and co-existence impacts of GM canola' (2014) and 'Farming without glyphosate' (2023).

Having a balance between well-respected presenters and new 'up and comers' (mainly BCG staff) is also an important element. One former BCG staff member said the value was in showcasing BCG staff capability i.e. they had skin in the game and observed the trials all year, with brought in expertise where required. But it really is a showcase of BCG capability".

Asking farmers

Feedback and evaluation from the attendees is undertaken in multiple forms. The two most important are formal evaluations and personal conversations. Historically, the formal evaluations have been in written or electronic form and personal conversations are discussed and recorded at staff meetings. Feedback from the advisory committees, as previously mentioned, is also examined.

In a survey of attendees conducted in 2013, 72 per cent of attendees indicated they expect a combination of information from groups such as BCG including varieties, weeds, farming systems, livestock and risk management.

Variety discussion is consistently a popular topic. In evaluation interviews conducted in 2011, one grower said: 'different results for varieties' was of value to them while another attendee said they were looking to 'incorporate a new variety predominantly due to rust' (issues in the previous season) and appreciated the 'expert opinion on varieties'.

The social aspect of the day is valued by attendees. Organisers therefore put an emphasis on allowing time in the program for one-on-one interaction. Specifically, this means providing a coffee van at the start of the day, half an hour for morning tea, an hour for lunch and time for refreshments at the close of the day.

Attendees appreciate the opportunity to talk with other farmers, industry representatives, researchers and presenters with respondents indicating, 'lots of discussion', 'networking and what other people are thinking', 'talking with advisors from so many different areas' as important.

One of the long-term Trials Review Day attendees said getting like-minded people together and being able to ask questions of the panellists and researchers always provides good information.

Local research for local farmers

Another aspect valued by attendees is access to local research. In a survey of long-term attendees, it was identified that Trials Review Day is the 'best day of the year' and the 'best event (offered by BCG)'.

In a survey of attendees conducted in 2013, 96 per cent of attendees indicated they perceived 'independent ag research' as either important, very important or essential 'to their farm business' (56 per cent indicated it as essential).

The diversity of presenters and topics reflects the range of topics that matter to BCG members. It also brings new perspectives and presentation styles which caters to different learning styles and keeps the audience engaged. On average, 16 different topics are presented at Trials Review Day which offer value for invested time for the attendees.

An important element of Trials Review Day is also the release of the annual *Season Research Results Compendium*. Approximately 25 articles are compiled to reflect and extend the research conducted by BCG each year. The research is primarily conducted in the Wimmera, Mallee and North Central regions of Victoria which is where many members are from.

Farmer to farmer learning

A popular addition in 2013 was the 'Farmer to farmer learning' sessions where farmer members share their reflections on the year and plans for the coming year. A farmer discussion panel at end of the day, introduced in 2020, offers an opportunity to summarise and instil the key messages of the day from a farmer perspective.

Opportunities

While the format remains relatively unchanged and as one former staff member reflected 'continue to hold this event, it is the only true members day and it has long standing success and value proposition for members', meaning opportunities for improvements are always seized to accommodate the audience. Recent developments include providing the opportunity to attend online (livestream) and delivering the compendium electronically, with the option to receive a printed copy.

An electronic version of the compendium means information is immediately available for reference via a mobile device that provides a sustainability benefit through reducing the number of copies printed. Another sustainability feature has been to provide a water stand where people are encouraged to refill their water bottles instead of using disposable ones.

Social media is also used to deliver some of the key messages of the day. The BCG social media accounts provide posts with links to related papers and articles in real-time and recordings of the day are made available to attendees to re-watch for improved understanding and implementation.

Since 2020, organisers have placed a focus on health and wellbeing by collaborating with the National Centre for Farmer Health (NCFH) to offer Health and Lifestyle assessments. Qualified nurses from the NCFH are on site to provide private assessments for any attendee wishing to take part.

One assessment participant in 2020 reflected:

I found the day fantastic! It [the assessments] should be held at all field days. The accessibility was good, the nurse was easy to talk to, made me feel relaxed and comfortable ... It did prompt me to take action.

Other recent health focused measures include provision of fruit as part of the catering and facilitators encouraging attendees to stand up and stretch after long periods of sitting.

Improvements in digital and electronic tools continue to be integrated primarily to encourage interaction and provide easy access to information. Three screens provide the presenter's presentation to attendees, so the information is easily seen. Participants can register for the day online which makes for a quick and convenient check in process and easy dissemination of information post-event. In 2023, 30 people viewed proceedings via livestream. Attendee interaction with presenters has increased in recent years by the inclusion of a Q&A and polling app where attendees (both in person and those watching the livestream) are able to pose questions anonymously and instantly.

The COVID-19 pandemic challenged BCG staff to rethink extension and communication strategies. With adherence to the relevant restriction guidelines, Trials Review Day was still held in 2021 and 2022 as a face-to-face learning opportunity but with modifications. The event saw reduced, in person attendance, more space in the seating arrangements, online registration and the introduction of livestreaming. There were some reservations that online may be the new way for

people to get their information. However, the return to a capacity crowd in 2023 indicates farmers still value the opportunity to connect in person and to gain a deeper understanding of the content.

Conclusions

The long-term success of Trials Review Day is underpinned by reliability (same time of year, prior to sowing), collaboration (invited speakers with good reputations and abilities to engage), social opportunities and the guarantee that local research will be delivered by the researchers who have analysed the results in collaboration with farmers and industry experts.

The program format is constantly adjusted to maximise learning outcomes and offer value for investment in time. Features included farmer discussion panels, a range of presenters to cater to different learning styles and utilising a Q&A and polling app for easy interaction with presenters. The application of the research is also supported by an electronically available research compendium.

This event remains an effective way to share key research outcomes for immediate application on farm as well as bigger picture thinking to drive innovation.

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