

Research and extension: delivering the goods

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Summary

The objective of research and extension in agriculture is to secure changes in the behaviour of selected groups, or individuals, secure the adoption of new products, techniques or systems of farming, leaving the farmer and society better off.

Sponsors of change can overcome constraints to adoption and deliver the goods by adhering to simple principles.

Sponsors of change must focus their attention on objectives for behaviour in the target group much more than objectives for the behaviour of themselves.

Main points

Extension 'models' provide a framework upon which certain facts and observations can be 'hung' so the sponsors of change can more easily understand an apparently complex dynamic of behaviour among their constituents. In some cases the model is used for extension planning. Our experience shows that it should always be used in planning for change since it is clean, simple and reliable.

This model may not be perfect to you, but no model is perfect. This model is not perfect but provides a simple and effective framework.

Let me use this model now. It will help you identify the main lessons in this paper. Do you recall the 'normal' distribution curve for adoption through time by a population? Under this curve the population is segmented:

- Innovators;
- Early adopters;
- Early, Middle and Late majority; and
- Laggards.

All populations can be so segmented. It is especially easy to see this sort of segmentation in one's mind's eye when considering farmers. But the segmentation will apply to farmers' advisers as a group, research scientists, agricultural merchants, builders, architects, engineers, doctors, lawyers and Indian chiefs!

Before we go on to look at 'delivering the goods', let us try to decide when adoption occurs and why.

The adoption of any new technique or product only occurs when the adopter is 'comfortable' with it - convinced it works; convinced of the benefit; and convinced that it is a change for the better.

We shall find it difficult to convince all the people in one fell swoop. The population must be segmented and target groups established in the plans of the sponsors of change.

When dealing with each group it is important to remember that change cannot be imposed on them.

If we cannot impose change, but we want to create and secure change, what must we do to 'deliver the goods'?

The first technique is to create the environment and circumstances where the targets will demand change of themselves. This is easier said than done.

The target will demand change of himself or herself only when comfortable with the technique or products, convinced of the benefits and comfortable, in a social sense, with the 'new person' he or she expects to become after adopting the change.

The sponsor wants the target group or individual to change, but cannot impose the change. The question is "how to create the environment where change is demanded by the target group or individual?".

Uninformed observers often say that as a general rule farmers are slow to change. This is arrant nonsense. History proves it is not so. Farmers will change rapidly, will adopt new techniques or products at a very rapid rate. But they must be convinced of the benefits so that they can demand change of themselves. How will this occur?

There is a simple progression which leads, step by step to people demanding change of themselves. It is a process of communication.

- Awareness -Create it!
- Interest - Provide it! Information - Serve it up!
- Reference - Provide it!
- Testing - Set it up!
- Adoption - Will take place
- Reward - Definition and reinforcement - essential!!!

This progression is a simple, but valuable framework for communication planning. It helps set each part of your programme against a framework and 'tests' the validity of each part.

Within this framework a range of activities must be organized. Events must be 'stage-managed'. The objective is to get each group in the population comfortable with the change, convinced of the benefits and convinced that the particular change is a priority. Remember this because it is important. It is not good enough simply to demonstrate the benefit. you must set out to convince the farmer that the change must be implemented.

Innovators are always the first people to pick up, even inventing, new techniques or methods without much of a push from any outside agency.

Early adopters, more cautious, often more successful in a business sense, and better balanced as a group, watch the innovators. They pick up the best of the innovators' ideas, put them to work and make money. Early adopters are active seekers of support, reinforcement, comment and criticism.

Each segment of the population works its way through the process of awareness, interest, information, reference, testing and adoption. Each group watches, assesses and reacts to the activities of its reference group.

It is obviously vital to ensure that material and activities are supplied to secure each step in the process, for each segment of the population. Their needs are not identical, in fact they are often quite different. In the process of delivering the goods the needs of each group must be kept in mind. Too often the sponsors of change slacken their effort when they see the process of adoption occurring with early adopters. They forget that the needs of following groups must be catered for.

Research consistently shows that farmers want clear, simple and easily understood messages - which are problem oriented; they want, among different groups, reassurance, guidance and outright direction.

The specifics of reassurance, guidance and outright direction are different from group to group. These needs must be catered for.

This is the second principle.

If you really want to convince the farmer that change is a priority then equivocation on the part of the sponsor must go out the window!

So often, the sponsors of change working with government research products appear equivocal and not committed to the farmer. Making the change they lose out to inertia or competitive 'products'. The opportunity for change is lost.

When guidance is needed, be a guide not a white stick.

When direction is needed, be prepared to direct! The barriers to adoption lie beyond 'awareness'. The creation of awareness is not good enough. You must go through to the end - committed and unequivocal.

Now, to recap we have our first principle: "create the environment and circumstances where the targets will demand change of themselves".

The second principle is to recognize and cater for the needs of different groups and that most of the barriers to adoption lie beyond awareness.

You must go on to create interest - even paying for the advertising space in various media to get the message across. 'Advertorial' may be best.

Information must be oriented to the farmers' needs not your need to express yourself or demonstrate the detail or power of the science behind the product or service. Field days are needed.

References must be credible - credible for each segment of the population. Know social and reference groups.

Testing of new techniques or products by farmers must be proper, thorough, and followed up to see that the job has been done properly and the correct evaluation of results has been made.

Our company believes very strongly that field work is an essential part of the whole communication process.

So now we have two principles - I will come back to interest, information, reference and testing later, but let us look again at the two principles we have so far:

- Create the environment where the targets demand change for themselves.
 - Recognize that most of the barriers to adoption lie in interest, information, reference and testing.
- Let us go on and establish the third technique for us to deliver the goods.

Decide on the behavioural objectives for the target groups. This is not what you will do, but what they will do! Now this is a hard one because it means that the sponsors of change must decide to actually make things happen. To some extent it means deciding what is good for the end user of your product or service. Since he is better off by using it, you are going to ensure that he does!

Quantitative objectives for adoption must be set. This too is hard, especially for those accustomed to creating awareness and giving information, leaving the rest to the market to decide on levels of adoption.

What level of adoption do you want?

How many farmers?

- What proportion of their stock, flock or crop?
- What market share? (What is the opposition?)
- Over what period of time?

Time is one essence. Quantities of adoption are the other.

Commercial extension - call it marketing if you like- is a very quantitative business. It has to be. Government extension programmes in Australia are often not quantitative, or if they are, there is a low level of accountability for adoption.

The setting of quantitative objectives is very important if the sponsors of change are to achieve success.

Tennis is no fun without keeping score. Beginners shelter behind a friendly no-score game. But to the professionals the score is the bottom line, the reason they play. They have the will to win. For professionals in extension - those who want to deliver the goods, quantitative objectives must be set. Accountability for change is needed.

We now have three principles, three techniques to ensure we deliver the goods.

- Create the environment
- Barriers lie beyond awareness
- Decide on the objectives

To decide on objectives is one thing. To decide where you presently stand is another.

A change in behaviour will need a change in the knowledge, values, attitudes and beliefs of the target market.

These are the basic determinants of behaviour. It is these that you seek to change in order to secure adoption. Before we set out to achieve our objectives, from where are we starting?

Market research is needed. Market research into:

- the farmers;
- their advisers - government and private;
- the merchants or dealers;
- the opposition.

Lack of a proper understanding of the end-users' perception or point of view is often the greatest barrier to adoption. Market research -properly conducted - is essential. Sponsors of change must approach change from the end-users' point of view.

So here we have our population - the Innovators - who, it has to be said, are not going to be a lot of use to us in securing change in the population, the early adoptors - who are vital; the majority - the biggest part of the market; and the laggards.

We have done the job right, decided to follow four techniques to deliver the goods. But what do we do?

Now we have our fifth technique: plan a programme, not an activity.

Commercial marketing programmes recognize the need, value and strength of interactive, integrated programmes. An activity is unlikely to secure adoption. Persistence, sometimes patience is needed.

Programmes are needed where each element reinforces the other.

How often have you seen:

- A good video flounder for lack of promotion of the video in other media?
- A good communication in the media fail because of poor support in the field?
- A great article fail to have any impact because of poor placement or savage editing in the press?
- A local extension officer who can 'scuttle' great ideas with a word of indifference?
- A great demonstration have no impact because of a poor attendance, pre-publicity or post-publicity? Or simply because it is too radical to be adopted?

A properly constructed, integrated programme of advertising, public relations and field work based on quantitative objectives and market research is the most effective way to do the job.

This brings us to the next technique. Let us review first:

- create the environment where people will demand change of themselves;
- recognize that the barriers lie beyond awareness;
- decide on the objectives;
- do the market research;
- plan a programme not an activity.

A programme may include many elements:

INDIRECT DIRECT

- advertising - field days
- advertorial - demonstrations
- editorial (submission and press liaison) - conferences, workshops
- literature - one-to-one calling direct mail and direct response
- audio or video tapes
- in-store or location displays

This is a wide range of activities, demanding a range of skills to conceive and execute. They are probably beyond the skills and abilities of sales or marketing persons or government extension workers in the field.

The sixth technique to overcome constraints to adoption: each sponsor of change must recognize their role.

Stick to your strengths. Do not try to be all things to all people, especially when it comes to delivering the goods. Government agencies seldom engage private companies to do extension, and vice versa. Our experience shows that when they do, great sensitivities can appear.

A product manager in industry knows the product, knows what he wants to achieve, knows the features and benefits, but leaves the packaging and communication of the product to the professionals.

In commercial extension or marketing, product managers do not set up:

- in-house public relations;
- in-house advertising;
- in-house design or artwork;

- in-house printing.
- So, to the final technique.

Distil the facts to given an identifiable product

- Package it properly
- Position it clearly
- Price it competitively
- Make a profit

The adoption of any new technique, product of system in farming involves a change in behaviour for individuals, groups or communities.

A planned approach is best. A premeditated, objectives-orientated approach is needed.

Sponsors of change can overcome constraints to adoption by understanding what determines behaviour. Market research is essential.

Adherence to simple principles will ensure success. Sponsors of change must focus their attention on objectives for behaviour in the target group much more than objectives for the behaviour of themselves.

The techniques to overcome constraints to adoption are:

- create the environment and circumstances where the targets will demand change of themselves;
- recognize that most of the barriers to adoption lie beyond awareness;
- decide on the behavioural objectives;
- do the Market Research;
- plan a programme not an activity;
- recognize your role;
- distil, Packaging, Positioning, Pricing, Profit.

If these principles are followed, success is assured in "Research and Extension. Delivering the goods."