

Integrated marketing of extension messages lifts adoption

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Summary. With a budget of \$0.25M. we examined the value of integrated marketing to rapid adoption of extension messages. The target group was 750 wheatgrowers around Moree (NSW), whose soils are generally deficient in nitrogen after decades of continuous cropping with wheat. A similar number of farmers in Dalby (Qld) provided a control group. Using commercial advertising on television, radio and press, the campaign's message was to urge farmers to grow a patch of lucerne "to prove to themselves that lucerne gives more high protein wheat". We measured, by mail survey, attitudes and practices regarding wheat and lucerne, before and after the campaign. Preliminary data suggests success with this approach to extension and points to the need for good one-to-one backup to exploit the potential interest that advertising creates.

Introduction

Over the last live years, organisations funding agricultural extension and research appear to have become obsessed with the need for better information transfer to farmers. The argument is that if farmers aren't adopting the technology we devise, then our communication strategies are somehow at fault. It follows, therefore, that improved communications will result in rapid and widespread adoption. But does it?

Wanting farmers to take-up the latest technology is desirable; that many don't respond should hardly be cause for brow-beating. In other professions as well, we hear the same complaint: clients really aren't doing what's best for them. A few examples illustrate the point. We don't buy enough Australian owned products and we don't follow all the rules for good health. Yet at the same time we expect our clients to follow our advice.

A more realistic view is to expect relatively small increments in uptake of technology, rather than the quantum leap. An increase in adoption of desirable technology by just a small but important percentage of farmers can be a significant achievement and it can translate into benefits to those farmers and their communities worth millions of dollars. Science rejoices at a yield increase of 10%. Yet getting one-in-ten farmers to change is not given similar respect.

Operation Quality Wheat (OQW), a nationwide extension campaign, demonstrates the significant gains extension can make. In Northwest NSW for example, the focus of the Northern OQW Working Party, nitrogen fertiliser sales rose almost 300% (2) during the five-year campaign (1987-92). Independent data from the Rural Development Centre at University of New England (Lees, pers. comm.) showed that 10% of wheat farmers started using nitrogen fertiliser for the first time only in the last two years. Getting farmers to use nitrogen to increase average wheat yields and lift grain protein content was a key message of the OQW campaign. The campaign worked, and no-one rejoiced!

A follow-on project, funded jointly by GRDC, NSW Agriculture and agribusinesses, set out to demonstrate the value of integrated marketing to get rapid adoption. Our reasoning was, that if OQW could succeed using traditional approaches to extension, what might we achieve using innovation? Commercial organisations spend billions of dollars each year on integrated marketing to capture or maintain market share. Presumably it works. But we don't use it to 'sell' extension messages. So we ran a commercial-scale demonstration to show that integrated marketing, when based around a strong advertising campaign, would hasten adoption of technology by farmers. The study targeted the northwest of NSW with a concentration of messages to 750 wheatgrowers around Moree during 1992/93.

Methods

Preparation

Having formed the idea of using commercial-scale advertising (TV, radio, press) as the platform in the innovation, it took us two years to get funds (\$181,000 cash. \$69,000 in-kind) for the project. A seeding grant of \$80,000 from the GRDC enabled us to approach other sponsors for the rest of the money. We found sponsors very willing to join forces. Our sponsors were: Australian Wheat Board. Incitec Ltd, John Deere, Telecom Australia, Prime Television, Moree Radio, DDB Needham WorldwideAdvertkino and *Australian Grain* magazine.

The next step was to home-in on a target group (Moree wheatgrowers), and with the help of agronomists and other interested people, devise the target behaviour that would become the focus of the campaign. This was challenging and took several months to do. The decision we reached was that we wanted to encourage farmers to grow a patch of lucerne (20 ha) on their exhausted wheat soils to prove to themselves that lucerne gives more high protein wheat. Alternative messages we might have used were to use more bagged nitrogen or crop a grain legume. However, we perceived problems with both: the former being too expensive the latter highly susceptible to market vagaries.

Our market research among the target group themselves confirmed both the timeliness and necessity for such a behavioural change. Meanwhile advertisements were finalised and tested with growers themselves. as was the content of an information kit farmers would get by responding to the campaign via a toll-free 008 number or freepost mailing card (in *Australian Grain* magazine). The kits focussed just on *establishing* lucerne successfully. Market research suggested this was a major obstacle in getting farmers to grow lucerne. The kit contained a five-minute video, a 30-minute cassette of farmers talking about lucerne, a simple step-by-step brochure and two NSW Agriculture AgFacts on growing lucerne. We used a professional advertising company to devise our strategy. and always consulted target clients themselves before implementing those strategies.

Advertising strategy

Phase one of the campaign began in September 1992 with release of a song *on* Moree radio. It was written specifically for the campaign to encourage a favourable attitude by farmers to growing wheat. Shortly after, the first of two commercials appeared on television (mainly the Prime network). Using the chorus from the song, this 30 second commercial was designed to 'massage' wheatgrowers to feel good about their participation in the wheat industry. The commercial's slogan was: *'Watch the best grow better'*. There was no other message. After three weeks, a second commercial replaced the first and specifically targeted the lucerne message. The slogan was: *Watch the best grow better with lucerne'*, and invited farmers to respond to the 008 number to get the five information kit. The second commercial ran for four weeks. This was followed by four weeks of radio where three 30-second commercials were aired just on Moree radio. Again the slogan was: *'Watch the best grow better with lucerne'*, and invited response to the 008 number. Two commercials appeared in the Moree newspaper concurrent with television advertising. A reply-paid mailing card was inserted in *Australian Grain* concurrent with the radio use.

Phase two commenced in February, and essentially duplicated the first phase except that both television commercials were replaced by a third. This change in strategy occurred to increase response rates to the 008 number and to be more timely in message content as decisions about sowing were imminent. Originally we had planned to simply replay existing commercials; there was no change to timing aspects of the strategy. However, feedback from clients suggested some discontentment with those commercials. so having the funds, we decided to shoot a third commercial. This commercial was more ruthless in message content. pointing out the realities of not making the change to lucerne.

Evaluation.

To test the effectiveness of the campaign, all 750 wheatgrowers in two Moree shires (Yallaroi and Moree Plains) were surveyed, by mail, about their attitudes and practices regarding lucerne and wheat, both before and after the campaign. A similar number of wheatgrowers from around Dalby (Old) provided the control group, not exposed to any of the media campaign. Farmers were first surveyed in July 1992,

some 4-6 weeks before the campaign started. They were surveyed again in July 1993, well after wheat sowing, by which time lucerne sowings would have finished also. Statistical analyses (in progress) will measure the success of the campaign in getting more Moree farmers to grow lucerne.

There were several other performance indicators as well. from which we gauged success of the campaign. These included responses to the 008 number and mailing cards, sales of lucerne seed, and enquiries to field agronomists.

Results and discussion

At the time of writing this paper, only phase one of the campaign is complete. So we limit discussions to performance indicators available at the time. The choice of message for the advertising campaign was particularly challenging. Three subjects were contenders: cereal rotation, grain legume rotation, and a lucerne rotation. Through our discussions with farmers and agronomists, it became evident that the lucerne message promised farmers most benefit (1); at the same time it wasn't so subject to the vagaries of market forces. (Understand we were targeting a change in behaviour 12 months after ideas were finalised).

Through using simple messages, advertising works quickly and forcefully. The notion of getting farmers to grow lucerne (many for the first time) didn't lend itself readily to an advertising approach. Compared with changing varieties or using fertiliser, there's a lot more behavioural implications in changing to lucerne. And from the scientific viewpoint, there are several additional and specific caveats associated with lucerne husbandry, like soil type, variety and pest control. Nonetheless, we believed that to demonstrate the effectiveness of integrated marketing in getting rapid adoption, we needed to focus on a fairly complex behavioural change, rather than something akin to changing brand preferences.

By the end of the first phase of the campaign, 218 people had requested the information kit. One hundred and twenty people responded to the 008 number and 98 to the mailing cards. Many of these (75%) were outside the target area of Moree (target in the sense of statistical evaluation only). This result was expected given that Prime television has a wide regional audience reach, and that *Australian Grain* goes to most cereal farmers. At the start of the advertisements we had no idea of what level of response to expect. Hearing about response rates from other information providers, as opposed to commercial merchandisers, suggests ours was reasonable, especially given that just within the target group. 7.3% of farmers responded.

In other words, the advertisements successfully motivated one in fourteen farmers to seek more information on growing lucerne to improve their wheat yields and protein levels. The information itself was not new, it had been readily available to farmers all the time at any NSW Agriculture office.

As a performance indicator, we were encouraged by this response for two reasons. First, we believed that by focusing more on the other aspects of integrated marketing (one-to-one, press releases, field days and the like), we could double the response rate in the second phase of the campaign. Were we able to trigger a response in one-in-five farmers in the target area, this would be a remarkable feat in extension indeed, remembering that at the time of the study, 70% of target farmers were not growing lucerne (Lees. pers. comm.). And second, the economics of using integrated marketing in extension started to become attractive.

Because this was a research study and not simply a commercial campaign, our costs were considerably higher than normally expected (about double). Also, the campaign, because of its generic message is transportable, being as applicable elsewhere in Australia as to northwest NSW. The cost-effectiveness of using this innovative strategy. then, to motivate farmers becomes very attractive indeed. An enquiry from an interested person hungry for information makes the work of advisory staff so much more effective. Of course, our definitive measure of success will be from the statistical analysis showing how many farmers actually made the change to growing lucerne (data unavailable as yet).

Regarding response rates to the various media, by far the greatest response (76% of responses to the (X)8 number) came front television. Commercials appeared on television 68 times each week, a good many of which were in prime viewing time. Radio, with an average of 24x30 second advertisements each week. drew a surprisingly small response. Such a high response to the mail cards was unexpected because the cards appeared quite late in phase one of the campaign by which time farmers had had ample opportunity to respond to the 008 number. This suggests either that target farmers did not see the commercials (unlikely) or had some difficulty with toll-free 008 numbers. We are testing this before starting phase two. to understand farmers' perceptions of the commercials, their themes and why some farmers have responded and why others did not, and why some media seem more or less ineffective.

Finally, despite our strong efforts to unite researchers, administrators, advisers and commercial Moree businesses behind the campaign. we feel that more could have been done in this regard. The advertisements provided those groups and people in Moree who service agriculture the opportunity to market the benefits of a major change which ultimately would give wealth to the farmers and indeed the community around Moree. We believe the project really has the capacity to create major change. Just how well it achieves that ambitious objective. depends in a large part on the extent that individuals unite behind the message and market that message to the target group. Nonetheless, we believe that integrated marketing as an extension tool has great potential in rural Australia. Not because of any novelty value but because of the technique itself. And this without saturating the advertising market.

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