

4-1-2006

Engaging Producers in Risk Management Education

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Recommended Citation

Gustafson, C. R. (2006). Engaging Producers in Risk Management Education. *The Journal of Extension*, 44(2), Article 24. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol44/iss2/24>

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April 2006 // Volume 44 // Number 2 // Ideas at Work // 2IAW4



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Engaging Producers in Risk Management Education

Abstract

The method of focus groups is used to engage farmers, crop insurance agents, and lenders in a risk management education project. Workshop participants were invited to offer suggestions leading to improvement of potato insurance. However, this necessitated understanding of the existing program. Participants asked far-ranging questions about the existing program, creating a teachable moment. Material was also discussed after the session with someone else, a primary goal of the project.

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Broadly defined, Extension programming has been geared towards helping producers manage risk, whether the source of stress is disease, weather, or financial. It is ironic, though, that Extension faculty have struggled to engage producers in workshops devoted solely to risk management. A colleague in economics has often used a "bait and switch" tactic by teaming up with crop/livestock specialists and delivering risk management education in conjunction with other production programs.

The need to engage more producers in risk management education has recently been heightened when the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced another \$9 million request for risk management education proposals (USDA). This is in addition to monies that are available from regional risk management education centers. For example, the North Central Risk Management Education Center (NCRMEC) has funded 80 projects totaling \$1.2 million from 2001-04. Extension faculty have actively participated in these programs, sometimes delivering multiple programs within a single state. If future funding for risk management education continues at this rate, one has to question producers' continued interest in the subject.

Focus Groups as an Education Strategy

Two years ago, I became involved with crop insurance for potatoes and instantly recognized a need for additional risk management education. Potato crop insurance programs are among the most complicated, with special endorsements for seed, quality, processing quality, and storage. Few producers, agents, or lenders understood the program's intricacies and coverage provided. I was fortunate to obtain an NCRMEC grant to: 1) increase familiarity with unique features of the potato crop insurance program and 2) assist growers, agents, and lenders with evaluation of alternative program options.

My only real challenge was finding a way to motivate my target audience (producers, crop insurance agents, and lenders) to participate in another meeting!

Rather than invite them to another education meeting, I engaged them by requesting their input on several new program alternatives that USDA was considering. My reasoning was that, in order for them to provide thoughtful comments on any alternative, they had to first understand fundamentals of the existing program!

One hundred North Dakota potato growers were asked to participate in five focus groups that were designed to improve crop insurance provisions for potatoes. Use of focus groups is a relatively new

method for obtaining qualitative research data (Krueger & Casey, 2000). This slant was expected to increase program attendance and meeting interaction.

Each meeting started with an overview of the present potato crop insurance program, including a description of each endorsement. An understanding of these basic program features was necessary if participants were to make informed comments later. Time was left at the end of each topic for peer-to-peer discussion. This valuable interchange reinforced and extended participant knowledge, particularly if they were hesitant to formally raise questions about the base program. Each participant then ranked the importance of features contained in the base program. Being able to list and rank these features was the first targeted goal of the education program.

Next, several alternative program designs being contemplated by USDA-Risk Management Agency (RMA) and their merits were presented. Care was taken to not bias participants, but to objectively discuss implications for individual potato grower segments as well as the industry as a whole. Special attention was devoted to policies that increase opportunities for over-production and fraud. Again, at the conclusion of this presentation, participants ranked the importance of each policy alternative. Being able to evaluate and provide a reason for their decision was an indication that higher learning was taking place.

Finally, the highest form of learning was expected to take place when the participants shared and discussed program materials with someone else after the meeting. In other words, it caused them to think and share something they learned that was important to them. A telephone survey of participants was conducted 3 months after the sessions to determine the extent of this communication.

How did I engage agents and lenders? A similar novel slant was used to engage them as well. These groups are always interested in what producers are thinking. Thus, results of the producer focus meetings were tallied and presented to agents and lenders at their annual meetings. The opportunity to hear what program changes their customers prefer stimulated their interest in learning more about the intricacies of the potato crop insurance program.

Results

The strategy of using focus groups proved very successful. Over 85 producers participated in the five focus groups. Exit evaluations completed by participants ranked the overall program 4.00 (on a scale 1=poor, 5=excellent) and indicated it increased their awareness 4.04 (on a scale 1=none, 5=greatly). Overall, 92% of participants discussed the workshop's material with someone else, which was the primary goal of the risk management education project.

These forums differed from traditional workshops in several ways. First, the initial overview of the base program was intentionally brief to minimize "lecturing." Surprisingly, producers asked numerous questions at this stage, especially after results of the first exercise, asking them to rate the importance of features in the base program, was completed.

Second, the opportunity to provide input on program alternatives that directly affected them financially led to considerable discussion. Producers actively debated ramifications of alternative program designs. The group leader's challenge was to keep discussion on track and ensure that people who were less informed of program details could learn. Often, the leader had to stop discussion and comment, "This happens because language in that section of the base policy means . . ."

Third, discussion tended to be more far-ranging than in traditional workshops. When asking for producer input, the leader has to be prepared for questions on any potential topic. Fortunately, a technical expert who was knowledgeable on most facets of the base program and alternatives attended all sessions and adequately responded to impromptu questions raised

Finally, producers had the expectation that their comments were going to be used. At the end of the each alternative, a consensus of the discussion was agreed upon, and producers were assured that it would be provided to appropriate leaders in USDA and the potato industry (which it was).

Conclusion

The method of focus groups can be a useful means of engaging producers in Extension programming. The method can lead to both higher attendance and interaction among participants. Discussion leaders must be prepared for a wide range of responses and assure the group that their comments are valued.

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