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Using a Contest to Attract and Disseminate Innovative Production Practices

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Using a Contest to Attract and Disseminate Innovative Production Practices

Abstract
Sugarbeet growers have always been innovative. The Grower Idea Contest was initiated to attract and disseminate ideas that led to innovations resulting in improved production efficiency. Ideas were willingly shared and adopted by many growers. Adoption of ideas generally resulted in higher yields, economic savings, improved safety, and better quality of life for the growers and their communities. Extension educators in many fields can use such contests to encourage development and dissemination of innovative practices.

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Introduction

In eastern North Dakota and Minnesota, there are three sugar cooperatives where the growers own the land, machinery, and equipment for sugarbeet production and the factories for processing the sugarbeet. The sugar cooperatives are American Crystal Sugar Company, with five factories, and Minn-Dak Farmers Cooperative and Southern Minnesota Beet Sugar Cooperative, each with one factory. The cooperatives are comprised of 3,600 growers producing about 50% of U.S. beet sugar (Anon., 2002). The sugarbeet industry contributes $2.3 B in economic activity to the bi-state area (Bangsund & Leistritz, 1998).

Specialized sugarbeet machinery and equipment are manufactured by a small group of companies mainly in sugarbeet production states. Most growers modify their machinery and equipment to further improve production efficiency. In 1978, the Sugarbeet Research and Education Board of Minnesota and North Dakota (SBREB) initiated the Grower Idea Contest. The contest provided a forum whereby growers willingly submitted ideas to be shared with other growers. The ideas were disseminated at annual sugarbeet seminars and in the Sugarbeet Research and Extension Reports as information and for adoption or further modification and adoption by fellow growers.

Rules, Ratings, and Rewards

The grower idea contest was managed by a committee comprised of one grower and one management representative from each of the three sugar cooperatives and two Extension sugarbeet specialists. The SBREB funded the contest. In August, growers were invited to submit ideas they had successfully implemented in improving their production practices. The entry provided the following information:

- Title of idea;
- Description of the idea, how it came about, how it worked;
- Number of seasons and acres where idea was used;
- Cost of implementing the idea;
- Benefits in terms of financial savings, increased efficiency, improved safety; and

- Photographs that illustrated the idea.

Areas of production that were of particular interest included:

- Improving plant stand,
- Nitrogen management,
- Environmentally friendly practices,
- Energy savings,
- Reduced tillage systems,
- Equipment modifications,
- Maximizing yields,
- Improved safety, and
- Reducing harvest losses.

Growers generally submitted their ideas through their agriculturists who ensured that the entries followed requested guidelines. About 10 to 20 ideas were submitted annually. The contest committee rated all the ideas based on:

- Quality of the entry,
- Originality,
- Simplicity,
- Adaptability,
- Importance to the industry, and
- Economics.

Growers determined the winners by ranking the ideas presented at the annual winter seminars. Generous cash prizes were awarded to winners, who were recognized at the annual International Sugarbeet Institute (ISBI) attended by several thousand growers and allied industry representatives. The winning entries were also highlighted at the North Dakota State University and University of Minnesota exhibition booths at the ISBI. Agriculturists encouraged and assisted growers with good ideas to submit entries to the contest. Agriculturists who assisted entry winners also received cash prizes and were recognized. All ideas submitted, with permission by the entrants, were published in the annual Sugarbeet Research and Extension Reports.

Discussion

The Grower Idea Contest served to inform and educate growers of production practices that fellow growers had successfully implemented. Some of the ideas were further developed and commercialized. Most successful ideas were usually very quickly and widely adopted by growers and became part of sugarbeet production practices. Some examples of grower ideas widely adopted in the industry include the use of mud removers on wheels of trucks at harvest and the "Safety-T Pull" used in safely pulling machines and equipment stuck in fields. Some growers modified ideas to suit their particular situation. Growers interested in a particular idea would contact the developer of the idea through the Extension sugarbeet specialists or field agriculturists.

Sugarbeet acreage in Minnesota and North Dakota increased by over 250% from the early 1970s to 2003. Growers were able to cope with the increased acreage by quickly adopting mechanization. The Grower Idea Contest played a significant role in growers sharing ideas quickly, which enhanced mechanized activities in sugarbeet production (Youngquist, 1989).

The attributes of the Grower Idea Contest that contributed to its success are as follows.

- The ideas were developed and proven by fellow growers.
- The contest was voluntary. Growers willingly shared their ideas that benefited other growers.
- Growers were interested in The Grower Idea Contest; the contest was a well-attended feature at all winter seminars.
- Sugarbeet growers generally very quickly adopted new and proven ideas, practices and technology.
- Because most growers were shareholders, all benefited from improvements in the industry.

Possible Usefulness of Contests for Educators

- Educators could use contests to share tried and proven practices, skills, or technology with clientele having similar interests.
- Contests could be planned and implemented to attract the attention and develop interests of particular target groups. For example, if a low income group of clients were interested in using a low carbohydrate diet, a contest could focus on developing and judging recipes of low carbohydrate, low cost meals that are well presented and tasty.
- Contests could be used to provide possible solutions to specific situations. For example, educators working with organic producers could develop a contest to share techniques or methodologies used to manage specific problems, such as pest control.

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