

Multimedia Campaigns in Agricultural Extension

There would be very few agricultural extension staff who have not looked enviously at the success of commercial marketers in bringing about behavioural change. In the early 1990s, the Rural Development Centre had the opportunity to evaluate the impact of a multimedia promotion campaign directed to wheat growers. The evaluation was complicated by the occurrence of a severe drought in the years after the campaign, but the findings were still encouraging.

Background

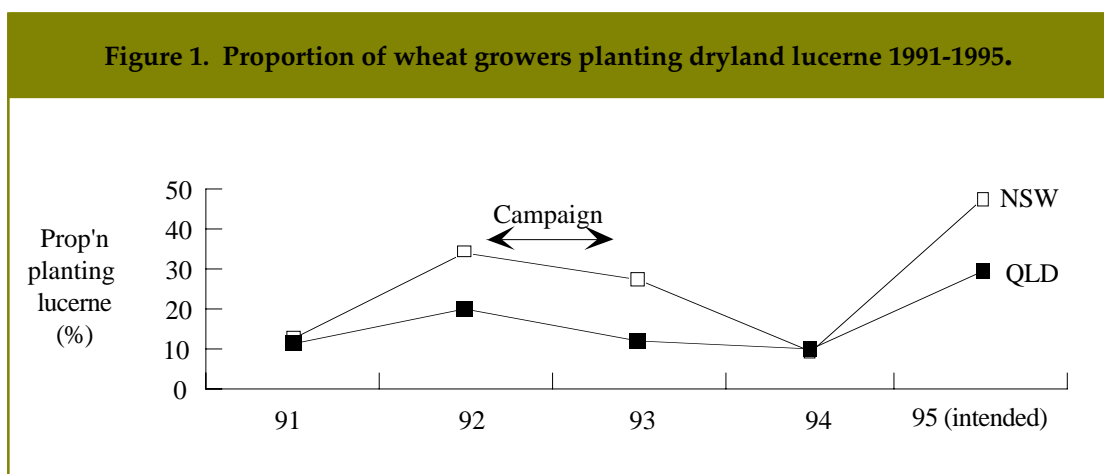
Between August 1992 and April 1993, a multimedia promotional campaign was undertaken by NSW Agriculture to encourage wheat growers in the northern NSW wheat belt to introduce dryland lucerne pastures in rotation with wheat. The campaign included three television commercials, a jingle, radio interviews, and articles in local newspapers and grower magazines. The campaign publicised a 008 number that could be rung to obtain a free kit (the Lucerne Up kit) that contained a video, audio tapes and an Agfacts publication on lucerne.

The evaluation used pre-campaign and post-campaign mail surveys of wheat growers in the northern NSW wheat belt and of a control group of wheat growers in southern Queensland. A total of 203 Queensland growers and 148 NSW growers responded to both surveys. A questionnaire similar to the post-campaign survey was also mailed to all who had requested the Lucerne Up kit and 200 responses were obtained.

Findings

The evaluation showed that about one in six growers in northern NSW became aware of the existence of the Lucerne Up kit, about half of these obtained a kit and about half of those with the kit reported that they had already put some of the ideas in the kit into practice. The aspect of the campaign most frequently recalled by respondents was the television commercials (31 per cent), followed by reports in newspapers and magazines (12 per cent). It is likely that the prolonged drought has retarded the translation of these levels of interest into detectable increases in plantings. As shown in Figure 1, there was no increase in the proportion of northern NSW growers planting dryland lucerne in 1993 that might be attributed to the campaign.

Figure 1. Proportion of wheat growers planting dryland lucerne 1991-1995.



The figures for the intended 1995 plantings suggest that, with an improvement in seasonal conditions, the adoption of dryland lucerne rotations would have been greater in northern NSW than in Queensland. This may be attributed, at least in part, to the campaign.

The evaluation demonstrated that a multimedia campaign can be effective in changing farmers' attitudes towards a new farming practice, and in motivating farmers to seek information that they would not have otherwise sought. The information that was packaged for the campaign had been available for a number of years, but only relatively limited adoption of dryland lucerne rotations had taken place in that time. When the drought broke in the period following the campaign, there was a marked increase in the proportion of farmers intending to plant lucerne and this increase was greater for farmers exposed to the multimedia campaign compared to the control group farmers exposed to normal levels of extension activity.

While the effects of severe drought have made it difficult to demonstrate that the campaign caused an increase in lucerne plantings, the favourable changes in attitudes and intentions measured in the evaluation can be validly attributed to the campaign and leave little doubt that a substantial increase in plantings would have occurred had the drought not intervened.

The absolute number of farmers who sought information about lucerne in the latter part of the campaign was far greater than could be expected from normal extension methods for a comparable agricultural practice. The use of professionally produced television commercials also appears to have been important in motivating the farmer response that was obtained.

The study has a number of implications for agricultural extension policy in Australia. The scaling down of government extension services poses a real threat to the sustainability of agriculture, insofar as these services have tended to concentrate on the areas that are unattractive to the commercial sector and that often contain a substantial public good component. Agricultural extension has tended to eschew the marketing methods of the commercial sector and it may be tempting to justify this by arguing that these methods will not work for the sorts of agricultural practices being promoted by the government extension services. However, this study has convincingly shown that modern marketing methods can work for agricultural practices such as dryland lucerne rotations that may not be highly attractive from a short term financial perspective, but nonetheless have a substantial public good component in maintaining the national resource base. This would suggest that there is good reason for government extension services to seriously consider using techniques such as integrated marketing.

Acknowledgements

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Further information:

Reeve, I., Lees, J., Price, I. and O'Donnell, L. 1995.
Evaluation of the 1992-93 Promotional Campaign.
Report to NSW Agriculture. Armidale: The Rural
Development Centre. 22pp.

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