

Does the hard copy newsletter still have a place in today's electronic based information systems?

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Abstract. Historically the Department of Agriculture and Food has produced the Agricultural Memo as a technical newsletter that provides independent information to raise awareness and help create change. It is written differently to most news publications that are out of date tomorrow by publishing information that is relevant for several weeks. The question is whether the hard copy, or printed version, still has a place in today's electronic communication systems. Farmers attending local crop update seminars within the Central Agricultural Region were surveyed and they all thought that the newsletter was very useful. Seventy seven per cent preferred to receive the hard copy, or printed word, rather than electronically via email. When asked the question in a different way, no one thought the department should stop producing the Agricultural Memo. These results suggest that despite today's technology, where electronic communication is so widely used, providing relevant information via the hard copy is still important and should not be ignored as an extension tool.

Background

Historically, each district office of the Department of Agriculture and Food, Western Australia has published its own Agricultural Memo, a printed newsletter circulated within agricultural districts to provide relevant information mainly to farmers but also to farm consultants and agri-businesses (Plate 1).

Plate 1. Front page of the Agricultural Memo for the Lake Grace District, February 2009



As a department extension tool, the Agricultural Memo is a technical publication that provides independent information to raise awareness and help create the right environment for change to occur. In some cases the Agricultural Memo may be directly attributed as being part of change, while for others it is one of the first steps in the 'raising of awareness' stage in readiness for change to occur at a later date.

The Agricultural Memo is the main method of communication used by the departments individual district offices, communicating relevant information, seasonal prompts, local news and research advice to its clients, especially farmers. Each district office in the Central Agriculture Region of Western Australia produces its own newsletter based on what is relevant to the district at the time. It aims to provide relevant, timely, technical and up-to-date information that raises awareness and increases the adoption of new technology, innovation, farming systems and research findings.

This Agricultural Memo is written differently to most news publications, such as daily newspapers, which are out of date tomorrow and are usually discarded after only one or two

days. Even rural weekly newspapers tend to be out-dated and discarded within a week, or when the next one arrives. The Agricultural Memo has information designed to stay relevant for several weeks or even months.

In a survey carried out by the department's Beth Green (2005), newsletters were considered by 40 per cent of producers as being a valued source of information that is used regularly. Although rural press and ABC radio were highly rated as ideal ways to provide important information to farmers, the department's Agricultural Memo was also singled out with 53 per cent of farmers saying they refer to the newsletter for information when it came to making some decisions. The survey also found that although the internet is used to browse for farming-related information (other than the weather) it is not often used in the final decision-making process.

Another recent survey by the department found that the internet is widely used by farmers to actively find information (Parsons 2009). This is different to the Agricultural Memo which is used to proactively raise awareness, provide prompts or inform farmers about new research results before they might even think of using the information. Hence the internet is often used in a reactive way, whereas the Agricultural Memo is used as a proactive extension tool.

The question is whether the hard copy, or printed version, of Agricultural Memo still has a place in today's modern world that uses so many electronic communication systems. This prompted the extension team at the Narrogin and Lake Grace District Offices to review the Agricultural Memos value for the farmers in the district.

This paper discusses why the hard copy newsletter is still important to extension programs in the ever increasing email-based electronic news delivery systems.

Method

A series of questions were asked at the Department of Agriculture and Food District Crop Updates held during March 2009 at Hyden, Corrigin and Narrogin, Western Australia. Crop Updates are half day seminars showcasing relevant research recently carried out within the department and industry. These were run by the departments Narrogin and Lake Grace farming systems advisory team. People attending the events were asked five questions about how they preferred to receive the Agricultural Memo and if they found it useful. One hundred and thirteen people answered the survey out of 146 who attended. Not everyone answered the questions because some were partners in the same enterprise, meaning only one person answered, while others chose not to answer. The questions asked were:

1. Do you still find the department's Agricultural Memo useful?
2. Would you rather receive the Agricultural Memo by hardcopy or by email?
3. When the Agricultural Memo arrives in the mail whereabouts in the house is it kept during the first week or two? Where does it go to after that?
4. During the last 12 months, how many people went back to the Agricultural Memo for information several weeks or months after they had received it?
5. How many people feel the department should stop sending Agricultural Memo as it is of no use any longer?

The questions were asked verbally during the transition of speakers at each crop update event. Farmers were asked to raise their hand to indicate Yes or No in answer to the question, and these answers were counted and recorded as data.

Results

All attendees at the three district Crop Update events said that they found the Agricultural Memo useful for obtaining information, with 20 per cent saying they had gone back looking for specific information well after receiving it, up to 12 months later in some cases (Table 1).

Seventy seven per cent preferred to receive the hard copy, or printed version, while the rest preferred it electronically via email. Many people commented that the preference for a hard copy was because they could take it anywhere in the house for reading at any time.

When asked where the Agricultural Memo was kept once it arrived, most people said it was kept in the kitchen or living room area for a week or two, with some saying it made its way to the toilet. It is assumed that this was for extra reading. Many said that after a week or so it moved to their office and it was often filed for future use.

When asked the same question a different way (question 5), no one thought that the department's local district office should stop producing the Agricultural Memo.

Table 1. Questions asked at the 2009 District Crop Updates regarding the department's Agricultural Memo

	1. Is AgMemo still useful?		2. How do you prefer to receive AgMemo?		3. Where is AgMemo kept?		4. Referred to in the last 12 months?	5. Should we stop sending AgMemo ?
	Yes	No	Hard copy	Email	In the 1st week or two	After that		
Hyden	20	0	19	1	Kitchen/dining area	Office/toilet and eventually filed	5	0
Corrigin	69	0	33	8	Kitchen/dining area	Office/toilet and eventually filed	15	0
Narrogin	24	0	9	9	Kitchen/dining area	Office/toilet and eventually filed	6	0
TOTAL	113	0	61	18			26	0
Per cent	100	0	77	23			20	0

Conclusion

One of the roles of extension is to transfer information to raise awareness, which will lead to change at some time in the future. The Agricultural Memo is just one of several extension tools based on the written word.

The survey results from farmers attending district Crop Update seminars suggest that despite today's technology where electronic communication is quick and widely used, relationship building and information transfer via the printed word in publications like the Agricultural Memo is still important and should not be ignored in everyday extension programs.

At the moment, the printed format of the Agricultural Memo is still a powerful way of communicating with farmers. This is mostly because it allows the reader to take it anywhere in the house. There is no doubt that some prefer it electronically and this should also be catered for wherever possible.

References

- Green B 2005, 'Efficiency in extension – locating and accessing the target audience', *Ovine Observer* (Department of Agriculture and Food newsletter), 32: 7–9.
- Parsons C 2009, 'Is the Department of Agriculture and Food still a primary source of cropping information?', in *Proceedings of the 2009 Perth Agribusiness Crop Updates, Feb. 24-25 2009*, Department of Agriculture and Food, Perth, WA, Australia, pp 309-311.