

Learning from public private partnerships in extension - Case studies of joint initiatives with agribusiness

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Introduction

Agricultural extension is likely to continue to see rationalisation of people resources in this discipline based on the perceived separation of public and private benefits. This applies in both production extension and extension on sustaining the natural resources of agriculture. However, if there are priority agricultural extension requirements that would deliver both public and private benefits there could be excellent opportunities for public private partnerships in extension. The Grains Industry for example has, in the 2008 Environmental Plan (Blumenthal et al, 2008), identified key priorities for resource use efficiency (e.g. of water, nutrients, energy) which could deliver both public and private benefits.

Of the successful agricultural extension initiatives in Western Australia, there have been a number that have been effective in engaging agribusiness. However, achieving the involvement of agribusiness in any joint initiative is the result of addressing a number of critical success factors. Future success in agribusiness engagement is more likely through addressing critical success factors identified from studying relevant successful public private partnerships and alliances in agricultural extension. Key questions are: 1. Have joint initiatives delivered increased benefits in the provision of extension services; 2. What have been the critical success factors; and 3. What have been the lessons of value?

Purpose and scope of this study:

The purpose of studying joint extension initiatives was to identify the critical success factors and the key lessons from current initiatives. This information could then be applied in planning regional joint extension initiatives currently being considered.

Scope: This study utilises existing reviews of joint extension initiatives to identify critical success factors. There is a large volume of outstanding reviews of current joint initiatives so this study is not undertaking new research to evaluate initiatives. This study is focussed on identifying critical success factors to guide extension planning in the Southern Agricultural region of Western Australia in particular.

Methodology

Step 1. A review of joint initiatives (including the State Agribusiness Crop Updates and Industry extension initiatives) updated to reassess the critical success factors. This is made possible because most joint initiatives have had some structured evaluations. For instance, the Agribusiness Crop Updates has had three different external and independent market research groups (AgKnowledge P/L 1998, Frost et al. 1997 and 1998, and Travener Research 2008 and 2009) evaluate the joint initiative. This has provided the opportunity for longitudinal studies across more than a decade. Western Australia's Agribusiness Crop Updates have successfully operated every year from 1996 (14 years) and remains the premier annual event in crop extension.

Step 2. Undertake consultation and semi-structured interviews with five leaders of joint extension initiatives. This step includes the study of current published evaluations.

Step 3. This involves the identification of critical success factors and key lessons from joint extension initiatives. For example, has the engagement of agribusiness in the Crop Update process been a critical success factor and what are the key learnings?

Step 4. This involves addressing identified critical success factors while undertaking extension planning for Southern Agricultural region initiatives (*Planning for impact*, Crisp 2007). This step enables the testing of the study findings to determine if they improve the extension outcomes.

Results

Step 1. A review of joint extension initiatives: The Agribusiness Crop Updates

The Agribusiness Crop Updates is a joint initiative and a public private partnership involving DAFWA, GRDC and agribusiness. The Crop Updates Working Group has directed the Agribusiness Crop Updates every year since 1996. This group has membership drawn from

consultants, commercial agronomists and government in an active alliance of the public and private service sectors. It was established as DAFWA was launching a new Corporate Strategy "Focus for the Future" (1996) which recognised the need for public private partnerships to better deliver outcomes. The review of information delivery processes (Cooke 1998) confirmed this need.

Has this joint initiative successfully engaged agribusiness? The answer is yes, based on various measures. Measurements include the level of participation in the Crop Updates each year by agribusiness from 1996 to 2009. Agribusiness involvement has grown and for more than a decade has been >40% (see Table 1), a good balance with state agency participation remaining around 40%. Each year has averaged over 300 participants. The growth in participation of the non-government research sector (*see Table 1) is also a key indicator of successful engagement of agribusiness.

Table 1: Comparison of 2009 and 1999 Crop Updates: % participation by sector

Agribusiness Crop Updates- analysis of participation	2009 Updates Number and % of total attendees in each sector	2009 Updates % of respondents from each sector in survey	1999 Updates Number and % of total attendees in each sector
Service sector or role			
Commercial consultant/agronomist	97 (28%)	32 %	109 (31%)
Independent consultant	31 (9%)	9%	37 (10%)
Research provider (non-Government or University)*	44 (13%)	9%	32 (9%)
University research	14 (4%)	6%	17 (5%)
DAFWA Researchers	44 (13%)	19%	51 (14%)
DAFWA Development Officers	37 (11%)	17%	38 (11%)
Grower group delegates	27 (8%)	4%	28 (8%)
Other (media, GRDC and VIP's)	48 (14%)	4 %	42 (12%)
TOTAL no. of participants surveyed		140 surveyed (41%)	156 surveyed (44%)
TOTAL no. attending Crop Updates	343 attendees		354 attendees

Source: Taverner Research (2009) and Frost F., (1999)

So why does agribusiness participate in the joint Updates? Because the Working Group has been focussed on determining client needs and ensuring needs are addressed, the four independent consultancies have addressed this question in their studies. The most recent study by Taverner Research P/L (2009) has produced results consistent with the other evaluations of the Crop Updates by Frost (1997 and 1998), Cooke (1998), Frost (1999), Crawford (2000) and Trigwell (2008) but also did further segmentation of the target client groups.

This 2009 study surveyed 140 participants including agribusiness (agronomists and consultants) with more than ten years experience and agribusiness (agronomists and consultants) with ten years or less experience. Experienced agronomists and consultants are already across the new emerging knowledge on current issues and gain most from interaction (contrast new agribusiness- see table 2 below). This is a significant trend because the Crop Updates have now been operating for more than ten years and the joint initiative has been responding to changing needs.

Table 2: Extract from research on main reason for participating in the 2009 Crop Updates

Main reason for attending the 2009 agribusiness crop updates (ten other reasons also identified)	Agribusiness (experienced)		Agribusiness (new)		Grower group delegate		Sub total (from 140 surveyed)	
	%	no	%	no	%	no	%	no
Current issues in the crop industry (gain knowledge)	27	8	36	10	33	2	31	20
Networking opportunities with other attendees	30	9	14	4	17	1	22	14
Future issues in the crop industry that will or may impact the industry	23	7	25	7	17	0	23	15

Source: Taverner Research P/L Report (2009)

Why is networking so highly valued? Because the Updates are across sectors (including public and private research sectors) networking is ranked as the main reason for attendance by a large number of agribusiness and especially by the experienced agribusiness. From the studies this is a high value because the Crop Updates involve key players from across sectors (private and public, commercial and government, academic and industry). This is in contrast to much of the activity within peer groups and professional associations. A critical success factor then is the level of cross sector engagement – if the Crop Updates does not achieve this then it will quickly lose value. The joint extension initiative does regularly evaluate whether it is meeting the needs of agribusiness (see table 2 above). Another critical success factor is meeting the “what is in it for me” imperative. A related critical success factor is the level of cross sector relationships achieved.

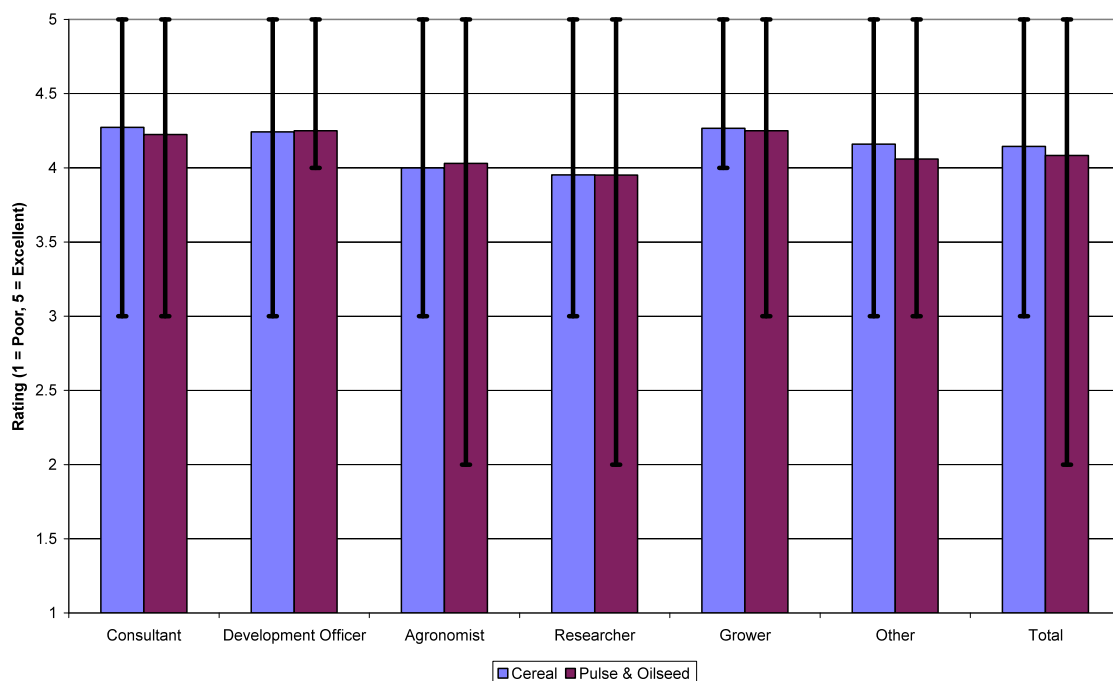
Relevance, timeliness and quality of presentations

Overall the relevance and quality of the presentations is perceived to be very good even by agribusiness. This addresses a third critical success factor on whether it is perceived that the best and most relevant science is being presented. The high overall rating of presentations by each sector (see Figure 1, Frost (1999)) is confirmed by the subsequent studies of Crawford (2000) and Trigwell (2008 and 2009); however each year there is wide variance on individual presentations. The Crop Updates Working Group is increasingly investing in ensuring the best and most relevant science is presented, independent of which sector is seeking to present.

Step 2 and 3 Undertake consultation and semi-structured interviews

Consultation and interviews are conducted with the leaders of joint extension initiatives that have engaged agribusiness. The objective is the identification of critical success factors and key requirements. The results of these interviews of five leaders are shown in Table 3, with the critical success factors identified being able to be grouped into three key learnings for engaging agribusiness in joint extension initiatives. A critical success factor identified is to what level the Agribusiness Crop Updates are acknowledged as extending the best and most relevant science in a timely manner (in February each year giving time for agribusiness and agencies to prepare pre-season updates for client groups).

Figure 1: Relevance and quality of presentations as rated by sector groups



Source: Frost (1999)

Table 3. The grouping of critical success factors for extension alliances into three imperatives

6.	<p>KEY REQUIREMENT The need to address the “what’s in it for me” imperative for the stakeholders from both the public and private service sectors (but especially the agribusiness sector). Critical success factors mentioned were:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to provide relevant information for <u>current</u> issues (5 mentions) • Need to provide a cross sector forum for essential networking (5) • Need to segment client base and customise delivery to each (4) • Need to proactively manage client branding of original information requirements (3)
7.	<p>KEY REQUIREMENT Need for effective cross sectional relationships - individual relationships as well as organisational relationships. These are required to ensure continuity and effective engagement between the public and private sectors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need responsive relationships that are across sectors – examples of responsive relationships were quoted such as enabling the correction of the perception that the Crop Updates were less relevant to commercial agronomists in 1999 (5). • Multi-sector participation to enhance agribusiness networking (3).
8.	<p>KEY REQUIREMENT Strong commitment to the core ideal of only extending the best science with the most relevance - if this sense of purpose is shared and agreed then private: public competition is not destructive and does ensure best return on extension investment (4 mentions).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong adherence to criteria for selecting information to be presented at the Crop Updates rather than an information “dump”(5) • The subsequent level of attribution and acknowledgement of original sources of information (Cooke 2001) remain a critical success factor for this joint extension initiative. A continuing issue with stakeholders. (4).

Step 4. Incorporate the key requirements in planning Southern Agricultural region extension initiatives.

The results of the study (key learnings and critical success factors) were applied in planning extension initiatives with agribusiness in the Southern agricultural region of Western Australia. These are specifically aimed at level 2 changes within the public private regional service capacity (Crisp 2009) –change in knowledge and understanding.

Forming relationships (across public and private service sectors). Consultations were undertaken with agribusiness during 2008-09 following on from studies undertaken in 2007-08 (Anderton 2008). It became apparent during the consultations that the regional agribusiness intentions are to address future issues as well as issues for the current season - “the vast majority of our clients are now able to lift their planning horizons from just a focus on 12 monthly cash flows to medium term business plans” (Evans and Grieve – pers. comm. 2009). This relationship development led to the first planned extension activity having 30 bankers, consultants, agronomists and marketers participating. Twelve participants did not previously have more than one regular contact with DAFWA personnel. The Southern Agricultural Region Linkage Group has been formed to strengthen linkages between DAFWA and agribusiness.

Addressing the “what is in it for me” imperative with agribusiness clients. Agribusiness identified a need to determine positions on key issues such as climate change, genetically modified crops, chemical resistance, peak phosphorus and fertiliser efficiency, and new opportunities (e.g. energy generation). These are issues that will/could impact on medium-term farm business planning, succession planning and investment planning. Regional agribusiness was keen to test current assumptions with multi sector interaction on new research and development information (e.g. for the private sector the need to confirm a position on the climate change issue based on best available science and regional information). This was a clear pathway to addressing the agribusiness imperative of “what is in it for me”.

Applying the “best science criteria”. This was the basis of the first extension activity – selecting the best climate science for the Southern Agricultural region Agribusiness Forum as part of a proposed ongoing series (co-hosted with agribusiness). A key result was the Changing Climates Agribusiness Forum held in the Southern Agricultural Region with 30 agribusiness attending of the 52 agribusiness contacted in the region (bankers, consultants, marketing specialists and industry agronomists). As part of the Forum a workshop was conducted to identify priority agribusiness needs for climate change adaptation which mapped out extensive opportunities for joint action and collaboration.

Conclusion

Three identified leads and the associated critical success factors have guided extension planning with agribusiness in the Southern Agricultural region of Western Australia.

KEY REQUIREMENT 1. The need to address the “what’s in it for me” imperative for the stakeholders from both the public and private service sectors (in particular agribusiness clients).

KEY REQUIREMENT 2. Need for effective cross sector relationships - individual relationships as well as organisational relationships.

KEY REQUIREMENT 3. Full industry engagement comes from strong commitment to the core ideal of only extending the best science with the most relevance.

The Changing Climates Agribusiness Forum is a precursor to ongoing joint initiatives with agribusiness. The most significant output in the regional application of the lessons from the study was the determination of the need for a joint extension initiative on managing seasonal variability as the lead to adaptation to climate change. Traditional extension approaches by competing individual sectors will not achieve practice change. Many in the farming community have inherent doubts on the science behind climate change (Evans et al) and an innovative extension approach in a joint initiative is being proposed with a focus on managing seasonal variability. The high participation rate by agribusiness (bankers, consultants, marketing specialists and industry agronomists) confirms the key lessons and critical success factors applied in extension planning. Joint initiatives such as the State Agribusiness Crop Updates are formulating changes for 2010 onwards.

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