



### FARM BUSINESS INFORMATION - WHERE DO FARMERS GET IT?

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I recently had an opportunity to spend a few days visiting with farmers in a small rural town in Missouri. I knew many of these farmers, indeed I had known some of them for many years. Thus it was both an opportunity to renew old acquaintances and gain some insight into farming conditions and problems in Missouri. The conversation with these farmers and among these farmers was typical farmer talk. How much did that cornfield by the railroad track make, and how are your soybeans turning out? Uppermost in all of the conversation was "What is the elevator paying for soybeans today?", and "What did the corn market do yesterday?"



Certainly these were items of concern to these farmers. Price and yield are important considerations in determining net farm income. Yet not once in their conversations about price did I hear any mention of pricing information other than what was obtained from the local elevator.

On my return to Pennsylvania I found myself wondering where these farmers obtained information on which they made their business decisions. Did they rely only on the local elevator for information on prices, on markets, and perhaps other crucial information such as varieties of seed, chemicals to use for weed control and etc. This is not to say they are wrong, if such is the case, for certainly the local elevator or farm supply center is an excellent source of information on farm inputs and commodity prices.

Perhaps my question should not be where do farmers get information as much as it should be where should they get information and how much. It seems to me that past events should supply farmers with a great deal of information that could be helpful. That means a farmer's own records -- on yields, prices received for commodities sold, fertilizer used, and weather conditions need to be considered. True these change from season to season (sometimes from week to week) but they still provide important information.

Another important source of information for farmers is friends and neighbors. In many farming communities this is the most important source. After all, most farmers rationalize -- my neighbor has the same interests and problems that I have. We grow essentially the same crops and have the same livestock enterprises and therefore what benefits and works well for my neighbor should work for me. While this is a logical approach, it is often an erroneous one and can lead to serious mis-

takes in farm business management decisions. It is important for farmers to consult with their neighbors and add the information they provide to their other sources of information. However, they should remember that each individual is different and what works for one farmer will not necessarily work for that farmer's neighbor.

Other important sources of information for farmers are farm magazines, newspapers, consulting services, and the farmers credit sources.

An important source of information that many farmers are often

unaware of is the Cooperative Extension Service. Often farmers are not fully aware of the depth of knowledge that their local extension agents have about farm and home operations. Also if the local county extension agents encounter a problem that they feel requires additional expertise they can call on specialists from the land grant university in their state for assistance. Thus, through their local county extension office, farmers have access to current information on the latest proven technology and research which can be applied and used on their farm.

Other important sources of information for farmers include the Soil Conservation Service and the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service. The Soil Conservation Service assists farmers in developing conservation plans for their farm. These plans often include contour strips, waterways, ponds, terraces, and field layout. The ASCS administers the various farm programs including Commodity Credit Corporation loans and conservation payments.

Another source of information that is becoming increasingly important is the video cassette. With more and more homes either

owning or having access to video tape players, video tapes become excellent tools for providing farm information which farmers can use at their leisure in their home.

Thus while there are many sources of information which the farmer can use, the question often arises as to which of these is the most important. In my judgment all of them are important and the successful farm operator will use all of them (plus some which I have probably omitted). There will be some sources of information which will carry greater weight than others. This is often determined by personalities and by the farmer's past experience with sources of information.

Having briefly discussed many of the sources of information available to farmers (hardly any of these were mentioned by the Missouri farmers), it seems to me another question is important. Are these various sources of information providing the information that farmers want? My 35+ years of work in farm management convinces me that these sources provide information that farmers need, however it may not always be in a form that is readily usable and easily understood.

In some situations some sources may supply too much information. By this I mean that sometimes the farmer has to look through or read too much material to find what he/she really wants to know. I am sure many people would argue that often the informational sources discussed don't supply enough, rather than too much. However I keep thinking about those Missouri farmers and the fact their major information sources appeared to be their neighbors and the local elevator. Why? I suspect it is because they only answered the questions asked and they answered them directly. While this is an approach that apparently pleases the farmer and satisfied their need, it leaves a serious void that many of the other informational sources do try to cover. What about alternatives?

For example, the farmer's neighbor may not be aware of alternatives and if so, may not mention them. The local elevator operator is not likely to tell the farmer that another elevator in a nearby town is paying 10 cents more per bushel for soybeans. Thus a key point in the information gathering process is some way of

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