

Internet Technology Aids Farmers

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ADAMSTOWN (Lancaster Co.) — "Farming With Technology," an educational event featuring seminars with computer-related topics, drew more than 40 farm operators, extension agents, business consultants, and EPA representatives here to Weaver Market's banquet facilities.

Sessions offered topics such as on-line, interactive computer training, locating on-line agricultural supplies and information, palmtop computers, field record software, better record-keeping ideas for dairy operations, and making field maps.

Technology As Farm Equipment

"Technology is just like any other piece of farm equipment," said Phoebe Bitler, Vista Farm. The Bitler family milks more

than 80 cows on their Fleetwood operation.

"Once you make the initial investment it is wise to find a trusted source to be your adviser," she said. "Having something in your possession that you don't know how to operate is completely worthless. Those dollars that you spend to pay a trusted someone is money well spent," she said. "Spend time and money right away to learn how to use it."

Also like other farm implementations, technology equipment needs regular maintenance, such as a virus scan, and updates to allow operators to get more and faster information.

E-mail and cell phones have become essential elements of the Bitler operation to gain and share information, she said. The Internet has offered them the ability to look for parts for the tractor

her son was restoring.

They were also able to become part of a global economic outreach program where the Bitlers got feed test results for a missionary in Mongolia. The Internet also allows them to put the pedigrees and photographs of their cattle on the Internet. The Bitlers keep records, pedigrees, and farm maps on the computer.

She has also used her computer and scanner for 4-H projects or gifts. This equipment cannot, however, replace handmade presents. "Technology is great but giving something that's a part of yourself is still a measure," she said.

Information Source

Bonnie Wenger, Wen-Crest Farms, and her husband Steve operate a livestock and crop farm in Schaefferstown. Wenger offered her ideas on finding information on the Internet. The www.Agribiz.com page, for example, offers markets and analysis and a daily update on LDP rates. Useful farm chemical information is available at www.greenbook.net. Weather conditions, news, and market analysis are found on Agweb.com.

Farm Service Agency programs and manuals are online at FSA.usda.gov.

The Wenger family has also had experience in marketing freezer beef on the Internet. Wenger recommends the avenue for a nonperishable product, as they found that beef was impractical to package and send long distances.

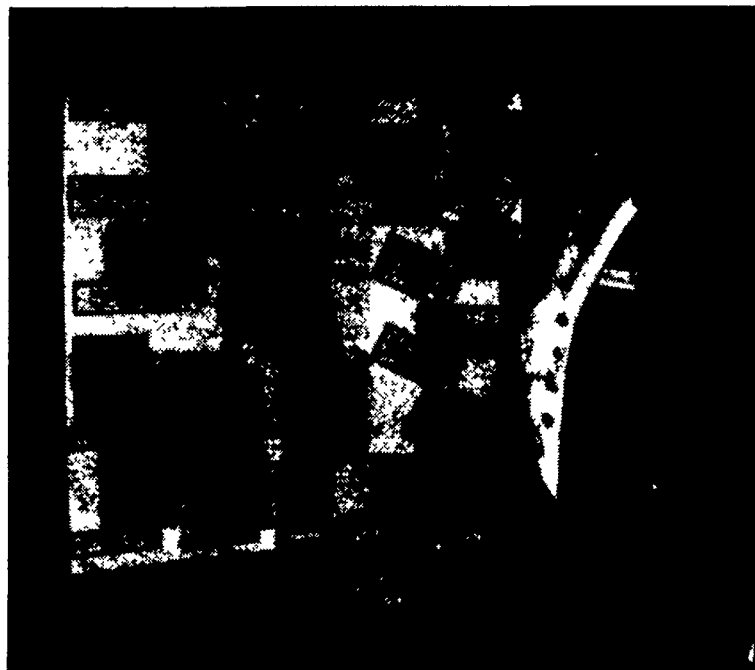
Representatives from Internet marketing company Sharp Innovations also shared Internet ideas. Alex Barga highlighted www.joefarmer.com, and www.agfind.com, www.agerize.com, and www.agrisurf.com as search engines that will help limit search

results to agricultural-related topics. Alex recommended formulating a question of what the searcher is looking for and identifying important concepts within the question to limit the number of results.

"The information is out there," he said. "If somebody doesn't have it on today they'll have it on tomorrow," he said.

Benchmarks

Since technology is important in gathering, synthesizing, and analyzing information, Brad Hilty, informa-



Phoebe Bitler, Vista Grande Farm, Fleetwood, offered her insights into farm technology during her presentation. She is standing beside a presentation board that features photographs and text created on their farm's computer.

tion management specialist with Penn State Dairy Alliance, detailed ways of using information to make operational decisions.

He emphasized the use of benchmarks, information management, and accurate record-keeping on the farm during his presentation.

A benchmark, said Hilty, is "how you are doing as compared to other business, or last year, or since you've made changes."

Once benchmarks are established, a producer can compare results to industry standards and use information (i.e., farm records) to make better management decisions.

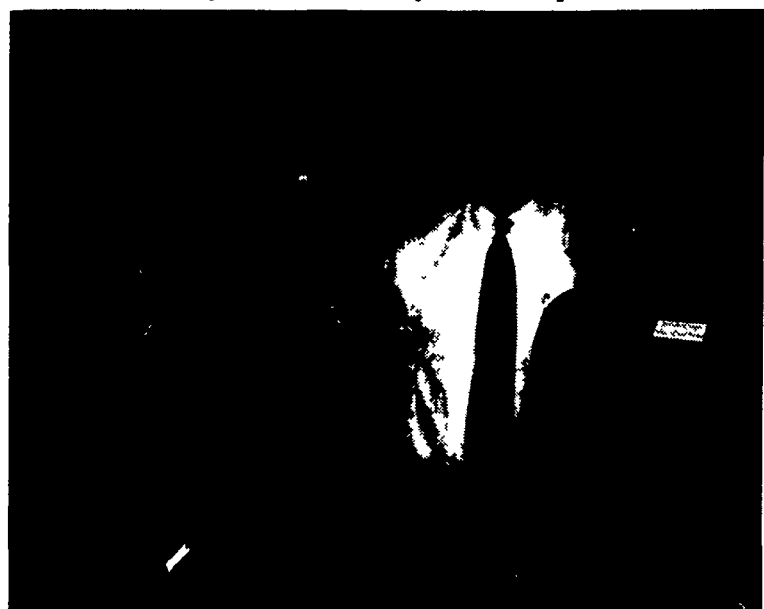
"Beware of averages," he said. "If you are shooting for average, you're setting yourself up to not be in business in the next ten years. It puts you in the danger zone. Look at what the top 15-20 percent are doing, because that's where you want to be."

With tighter management controls, farmers will reap profitability. "If you can measure it, you can manage it," he said. "You can collect all this data, but if you are not using it to make decisions, it's useless. Use it to get a better idea of how you are performing."

Accounting systems, production records, analysis systems, and advisors are sources of information.

As examples, Hilty highlighted the statistics of dairy businesses. In 1995, averages dairy businesses exhibited an average of 4.5 percent return on assets, while top herds checked in with an average of 15 percent return on assets.

In summary, good benchmarks require accurate data and accurate data requires sound data management, said Hilty, who encouraged producers to reconcile accounts on a monthly basis.



Joe Sharp, Jessica Forney, Alex Barga, Sharp Innovations, and Bonnie Wenger, Wen-Crest Farms, offered their ideas on locating agricultural supplies and information in their presentation.

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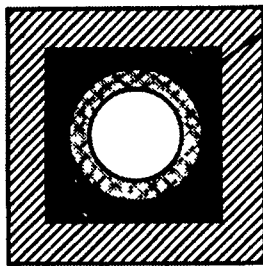
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