

Technology transfer: systems used by a Wairarapa farm consultancy firm

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Abstract

This paper outlines the systems of technology transfer used by a local farm management consultancy firm. The clientele of the firm is profiled along with the expectations of that clientele. The paper outlines the methods by which the firm receives technology input and the methods by which it transfers that technology. The evaluation of the success of that technology transfer is also described. The author emphasises the importance of technical competence and professional independence in the consultancy profession. He also outlines his philosophy on technology transfer. This philosophy maintains that agriculture is a people-based industry and that the most successful technology transfer will occur where the bearer of that technology has credibility and is a good communicator, whether he or she is a farmer, consultant or a scientist.

Keywords: client servicing, communication skills, farm discussion groups, management newsletter, people-based industry, professional independence, technical competence, "trickle-down" effect

Background

Support by Wairarapa farmers for the farm consultancy profession has always been strong.

Farm consultancy operates in a 'free market' based on a user pays system.

The number of well established consultants operating successfully would suggest Wairarapa Consultants are good at what they do. Technology transfer is **only** one part of a consultants role.

Farming is very much a people based industry. Business is done on a personal basis. The transfer of technology in farming occurs more readily through individuals or small groups than by any other means.

Consultants are people first and professionals second. Successful consultants rely on well developed "people skills" to relate to their clients, to gain their confidence, to perceive their needs and to help them to improve their own position. These skills are implicit to the process of technology transfer.

Commercial independence is an essential pre-requisite for professional consultants. Our clients expect us to provide advice which is technically correct and

independent of any commercial bias or personal involvement. The credibility of a consultant is very dependent on this professional independence.

This paper outlines how our consultancy firm sources its information, transfers it to their clients and evaluates its success in doing so.

The practice

D.O. Baker and Associates consists of David Baker as Principal and Chris Garland, **Nicky Orbell** and Geoff Croker as Associates. The core business of the firm is farm management consultancy, valuation and the publication of a farm management newsletter. The firm also manages a technology transfer programme for Wairarapa Farm Improvement Club and D.O. Baker & Associates' clients. This new service is providing farm monitoring, financial forecasting, and research and development data to subscribers on a monthly basis.

The firms services approximately 300 regular clients a year along with numerous one-off commissions. 150 clients would be serviced on a contracted individual basis with whole or half day visits throughout the year, Another 100 through six farm discussion groups and the balance would be serviced through one-off valuation and property evaluation projects.

Our clients are primarily livestock and arable farmers though the firm does a significant amount of business with banks and finance houses, local and regional authorities, private investors and law firms.

The firm publishes a weekly farm management and marketing newsletter for 400 subscribers in the Wairarapa and Hawkes Bay.

David and Chris are consultants to the Wairarapa **Farm Improvement Club (established 1967)**, which services 150 members throughout the Wairarapa through four consultants. Geoff sits on the Land Valuation Tribunal. David is director of two national companies and is Trustee on various Government appointed trusts.

Technical expertise, people skills and professional independence are three areas of our business in which we strive to maintain very high standards.

- Our clients expect us to keep up with the latest technology and to be able to interpret what is of use
- We must be able to understand our clients strengths, weaknesses and their objectives before we are able to assist them in their business.

- We must at all times be seen to be independent of any commercial concern with which our clients do business. Our clients place a very high value on the independence of our advice.

Technology input

Our firm places a high priority on maintaining a high level of technical expertise. Participation in research projects and the attendance of seminars and field days therefore represents a significant amount of “down-time” for our consultants.

The firms “intelligence input” can be listed as follows:-

(a) **Professional Seminars**

Examples of seminars attended annually are the NZ Society of Farm Management annual seminar, and those of the Valuation Institute.

(b) **Scientific Conferences/Seminars**

NZ Grassland Association. Animal Production Society. Massey University conferences/field days.

(c) **NZSFM Education Programme**

Courses have been held on report writing and on fertiliser research. Investment analysis and counselling skills are courses programmes for the next year.

(d) **Peer Review**

A substantial transfer of technology occurs between consultants within our firm, and between those at NZSFM functions.

(f) **Journals and Scientific Papers**

Proceedings of Grassland Association, NZSAP, Whatawhata Proceedings, NZ Farmer, Meat News, ‘Producer’, NZIV data.

(g) **Corporate Bodies**

NZ Meat & Wool Board Economic Service, Meat & Wool Boards, Wool Exporters Association, Meat exporters, Fertiliser companies, Livestock Exporters Assn, Met. Office & NIWA.

(h) **Research & Extension Personnel**

Through offering direct assistance to research organisations (e.g. **AgResearch**, Massey University) our firm fosters and maintains a working relationship with these personnel. It is easier to give somebody a ring who is in the know than to hunt through scientific journals.

(i) **Contact with Individual Farmers**

As farm consultants we are “information brokers”. A large amount of technology transfer occurs where we see one farmer applying a piece of technology well, we interpret this work and determine the application to other farm businesses.

(j) **Agribusiness Contacts**

Accountants, bankers, stock and station agencies, private stock agencies forestry companies/consultants, service clubs regional councils and merchandise representatives all comprise a pool of technology that can be called on an “on demand” basis.

Technology output

(a) **One-to-one Client Servicing**

This is the most effective and enjoyable form of technology. Farm consultants have the privilege of doing business with their clients at their own place of business, on their turf. Visiting a farming family on their own farm allows a consultant to get to know the strengths, weakness and aspirations of his clients. By understanding the client and observing the physical management of the property, a consultant can evaluate the appropriate technology requirements and method of application.

It should be stressed that technology transfer may be only one part of the service provided in this process. Financial control and planning, estate planning and personal counselling are other services that are likely to be offered at the same time.

(b) **Farm Discussion Groups**

These have proven to be a popular and efficient method of technology transfer in the Wairarapa. There are approximately 12 sheep and beef farm discussion groups currently operating, along with numerous dairy groups.

The groups to which this firm consults operate on the following format:-

- Groups comprise 12-20 members in a similar geographical area.

- Groups meet approximately monthly on a different members farm for the afternoon.

- Members are mailed a notice in advance which details the physical description, farming policy and financial performance of the property being visited.

- The afternoon comprises a farm inspection and formal discussion including summary comments from each member.

- The consultants role is to co-ordinate the annual program, prepare notices, chair the discussion, provide technical input and to furnish a written summary report to the host farmer.

Variations on this format include groups with membership from throughout the region and those which target business issues outside of the farm gate in their program.

As well as providing the transfer of technology between members, discussion groups provide a forum into which specialists can be drawn. Groups also fulfill an important social and support function within farming communities.

(c) Wairarapa Farm Improvement Club

The role of this Club in technology transfer in this region is covered in a separate paper to this conference.

(d) Farm Management Newsletter

This has proven to be a very effective vehicle for mass extension. Originally designed to provide up-to-date and independently sourced marketing information, the “AgLetter” is now primarily sought for its timely management advice.

The role of this newsletter is to appraise new technologies and stock policy options, to raise awareness of financial, administration and staffing issues and to provide a prompt as management practices appropriate for the time of year.

Primarily “consumed” by farmers, the “AgLetter” also has a strong following amongst accountants, bankers, meat exporters and other agribusiness groups.

Being committed to providing topical and informative information on a regular basis is a very healthy discipline for a consultancy firm. It keeps us on our toes.

The format and writing style of the newsletter is a critical feature. Farmers are not generally enthusiastic readers. Information must be in a concise readable form and written in a familiar style to be digestible.

(f) Field Days and Mass Extension

The MRDC focus farm network and the “Hill Country Farmer of the Year” competition are examples of two forms which have proved to be very successful forms of mass extension. It is vital for the success of these days that well prepared background material is provided and that technology is demonstrated by clear example.

Evaluation of technology transfer

(a) Analysis of Financial Results

The analysis of our clients annual financial statements through discussion groups and through the Wairarapa

Farm Improvement Club gives an accurate measure of which businesses are performing well and why.

Because of our intimate knowledge of many of our clients circumstances, it is not difficult to attribute a performance result to the adoption and application of technology. It is common to witness the spread of technology through networks such as discussion got-ups, neighbourhood groups and peer groups.

(b) Documentation of Intent

It is a policy of this firm that consultations are recorded in the form of forecast budgets and minutes. This record serves not only as a reference point but a statement of intent. This process injects an element of discipline and accountability into the professional relationship we have with our clients.

(c) Commercial Indicators

As self-employed professionals, the success of our business relies on the quality of our work. If we were not effective in our capacity as consultants we wouldn't be in business. Our greatest asset is the loyalty and trust of our clientele. Business has never been better and we have every intention of maintaining our standards and our position in the market.

A local philosophy of technology transfer

Farmers are instinctive creatures. They will believe what they can see and what they can understand.

The most convincing proof of a technology is seeing another farmer successfully using that technology.

The most successful technology transfer in farming involves individuals interacting with individuals, whether it is specialist-to-farmer or farmer-to-farmer.

We are firm believers in the trickle-down effect. First prove a technology to a successful farmer. Let him “suck it and see” and work out the practical application. Then “shepherd” that technology through the rest of the community.

Farmers are not “sponges waiting to soak up new technology”. An individual has to be in a positive and motivated frame of mind before he/she will seek and adopt new technology.

Our firm spends a large amount of time motivating its clients by solving financial or management problems – thus **creating the motivation for technological advancement.**

