

Current use - farmer computer groups

NF Clark

Agricultural Consultant
431 McIvor Road Bendigo 3550

In 1986, farmer colleague Tim Hutchings from Yerong Creek, NSW and the writer set up Farmfacts Farm Business Project. A series of management groups for farmers with the same group-bought computer hardware and software. The main object of Farmfacts is to encourage group members to use computers competently in farm management.

A total of 52 farmers have been formed into eight groups from Young in NSW to Hamilton in Victoria. It took more than a year to sell the idea to sponsors (1), decide on suitable hardware and software and assemble the groups.

There are plenty of computers out there on farms, but many of them are gathering dust because farmers are afraid of this new technology and they have not been getting easily accessible help. This project was aimed at mixed farmers who have not progressed into computer technology as quickly as pig, poultry and milk producers.

Farmfacts members will benefit from working with the same hardware and software and working in groups over a two year period. Tim Hutchings and the writer act as their group managers. The farmers will be computer literate at the end of this period and will then make their own decisions about rural software or computerized information and communications services

The package

Considerable research went into the selection of a package which was reliable, easy to use and met industry standards. The group managers selected the following as being a suitable start-up package for group members:

Hardware

Epson PC (MS.DOS) with 512k RAM, two 360k disc drives and a built-in modem. This computer was the 1986 BRW "Business PC of the year" High resolution green screen monitor Epson FX-105 printer

Software

"Junior Financial" from FARMPLAN Pty Ltd

A simple to use cash based accounting system which won "Best Rural Software" at Sydney Royal 1986

"First Choice" from PFS. An easy-to-use, integrated software program with four applications - Word Processing, File Management, Spreadsheet Analysis and Electronic Communications.

Cost

Hardware and software - \$4,500

Farmfacts members purchased or leased this package which then entitled them to free group participation funded by the sponsors over a two year period.

Project benefits

The package was sold to the farmers on the basis that they would become computer literate over a two year period. It was not considered that the investment of \$4,500 by each member would provide a cost benefit for all project members initially. In simple terms these farmers would develop a new skill. It would be an investment in themselves and other family members. In fact it was considered important that wives and children be involved. In many cases the farmers wife is running the computer and the farmer has a basic understanding to allow him to access information at random.

The most exciting aspect of the scheme is group participation and after sales service. Meeting in groups on a regular basis has allowed members to learn with help from their own peer group rather than seeking help from a dealer. In fact, dealers often have a "sell and forget" philosophy. This is not entirely their own doing. Geographic remoteness and the lack of understanding of Rural Software has not been conducive to good back-up service in country areas. The Farmfacts managers call meetings on a regular basis, provide a hotline service on software problems as well as following up any hardware difficulties.

Members of the project will also receive help from the major sponsors. In return for their sponsorship, the National Bank would like to test financial software and remote banking for farmers. Pivot and AFL would like to develop farm fertility models, particularly as they relate to improving crop productivity. In addition the groups have been offered the opportunity to join CSIRO's SIRAGCROP information service, operating from a Mainframe computer at Griffith, NSW.

Current progress

Farmfacts members have now had their computer systems for six months and it is quite clear that the learning phase has been slower than anticipated. All members attended three day start-up schools at Yanco and Dookie, in addition they have had three formal group meetings. They are benefiting from help within their groups but many were unable to get to their machines during seeding so some skills were lost. Some individual members are making excellent progress which sets a target for others to aim for. It is clear however that the project objective of teaching new skills was correct and members will enjoy cost benefits in the future.

Financial management and planning is the area of greatest emphasis within the groups. Spreadsheets allow -what-if" calculations and "Junior Financial" allows members to use their accounts as a resource for sound financial planning. The challenge for the group managers is that many members have not been practicing financial planning so that in addition to using the software, education in accountancy is required. Members did not anticipate a cut in accountancy fees following the adoption of this financial package, in fact it could be the reverse. The financially well informed group members will make better use of their accountants to plan longer term strategies rather than the usual "auditing of the books" for taxation purposes.

Recording systems for paddocks and livestock enterprises will improve with the use of computers. Many members have not had an interest in keeping detailed records, owning a computer may not necessarily change their habits. Working within a group however will encourage these non-recorders to start some form of monitoring. This will be brought about by the interest in sharing information and comparing paddock or enterprise performance on a local basis, this is one objective of the project. Group members will set up a common recording systems which will include formal recording sheets. This will make the data transfer to the appropriate computer program relatively simple. Members will not get the full benefit of their recording efforts until they build up their own database. Some years from now they will be able to look back and say "thank goodness I started formal record keeping in 1987"

It is hoped that the ability and need to seek outside information may rate second to financial planning as a benefit to those participating in this project. It is also considered by the managers as being quite some way off. There are two main reasons for this:

The group members cannot recognise many "real" benefits from the information being provided.

They are comfortable with their current information collection systems. These include radio, written media, mail and personal communications.

There is certainly an industry "push" on electronic information services. Members are being encouraged to alter their information collection habits in favour of the more up-to-date data from providers like Information Express and Elderslink. As the rural community realize they need to be more active information seekers, so they will adopt these services. It may well be that the need for electronic communications will stem from a need to move money, sell or bid for livestock, buy merchandise or work with interactive packages to fine tune crop or animal husbandry. Members of the Farmfacts project agree that when they are ready for communications, the providers may be ready for them!

Conclusion

Farmers participating in the Farmfacts computer groups realize that they must become computer literate. It will assist them in running a more professional business. It will take personal time, it is a major commitment. In three to five years they will recognise that their new skill will be invaluable in financial planning and developing farm management strategies.