

A CASE STUDY IN DECISION SUPPORT INFORMATION: A MANUAL TITLED *MAKING BETTER DECISIONS FOR YOUR PROPERTY*

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Summary. Market research activities in Southern Queensland showed landholders were asking for strategic decision support material. A manual titled *Making Better Decisions For Your Property* comprising a series of topic sheets was prepared and produced with an extremely high level of community participation. This proved to be a difficult task and provided many insights into producing information on strategic decision making. Testing various writing formats showed that landholders liked a *question and answer style* for this type of information. Evaluation results show there is still conflict between technical or professional advisers and landholders towards the value of the information in the manual and the way it is presented.

INTRODUCTION

The manual titled *Making Better Decisions For Your Property* was launched at Toowoomba in October, 1994 and provides important topical information for landholders on *Whether to* or strategic type decisions. The need for decision support material on property management came from market research activities conducted by the *Viable Farming Systems Group*¹. An analysis of these activities showed that landholders are asking for decision support material and that information needs are more *strategic*² than *operational*³ (1).

Input from approximately 250 people including bankers, accountants, landholders and rural women showed that *How to* information for operational decisions such as planting rates is being adequately provided by agronomists and DPI extension material such as the *Crop Management Notes*. However, information on *Whether to* or strategic decision making such as succession planning was scarce, dispersed and hard to access in remote areas. Landholders also said that these issues have the greatest impact on their viability and they commonly sought information from up to 10 different sources before making a decision (2).

The market research found that farmers rated their own experience and the experience of other farmers as having the most influence on both strategic and operational decision making. Spouse and children also had a significant influence at the strategic level of decision making. This suggests farmers learn best from their own experiences, their spouse and children, and other farmers (1).

For information to have impact it must be presented in a form that landholders can relate to. This means it must be tested both economically and socially, be easy to obtain, use simple language and use clear definitions. Market research also found that landholders value information that is

practical, local and not commercially biased. Landholders value the DPI for its impartiality and it is regarded as a credible source of information (5).

METHODS

Consultation with landholders indicated that the best method of presenting this information was as a series of written topic sheets.

The authors

A writing team of extension and research staff were chosen to mix a range of experience (financial, social, technical), years of experience, training and personality. The team consisted of land conservationists, a financial counsellor, agronomist, social economist and a publications officer.

The writing process

The first draft was compiled at a 3-day workshop in October 1992, where participants were deliberately isolated from phones and *the office* to help focus on the task. Titles for the topic sheets were drawn from the market research and developed by the writing team. To *set the scene* and standardise the writing approach, a series of exercises was completed including considering the audience, planning the article and writing simply, direct and positively.

The team then developed the key points and outline for each topic using a card system before splitting into groups of three and commencing writing (4). Each small group spent about 1½ hours on each topic which were no longer than 2 x A4 pages. By lunchtime on the second day, the completed *1st drafts* were swapped between groups for feedback. At the end of the third day, all topics had been edited and a *1st draft* of the manual had been prepared.

The testing

The written material then went through a rigorous testing cycle for 15 months with open ended questions used to gather feedback such as; *What do you think?*, *What has been missed?*, *What don't you like?*, *Is it correct?*, *How can it be improved?* The material was primarily tested with landholders and their families. Professional people such as agribusiness and DPI extension advisers, TAFE and college lecturers, accountants, bank managers, counsellors and ministers of religion were also asked to comment.

Over 100 farming families in southern Queensland provided information and feedback on the material.

Format, style, tone and illustrations

The format, style, tone and illustrations for the information was also determined by landholders. As well as considering content, people were asked to say which type of printing format they found easiest to read. For example, one or two column. Preferences for illustrating the material such as quotes, farmer case studies, cartoons and diagrams were also tested (3).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Testing various writing formats with landholders showed that they liked a *question and answer style* for this type of information. They found this more provocative and challenging than other formats and styles. They preferred the information presented so it didn't prescribe solutions for them, but challenged them to think and find their own solutions to issues (3).

The manual is useful as it poses problems before it gives an answer. Even if I don't agree with an answer or suggestion, it at least provokes my thinking. Fred McCann, Farmer, Allora

Farmers also said they like information presented in point form with simple, positive, personal and active writing rather than long, hard to understand sentences. They were also particularly hard on technical jargon.

Points are made clearly. It doesn't pontificate! John Davies, Farmer, Warwick

It has a good style. A good, commonsense approach. Mike Coleman, Farmer, Warwick

Lack of technical data in this manual makes it readable. Anon., Farmer, Dalby

Other features particularly liked were the farmer case studies, quotes and cartoons.

The cartoons are important to its understandable style and makes it easier to read.

Mike Coleman, Farmer, Warwick

Content Conflicts

There were considerable differences in the feedback from technical or professional advisers and landholders during the testing of the information. Technical and professional people concentrated more on grammar and style and wanted to *beef up* the material with technical information. Comments like *It doesn't tell the readers very much* and *It doesn't give any answers* were common. By comparison, landholders were more positive, suggesting extra ideas and liking the style and simple language. The writing team also found it hard to resist the temptation of slipping back to the comfort of technical information when preparing the manual (3).

Further Feedback

A phone questionnaire was conducted in June 1995 to obtain feedback and comment on the manual since its launch in October 1994. A semi-structured approach was adopted to gather the *colour, depth and detail* of information from the interviews. The sample group of 40 were stratified by profession and how they obtained their copy. The type of information sought during the interviews included:

- ◆ have they looked at the manual, if so, how have they used it?
- ◆ has it enhanced their knowledge?
- ◆ has it changed the way they present information?
- ◆ have they used it for their own or a clients benefit? and,
- ◆ any suggestions as to how the manual could be improved to increase its usefulness to you or your clients?

Evaluation Results

The responses from landholders to the type of information contained in the manual tended to be very positive. For example:

Great. It should have been put out 10 years ago. It doesn't get tangled up in facts and figures. Easy to read. Very positive. It compliments our work quite well.

However, some government extension staff and professional business people felt that it covered a lot of topics with not a lot of detail and mainly serves as a referral or starting point.

The actual use of the manual varied. Most people had used the manual for referral or for workshops. Some have used it to help structure other manuals, while other businesses use it as a client reference in their lounges. Quite a few had not used it or just glanced through it, however, one farmer admitted that he carried it around in his truck and referred to it regularly when considering different options.

When asked about ways to improve the usefulness of the manual, respondents suggested that more detail was required for most topics or that updates would be necessary as information dated. Many people suggested the manual needed wider promotion and marketing to *get it out there*. Several business people requested a training seminar on the manual with clients and to include an open forum with a panel

of speakers to field queries from landholders. Extra topics on *Computers on farms, Budgeting and Nature Conservation Planning* were suggested as were some alterations to other topic sheets.

Several landholders did say that it changed the way they thought and that there was a need to *reach out to people who need to consider the issues the manual raises - farmers that are not getting enough information or people entering different phases of property management.*

CONCLUSION

There are three points in our conclusion:

1. Writing resource material to support strategic decision making is not easy. It requires a total change in thinking and it is difficult to resist slipping back to the comfort of technical information.
2. The feedback and testing process ensured a wide range of people had input into the material. This not only made the information very valuable, but it encourages ownership of the information and increases the chances of the finished material being used.
3. Feedback during the testing of the information shows the need for technical and professional people to consider their audience when commenting on information. Certainly landholders could relate more to the importance of empowering farmers and their families to decide which strategy best suits their own situation and assist strategic decision making better than technical/professional people.

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