

## Evaluation and practice change: a private and public sector collaboration

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### Abstract

Crop scientists aim to facilitate improved crop management and practice change on farm. Practice change relates to how farmers alter their current practices to improve their economic, environmental and social sustainability within their industry. To achieve this, venues are needed where crop scientists, advisers, industry and farmers can interact. In Victoria, a key annual opportunity for this interaction is the BCG (Birchip Cropping Group) Grains Research Expo. This Expo is an opportunity for farmers to interact with researchers and industry to discuss ideas and innovative solutions to farmers' issues. It is a forum for discussion and learning for both those presenting information and those attending. Planning, execution and interpretation of the Expo evaluation were undertaken jointly by the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) and the BCG to provide the right mixture of skills and resources. The evaluation consisted of a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews.

One hundred and eighty people paid to attend the Expo on the 10<sup>th</sup> of July 2003. Ninety-one questionnaires were returned and 14 semi-structured interviews were completed. Fifty seven percent of respondents were farmers - the main target audience. Farmer respondents valued discussion sessions (92%), hearing new ideas (86%), receiving up-to-date and relevant information (75%) and social interaction (75%). Respondents generally considered the Expo was well run and interesting, but a number of them had suggestions for improvement. The Expo provided a good opportunity for agricultural researchers to share their knowledge with and receive feedback from industry. A challenge for the future is to assess how effective the Expo has been in facilitating knowledge sharing between agricultural researchers and farmers and whether it has brought industry issues to the attention of agricultural researchers.

### Media summary

Collaborative evaluation work between the Victorian Department of Primary Industries and the Birchip Cropping Group has assisted the two organisations to plan and target the extension and delivery of research findings to industry in the most effective way.

### Key Words

Evaluation, DPI, BCG, Collaborative,

### Introduction

For crop scientists to facilitate improved crop management and practice change on farm they need to understand industry issues as well as be able to effectively communicate new information to and from industry. One forum which actively encourages both these processes is the BCG Grains Research Expo.

The Expo is a unique event, which brings together technical experts, researchers, industry and farmers to view the latest developments in grains research. Major components of the Expo are display stands, formal discussion forums, machinery displays and the opportunity for informal one-to-one interaction. The Expo creates an opportunity for farmers to have questions answered and for researchers to discover the issues affecting farmers, so allowing farmers to have input into setting the research agenda while accessing the most up-to-date technology and research information.

The BCG is a not for profit organisation managed by local farmers and based at Birchip in Victoria. The BCG conducts research and runs a range of communication activities on behalf of its 520 financial members. The Expo is a core communication activity for the BCG and has been running annually for seven years. The time was right to assess whether the Expo was continuing to attract the target audience (farmers), to understand what attendees value about the Expo and to consider possible changes to the Expo. The BCG and DPI combined their skills and resources to plan and evaluate the Expo.

## **Methods**

### *Planning*

BCG and DPI staff used Bennett's Hierarchy (Bennett 1975) as a planning framework to explore the goals of the Expo, what success would look like, target audiences and processes used at the Expo. Also clarified was the purpose of the evaluation, who would be using the evaluation data and for what purposes.

### *Evaluation tools*

The Expo was evaluated using a simple questionnaire (handed out and collected on the day of the Expo) and short semi-structured interviews (done on the day of the Expo and by telephone after the Expo). This approach was determined after considering how good a response would be gained from other methods and timings, how much time Expo attendees would have on the day and resources available for the evaluation.

The questionnaire consisted of seven questions relating to demographics, what attendees valued about the Expo and suggestions for improvement. Most questions were quantitative, but selected qualitative questions allowed exploration of the richer picture.

### *Data analysis and interpretation*

Questionnaire results were examined using simple descriptive statistics (percentages and bar graphs) managed using Excel spreadsheets. Results were discussed with the BCG staff and committee to assist in interpretation.

## **Results**

The process of collaborative planning for and implementation of the Expo evaluation improved the understanding and skills of DPI and BCG staff in evaluation. During planning, staff gained a clear understanding of the outcomes that the BCG wanted from the Expo.

The Expo was held on 10<sup>th</sup> July 2003 and 180 people paid to attend. Ninety one questionnaires were returned. Fourteen semi-structured interviews were completed during the Expo. Results relevant to this discussion are presented: occupations, what respondents valued and what respondents thought might improve future Expos.

Respondents were mainly farmers (57%), with agri-industry (15%), government employees (13%) and all other occupations (5% or less) at much lower incidences (Fig 1).

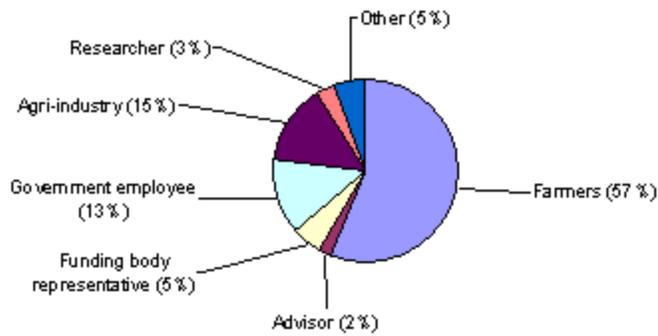


Figure 1. The main occupation of Expo questionnaire respondents

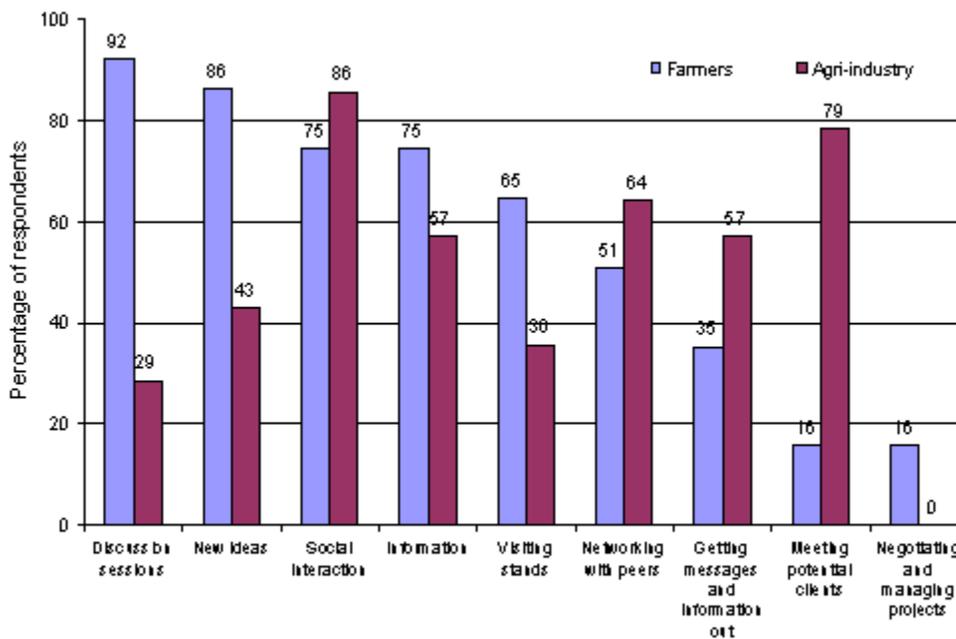


Figure 2. What farmer (n=51) and agri-industry (n=14) respondents valued about the Expo.

Farmers valued discussion sessions, hearing new ideas, acquiring up to date information and social interaction most (Fig 2). Agri-industry valued social interaction, meeting potential clients and networking with peers most (Fig 2).

Farmer respondents considered the Expo provided them with "new information to help on farm decisions" and "pieces to add to the whole picture". In general, they had no suggestions for improving the Expo. Suggestions mostly came from advisers (eg "increase researchers and research content"), agri-industry (eg "look at demographics - where they come from - will help target audience better") and government (eg "push the innovation part of the Expo").

## Conclusion

What farmer respondents valued about the Expo indicated a willingness to learn and apply that learning on farm as well as to participate in discussions. This indicates that the Expo has good potential for

agricultural researchers to share knowledge with farmers (contributing to changes on farm) and to hear about the research needs of farmers.

Collaborative planning and implementation of the Expo evaluation allowed private and public sector staff to share knowledge and gain experience in evaluation. This resulted in a shared understanding of the aims of the Expo and its current strengths which has allowed joint discussion about the opportunities the BCG might implement in its continuing effort to improve the Expo.

A challenge for the future is to assess how effective the Expo has actually been in achieving knowledge application on farm and in bringing industry issues to the attention of agricultural researchers and agri-industry.

## **References**

Bennett, C. F. 1975, Up the hierarchy, *Journal of Extension*, (March/April), pp 6-12.