

# Yacker: Agriculture's Phone Directory & Reinventing Extension

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## Abstract

In a world full of social media, how does the ag industry cut through to ensure that growers are being reached with new information and have the best opportunity for extension and practice change. Research shows that there is a need for researchers to invest more time on the ground to better understand the systems that are influencing, but how do researchers connect with people outside of their current circles. Research shows that maximum extension outcomes can be achieved when grower to grower education can be used. So how do we combine the best of both worlds, leverage the better aspects of current social media platforms and fill the gaps?

This is where Yacker comes in. A platform that allows for group and one to one connection to be formed. It allows for connections based on location, interest or crops. The modern take on the phone call aims to make everyone's life easier and create a phone directory for agriculture.

## Keywords

Agriculture, connection, extension, research, communication, education, resources, social licence, app

## Introduction

In the modern-day, extension world relies on a mixture of face to face, email and social media tools to assist with information sharing. Research shows that the best way to reach the male demographic is through YouTube, while to reach a male audience from mid-20's to 60 is through Facebook or Twitter (Khoros, 2018). This means that the majority of industry extension groups look to these platforms to get information out to a large audience in a low-cost manner.

It is also well understood that farmers will be more likely to adopt ideas and techniques if they are told about them by another producer. So how, as advisors, researchers and extension officers do we better bridge the gap?

With Twitter considered to be the preferred choice for active engagement of farmers, there was a survey performed but the team behind Yacker ©, on farmer use and engagement on Twitter. From research surveys by Summit Ag, of their clients in 2020 they found that 60% of their base, aged from 25-65, had an active twitter account (active counted if they had a profile setup). Of those clients they found that only 6% were active on the platform within the 6 months prior to the survey being conducted, with majority of that activity being retweets and likes, not new content (unpublished, 2020). A selection of these growers was then further interviewed to get an understanding of why or why are they not active on the platform, or if they did have the platform, why.

From these interviews there were some common trends seen from both "observers" and user of twitter. One of the key ones was a desire to passively obtain information without having to engage as there was a reluctance to be part of the conversation due to nervousness around placing comments, questions and ideas into public domain for ridicule. When growers who didn't have the platforms were interviewed their reasoning for not having social media reflected the same sentiments of not being interested in dealing with trolls or that "typing" communication wasn't their style.

So how do we create a low-cost social media style platform for information dissemination that combines the positive aspects of platforms like twitter, with the added power of being more specific as to the type of people that are there, the content placed and captures the observes and non-users by offering them more traditional communication tools. This is where Yacker comes in.

## **Descriptions**

### *Researchers Roles*

There has been a demand for researchers to increase their understanding of wider farmer practices and desires for change to better be able to reflect farmer needs in their work (Leeuwis, 2004). But how do researchers find people outside of their immediate circles, regions and with new experiences and ideas? This can be one of the key challenges, finding these people, and then being able to actively engage with them.

Other challenges from people in the research sector can be sourcing new locations for trial sites, or finding sites that offer particular issues or factors that will allow for a trial to be designed and executed in a way that will increase the chances of meaningful data. The Yacker Platform aims to help overcome these issues through the ability to search people by any term. This means that researchers and extension officers can search by crop type, issue, location or name to easily find people to connect with.

### *Farmer Extension*

The farmer-to-farmer extension model has been a success in a number of countries around the world, including Latin America and Africa (Ssemakula and Mutimba, 2011) with a large amount of work in Australia to look at implementation and results. An example of this is through the Nuffield Scholarship of Chris Reichstein (2014) that found that some of the best ways to get practice adoption and information dissemination is through the use of farmer led experience. So how do we find and use cases and examples of new practice adoption for farmer influence? How do we connect people from outside of their regions to share information?

There have been some great real-world examples of this being implemented. A grower based at Gunning NSW wanted to trial growing premier digit grass for his merino enterprise. This was something completely new for him and for majority of growers in his regions. There was also limited professional support so while he did get some basic information through his networks, by posting the question in Yacker he was able to engage with 2 experienced agronomists that allowed him to execute production on his farm with great success.

### *Issues with current strategies*

The issue with the current platforms for extension and communication is the need to put ideas into the public domain with limited opportunity for in depth discussion (character limitations, time taken for typing, getting lost in threads). This means that people can easily get disheartened with being part of the conversation due to the message threads being difficult to keep up with, or limited on the information that can be shared. It can also mean that conversations can be hijacked by people with strong opposing opinions that can ruin the conversation. There are also limitations when people are busy driving, on machinery or similar the conversation ends when its text based but can continue in the form of a phone call.

Yacker aims to combat that by incorporating what is classed as typical social media communication tools like seen on Twitter with the more traditional communication of a phone call to ring people when they are free to have a chat and explore beyond the text feed or capitalise on driving time. This means that for people happy with a short text response, they can have the ability to comment, but to really be able to extend the conversation through actually talking and call people, will combat the abrupt end to information exchange. It also means that using the search function you can ring people with similar interests, regions or things of interest so that a conversation can be started without having to put comments and into to public domain.

By having the ability to have candid and one-on-one conversations with people from a range of backgrounds and experience means that being able to better understand the needs and desires of the

people they are researching for. Allowing farmer to farmer information transfer will significantly increase the reach of information as well as potentially increasing uptake through grower testimonials and experience.

### *The Future of Yacker*

Yacker currently has over 500 users that demographic is 30% farmers, 30% industry/researchers, 30% suppliers and the balances people with an ag interest including school teachers, bankers and similar). From conversation with extension teams from industry this is consistent with the demographic engagement splits that are commonly seen. The aim of Yacker is to maintain this demographic split but having higher levels of engagement then currently seen on other platforms.

There is also scope with Yacker to look to customise how it is used, meaning that if there are particular issues within extensions, that the current social media doesn't facilitate well, to customise to fill this gap. For the transfer of knowledge to be able to target the range of end users there needs to be a thorough understanding of the needs, desires and gaps in the traditional marketing. This offers a great opportunity to work with researchers and extension groups to find a fit and help to craft a tool that will better enable the extension process to the wider ag sectors.

### **Conclusion**

Extension of information and improving the uptake of new tools, techniques and technologies can be difficult. Managing relationships between grower groups, project participants, trial participants and co-ordinators can be time consuming. Traditional social media platforms have many positives in terms of being a cheap way of disseminating information into the Ag sector, but brings with it many draw backs in the form of being reliant on text-based communications and being placed in a public forum. Through research, understanding and integration, the Yacker App looks to take the best of current platforms with the reinvention of the phone call to improve and streamline communication and education in agriculture.

### **References**

Note the format of the references with full journal names without italics or bolding but with minimal punctuation (Liu et al. 2015).

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