

DETERMINING EDUCATIONAL NEEDS: A FOCUS GROUP APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The first step in planning and delivering a successful program is to identify the needs and interests of the target audience. The North Central Risk Management Education Center, which provides grants for educational programs for producers in the 12 north central states in the US, conducted a series of focus groups with producers. The goals of the focus groups were to: 1) determine the impact of funded programs; 2) assess risk management education needs of producers; 3) assess preferred delivery methods; and 4) determine program characteristics that will enhance participation.

The participants had an average age of 45 which is about 12 years younger than the average age of all farmers. With 1,861 acres of owned and rented land, they had slightly larger operations than the average producer.

Labor availability and management was the most common educational concern. Marketing of traditional commodities continues to be a high priority. Related priorities were developing value-added businesses and developing niche markets for new products and farm-related services. Associated concerns were liability insurance needs, reliable supply of needed inputs and government regulations involved in new enterprises.

In terms of disseminating information on education programs, direct mail delivery is preferred as email may not be checked regularly in busy periods. Mailings should be directed to both husbands and wives. Program fees are not only acceptable but are viewed as an indicator of quality and credible information.

Key Words: focus groups, risk management, education needs, labor, marketing, human risk

MAIN TEXT

Since 2001 the North Central Risk Management Education Center has been providing leadership and program coordination in risk management education for twelve states in the north central region. These states include: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin. "Empowering the strengths and skills of individuals in the North Central Region involved in the management of agricultural production, marketing, financial, legal and human resource risks" is the Center's mission. The Center is headquartered in the Department of Agricultural Economics at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

The Risk Management Education Center is grant-funded through USDA and offers a competitive grants program each year. This program enables educators to develop and deliver risk management education programs that respond to priority risk management education needs at the producer level. The grant program encourages collaboration and partnering of public and

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private entities inside and outside the region.

This past winter the Center worked with local extension educators to conduct a producer focus group in each of the twelve states. The purpose of these focus groups was to determine the impact of programs funded by the Center and to assess the risk management education needs of producers throughout the region. We focused on the five main areas of risk: environmental, financial, human resource, legal, and marketing. The results from the focus groups will be used to determine the direction of future risk management education programs.

Presently, ten focus groups have been completed. The participants of these focus groups were on average 45 years of age, had some college education, owned/rented 1,861 acres of land, had 628 head of livestock, and had been farming or ranching for 25 years. Participants in focus groups identified several areas of need for educational programming. While each of the states did have some specific needs, many of the areas identified were similar across the region.

Labor was one of the most common concerns. Producers are competing with corporations and other established businesses for quality labor. Education is needed concerning how to provide competitive benefits concerning health, disability and workmen's compensation. Many were concerned about managing employees, how to motivate them and keep the turnover rate at a minimum. Employers would like to see a generic personnel policy and procedure manual developed for all sizes of operations, to use as a guideline when a new employee is hired. The manual could include the basic 'how-to' for developing job descriptions, developing payroll/compensation packages, and address the concern of employee safety. Most of the labor available in some areas do not speak English. This usually requires the hiring of an interpreter, understanding and completing required government forms, and both the employer and employee adjusting to cultural differences.

Several participants expressed concern about city encroachment. This causes division between rural and urban residents, and sometimes farmer to farmer relationships. While producers feel they need protection from city growth, the public perception of agriculture can affect the type of relationship that is developed while they learn to co-exist together.

Many producers are trying to maximize their income with a value-added business. Education is needed to learn to develop or find a niche market, what liability insurance is needed, how to get a steady supply of quality products, and government requirements concerning their value-added business.

Marketing is critical to all operations. Education programs need to be developed from the basic 'How-To' to the more advanced, such as forward marketing your product. Developing a marketing plan and having confidence to follow it is a challenge for most producers.

Other areas of interest concerned understanding cash flow and cost of production for their operation, estate planning, farm transfer, sharing and leasing equipment, crop livestock, health/disability and liability insurance.

One issue that was apparent in every state was women's education. Often silent, hidden, and under-appreciated, rural women represent an untapped resource to the stability of the farm operation. The number of female-operated farms and women landowners continues to rise in the United States. Some of the participants were young farmers, coming back to the farm or beginning their own operation. Their wives want to network with other experienced farm women to become educated on facing the overwhelming knowledge needed as they partnered with their husband in this business and the need to keep family relationships in tact.

There are many factors affecting producers concerning human resource risk education. Programs need to be developed to help families understand and appreciate each others skills and abilities. It is a challenge to farm with siblings who no longer live on the farm. Transitioning

a son or daughter into an established operation takes a lot of negotiating and understanding between family members, so that everyone has the opportunity to become a successful operator. Estate planning is another hurdle. Not only are there tax consequences, an estate plan that needs to include the son or daughter who has left the farm and the one who has remained creates its own challenge. With education in communication and understanding personalities this can happen successfully.

Technology is an important part of our daily lives, how do producers use it to their benefit? There is a great need for basic internet education. Most of the participants have dial-up connection, which is all that is available in some areas. Time cannot be invested in searching and moving around web sites. It's a slow process and at times producers are unexpectedly 'booted out' of the connection before the downloading of a document is complete. The exact locations and the resources of what web sites are available for information needed is critical.

Once programs are developed and ready to be delivered, how do we get the information out to producers about the programs? According to the focus group participants, while email is efficient and has minimal cost, producers do not take the time to check their email everyday. It is easy for them to miss information about a meeting. The participants' first choice was direct mail. They also suggested adding their wife's name to the label in addition to theirs. This would serve two purposes: 1) women tend to be the organizers for the family and would let them know about the meeting; 2) it might encourage women to attend along with their spouse or on their own. Other suggestions included sending out a monthly calendar, postcards, newspaper, flyers, and phone calls. The most important thing for educators is to be proactive concerning the planning and implementing of programs.

Now that they have received information about this educational opportunity, what will make them want to attend this workshop? The top remark from the participants is that workshops need to be focused on timely issues. They are looking for good, unbiased information. One of the general concerns is that sometimes speakers are so busy explaining about how they apply this risk management education tool in their operation, they forget to express to the group how this will affect their business. Keep the workshop concise, begin and end on time, and food and door prizes are always an incentive. If the program is co-sponsored by an ag organization, their members will encourage people to come. One of the most interesting comments was to charge a fee to attend. Producers want quality, credible information and they are willing to pay to insure that is what they are getting.

Several other suggestions included, continuing education opportunities, hands-on workshops, the time of year, and have it be a community building event, as well as informational. The speaker needs to have the trust of the producers and talk on the level of the producer.

Because educators want all their meetings to be successful, we asked the participants how they knew it was worth their time to attend this meeting/workshop. Participants shared that if they are still thinking about the topic a week later, it motivated change, caused them to think bigger or outside the box, they actually used the information that was provided and there was follow-up on the topics covered.

There is a true need for education in agriculture as evidenced by the focus groups conducted by the North Central Risk Management Education Center. The challenge is set before us to continue to develop risk management education programs to give producers the tools they need to sustain a successful operation in the changing profession called 'agriculture.'

To find information on programs that have been funded through the Center, or information on the grant application process, check our website at www.farmdoc.uiuc.edu/ncrisk.