A CASE STUDY OF PODCASTING IN AUSTRALIAN DAIRY EXTENSION

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Abstract

In August 2009 Industry & Investment NSW launched thirteen podcasts on its web site. Since August 2009 the counter system on this website showed 14,481 total hits to the thirteen dairy podcasts. The effectiveness of the podcasts as an extension medium has been evaluated since the launch of the podcasts. The preface for this evaluation of the podcast series was that any new medium must be as 'good as' or 'better than' the existing system in which an organisation is already prepared to invest time and dollars. In the case of podcast, the comparable existing system was the web based delivery of extension material as PDF files. The analysis of web site traffic revealed that over a thirteen month period the thirteen dairy podcasts generated 3.65 times the downloads of the top thirteen publications in PDF format. The skill set required to develop and deliver podcasts is one that can be readily acquired by most extension officers with minimal training. With a low start-up and ongoing cost, podcasts will quickly become a mainstay in the toolbox of many extension officers.

Keywords: Podcast, Extension, Dairy, Farm Business Management

Introduction

As the budget for extension services continue to contract, the challenge continues to be to implement cost effective extension methodologies whilst maintaining high levels of client service. Podcasts are one low cost tool that has the potential to promote client engagement in extension programs. Podcast are audio files which can be listened to on-line or downloaded for later listening on a computer or portable MP3 player. The audio files can also be burnt to a conventional CD.

For a target audience to have access to podcasts they must have a computer with adequate internet access. 66% of Australian farmers used the internet in their business in 2007/08 (ABS 2009), up from 46% in 2003/04 (ABS 2006), with 68% of these having broadband internet access. Internet access on farms was as high as 90% on farms with an estimated value of production above $1M (ABS 2009). Increasing acceptance of the internet as a delivery mechanism for information suggests that podcast may enhance the delivery of extension messages. Podcasts have been used by Texas A&M University System Agricultural Communications since 2004 (Fannin 2006) with at least 12 land-grant universities in the United States now using podcasts (Xie and Gu 2007).

A random phone survey in January 2009 of 1,858 people in the United States revealed that 22% of people had listen to a podcast, up from 18% in 2008 and 11% in 2006 (Webster 2009). A follow-up survey in October and November 2009 of 4,787 podcast users identified the ability to access material whenever and wherever they wanted as the key reasons for using podcast (Webster 2010). The ability to access unique material unavailable elsewhere, and having this on demand, was also rated very highly. 79% of these podcast users listened to audio podcasts each week. As with other trends

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in computer and internet use it would be reasonable to expect that, with some lag time, this trend would be also seen amongst Australia farmers.

Methods

In 2009 Industry & Investment NSW (I&I NSW) released the first thirteen podcasts in an ongoing series focused on dairy production and farm business management. The development of these podcasts focused on developing a methodology to allow the production of high quality podcasts which could be produced at a low cost by extension staff with minimal training.

Audacity, a free open source software system, was used for recording and editing the podcasts. A conversational/interview style was selected for the content of the podcasts as this proved more engaging than a monologue style in initial testing. A telephone recording adaptor, costing $175, connected to a computer made it possible for the host and the interviewee to be in two different locations thus making recording logistics simple and very cost effective. Using this system it was possible to record twelve podcasts in three and a half hours.

The topics for the podcast were supplied by members of the dairy extension team. Members of the dairy team, not involved in the interview, were also asked to provide 8-10 key points that they felt should be covered in the podcast. This process provided effective third party input into the content of the podcast, giving guidance to the interviewer and interviewee and focusing the content in areas thought to be of maximum interest and value to the target audience. The list of 8-10 points was used by the interviewer to structure the podcast interview and ensure the key subject issues were addressed.

Following each recording the audio quality was enhanced by removing background noise and amplifying if required. The content was also edited to remove ums, ahs, deep breaths and other distractions. Long silences were removed and pauses were also shortened to improve the listening quality. Royalty free music, costing $45 was purchased and used at the start and end of the podcasts to develop a common theme across the podcast series. As with all government publications, and following legal advice, a disclaimer was developed and added to the end of each podcast. On average it took 40 minutes to edit each audio file and add the introduction music and disclaimer. As a general rule it took 4-5 time the length of the audio to edit the file, depending on recording quality and the skill of the host and interviewee.

To ensure equity of access to the material provided, each podcast was transcribed using an external transcription service. This cost $2.20/minute of audio with a minimum charge of $25 for shorter podcasts. In August 2009 the podcasts and transcripts were then uploaded to the I&I NSW Website (www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/podcasts/dairy).

The existence of the podcasts was initially promoted on the I&I NSW website with a highlight spot on the main dairy web page. Members of the dairy extension team used email contact lists to promote the podcast and publicity articles were also included in industry newsletters and other publications. Over time the I&I NSW dairy podcasts became the top item in a Google® search for ‘dairy podcasts’. This has assisted in delivering considerable traffic to the podcasts.

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Data and Results

From August 2009 to September 2010 the counter system on the I&I Website showed 14,481 total hits to the thirteen dairy podcasts. While the hit counter system shows that the audio files have been delivered it does not give any indication that the recipient listen to the file. Nor does it indicate that some change in management resulted, which is the aim of an extension program. Though experience suggests that the number of hits and audio downloads provides some measurable data on usage (Fannin 2006:13). It is not possible at this early stage, and may prove too difficult in the longer term, to measure the impact on-farm of the podcast initiative. While the podcast system is a relatively low cost system, it is not zero cost, and must show demonstrated value if it is to be utilised on an ongoing basis.

The preface for the evaluation of the podcast series was that any new system must be as 'good as' or 'better than' the existing system in which an organisation is already prepared to invest time and dollars. In the case of podcast, the comparable existing system was the web based delivery of extension material as PDF files. Typically this information contained in the podcasts would be delivered in the form of a PrimeFact® or other topic based publication which would be made available as a PDF from the organisations website.

A comparison of the web traffic generated by podcast and PDF was undertaken over a thirteen month period from September 2009. The hits to the website generate by the thirteen dairy podcasts was compared to the hits generated by the top thirteen PDF on dairy topics for that month.

	Sep 09	Oct 09	Nov 09	Dec 09	Jan 10	Feb 10	Mar 10
13 Podcast	265	1,267	1,390	1,638	1,121	1,089	837
Top 13 PDF	253	368	263	346	374	230	274
PodCast:PDF	1.05	3.44	5.29	4.73	3.00	4.73	3.05
	Apr 10	May 10	Jun 10	Jul 10	Aug 10	Sep 10	Total
13 Podcast	898	835	1,363	1,512	1,376	985	14,576
Top 13 PDF	305	291	287	287	399	321	3,998
PodCast:PDF	2.94	2.87	4.75	5.27	3.45	3.07	3.65

Table 1. Total hits to I&I website for dairy podcasts and the top thirteen dairy PDF documents for that month.

The analysis of web site traffic, as shown in Table 1, revealed that over a thirteen month period the thirteen dairy podcasts generated 3.65 times the amount of downloads than the top thirteen publications in PDF format.

Discussion

The level of acceptance of podcast by I&I website users, combined with a low production cost, has demonstrated that podcasts are a tool that warrants inclusion into future extension programs. Through the methodologies developed, podcasts allow topical information to be deployed quickly. A

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podcast can be recorded and edited in an hour, transcribed overnight and be on a website or emailed to clients within 24 hours, or perhaps sooner if required.

The use of Podcasts is not without its challenges. While podcast can be quickly generated and released, many organisations may not have policies and procedures to approve release this quickly. As was the experience in I&I NSW, podcast are technically easy, but the framework of legalities, approval procedures, equity access, publication policies and web logistics must also be moulded and manipulated to make podcasting a reality.

The skill set required to develop and deliver podcasts is one that can be readily acquired by most extension officers with minimal training. With a low start-up and ongoing cost, podcasts will quickly become a mainstay in the toolbox of many extension officers.

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