

Dispositions of Tennessee Farmers for Learning

Online

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Abstract

The “How Farmers Learn” research initiative was conducted to examine how producers currently prefer to learn and implications for Extension programs. The study involved 48 producers in five focus groups. A questionnaire was also administered in which producers categorized learning methods as “preferred” or “not preferred”. Female, value added, and organic producers tended to use the World Wide Web (Web) more often than beef, forage and tobacco producers. Age did not influence preference for online learning.

Introduction

UT Extension extends the knowledge and expertise of the University to the people of Tennessee through agents and specialists in all 95 counties of the state. Educational programs in agriculture and natural resources reached 885,171 contacts by Extension personnel in 2007 with 443,191 (50%) being producers.

The “How Farmers Learn” research initiative was conducted to examine how producers currently prefer to learn and what it means for agricultural education, especially Extension education. This project studies the intersection

of farm practices, farm systems, and the farmer as a learner. In Tennessee, this research project was guided by a steering committee of producers and Extension personnel. It explored the preferred learning methods of five different producer groups:

- organic fruit and vegetable producers
- tobacco producers
- beef and forage producers
- value-added producers
- women in agriculture

Objectives

The major objective of this study was to describe producer preferences for learning through different methods, including online. Specific research questions were:

1. Does age influence producer preferences for online learning?
2. Are there differences for online learning across producer groups?
3. What is the relative importance of online learning for producers compared to preferences for other learning methods?

Methods

Producers participated in one of five different focus groups. The focus group sessions lasted approximately two hours, and an example question included, “How do you prefer to learn a new skill or way of operating?” During the focus group sessions, a written questionnaire was used to document preferences. Producers were asked to indicate if they preferred or did not prefer 35 different learning method types. Focus group questions were used to describe why methods were preferred or not preferred. The producer’s age was also collected via the questionnaire.

Findings

The average age of the producers was 48. Age was not specifically related to a preference for Web use. Female, value added, and organic producers tended to use the Web more often than beef, forage and tobacco producers. Online learning was preferred by over two-thirds of producers (71%). The percentage of producers favoring the Web (71%) is smaller than 15 other learning methods including hands-on (100%) and demonstrations (100%); see table.

Producers’ Preferences for Learning Methods (N=48)

| | N (48) | % (100%) |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Demonstration | 48 | 100 |
| Hands-on | 48 | 100 |
| Farm Visit | 46 | 96 |
| Discussion | 44 | 96 |
| One-on-One | 42 | 93 |
| Experiment | 41 | 87 |
| Workshop | 41 | 85 |
| On-farm Test | 40 | 87 |
| Photos | 40 | 83 |
| Field Day | 38 | 81 |
| Question and Answer | 38 | 86 |
| Book/Manual | 37 | 77 |
| Meeting | 37 | 77 |
| Newsletter | 37 | 77 |
| Exhibit | 35 | 73 |
| Fact-Sheet | 34 | 73 |
| Online/Web-based | 34 | 71 |

Producers tended to describe the Web as a source for information to build awareness that later may lead to learning. Producers expressed little interest in structured, online courses, but they did favor convenient websites that made keyword searching easy. Producers consistently used the term “Internet” in reference to the World Wide Web.

“If it is real specific with disease and stuff like that I go on the Internet, and if I am still lost I’ll call up the UT Extension.”

Producers described a major positive of the Web as being able to access information anytime. Other positives included being able to refer back to the information and working at their own pace.

“What I like about the Internet is the fact that you can do 24/7. You can do at midnight or whatever...”

Conversely, some producers noted that some searches take a considerable amount of time or provide more information than they desire to evaluate.

“I have a dial-up connection so I tend to not use the Internet for much searching. I use it for email and that’s about it. It takes too long to wait.”

“I used it a lot at the beginning, but it was just too hard to sift through the information.”

Conclusion

Producers do have preferences for learning, and the majority of producers in this study use the Internet, however, it is not necessarily preferred more often than other methods, especially demonstrations, hands-on, farm visits and discussions. The challenge for Extension is to continually align educational strategies with producers’ preferred learning methods.

Funding for this project was provided by USDA-CSREES Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (Southern Region)