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Complementing tradition, managing change: using communication technology to connect an industry; the case of AGRIWEBINARTM

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ABSTRACT

It is a significant challenge to be successful farming in Canada today. In an ever-changing and increasingly competitive global environment, the Canadian agricultural industry faces the impacts of international competition and trade negotiations, evolving regulations, climate change, shifting consumer demographics and trends, rapidly evolving technology, competition for qualified human resources, and environmental concerns, to name but a few challenges.

Much of the solution to deal with these intensifying realities lies in applying proven business approaches and methodologies, coupled with emerging innovative business thinking. Indeed, producers require the appropriate resources and tools to capture opportunity – to anticipate, respond to, and plan for change.

However, it is not enough to have the facts and figures; rather, appropriate delivery mechanisms for these resources become equally essential to making the information transferrable and more importantly, applicable. Effective communication of proven business practices with tangible benefits will motivate the sector and empower managers to reach for new heights.

This paper focuses on the ever-increasing importance of farm business management – communicating best practices to secure a sustainable and profitable future for Canadian farmers and agriculture at large, using online technology as a means to increase reach and impact, whilst complementing traditional means of information dissemination. The paper seeks to prove delivery is essential to and can greatly enhance content. Specifically, the AgriwebinarTM system exemplifies the importance and benefits of using communication technology to disseminate and encourage farm business management best practices. AgriwebinarTM provides an electronic platform to conduct online seminars on diverse topics to an international audience, and is achieving great success. It is a communication platform that can be used and adopted by other countries for information dissemination and industry collaboration.

KEYWORDS: Farm; management; webinar; education; Canada; online

1. Introduction

The success of any farm enterprise is directly related to the business management skills of the farm manager – this is the *raison d'être* of the Canadian Farm Business Management Council (hereafter referred to as CFBMC or 'Council'). Numerous domestic and international factors influence the profitability, sustainability and success of farmers and other agricultural businesses. Efforts to improve business management practices are critical for the ongoing sustainability and profitability of the agricultural sector.

The Canadian Farm Business Management Council was established in 1992 to coordinate, develop and disseminate farm business management resources and tools to Canadian farmers. CFBMC initiatives provide

farm managers with the tools and inspiration to confront change with confidence and seize opportunity. CFBMC helps farmers assess risk, market potential, develop plans, manage human resources, and understand the forces shaping the world around them.

CFBMC's key to success is not in providing farm business management resources and tools alone, but rather, having effective communication mechanisms to source and deliver the information. The Council is dedicated to using emerging technologies to continuously enhance delivery of products and services to assist existing and reach new target client groups. *Agriwebinar*TM is one such mechanism responding to the learning needs and preferences of Canadian farmers in an increasingly information-technology-based culture. *Agriwebinar*TM as an easy-to-use webinar platform

¹ This paper was originally given at the 18th International Farm Management Association Congress, *Thriving In A Global World – Innovation, Co-Operation And Leadership*, at Methven, Canterbury, New Zealand, 20 – 25 March 2011, and is reproduced by kind permission of the conference organisers.

² Canadian Farm Business Management Council

to improve access to leading edge farm management information for Canadian farmers and the agricultural industry at large.

2. The Medium is the Message³ – Keeping Pace with a Culture

A recent survey by Farm Credit Canada (2009) found that fifty percent of farmers plan to expand or diversify in the coming five years. Likewise, Canada's 2007 National Renewal Survey (Agriculture & Agri-Food Canada, 2007) identified an upward trend in producer participation in farming-related training and in the development of business and related plans such as: financial assessment, production, marketing, environmental, food safety, and human resources. Canadian farmers' passion for their profession remains strong, and so does the need to provide those farmers with the tools and information they need to achieve their goals. While only twenty (20) percent of Canadian producers have a written business plan, of these farmers, seventy-one (71) percent have used these plans to secure financing. Thus, we can demonstrate a direct financial benefit to creating and following formal business plans. Perhaps the problem is not the information, but rather, the delivery thereof.

The question becomes not *what* information is needed, but rather, *how* do we communicate the information to maximize reach and impact towards instilling a culture of farm business management in Canadian producers?

Merriam-Webster defines *management* as "judicious use of means to accomplish an end." (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2010). It is becoming increasingly important for organizations like CFBMC to embrace practices that permit and restore a connection with producers. The management of information – what is being disseminated, and how. Information management is exemplified by *Agriwebinar*TM. Facing a new reality of information overload, it becomes essential for organizations to invest in opportunities that meet the changing needs and preferences of target clients – accessible, cost-effective learning.

It is often said that necessity is the mother of invention. Hectic work and life schedules, along with economic pressures, signify an opportunity to create an alternative mechanism for training and information dissemination. Communication technology, as evidenced by the *Agriwebinar* system, provides a means to reach a broad audience in a way that aligns with current learning trends and increasing demand for accessible, convenient, timely, relevant, reliable, trusted and interactive information transfer and learning opportunities.

While encouraging farmers to stay informed to manage change, Council too must seek to provide resources and information that respond to the changing learning needs and preferences of farmers.

³ McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1964.

3. AgriwebinarTM

*Agriwebinar*TM is a unique and easy-to-use online presentation platform delivered by the Canadian Farm Business Management Council. *Agriwebinar*TM uses state-of-the-art online communication technology to provide farmers and other agricultural stakeholders with access to topical and leading-edge farm business management information and expertise. As an online learning tool, *Agriwebinar*TM mitigates the time, geographic and financial constraints, while also providing an opportunity to complement and communicate between face-to-face meetings such as workshops, conferences and seminars. *Agriwebinar*TM can be accessed by an individual or groups from the comfort of their home or business. Webinars are an effective communication tool to connect with audiences in a way that is convenient and far-reaching - the same information is being communicated coast to coast, in both Official languages.

*Agriwebinar*TM serves as a broadcasting and communication mechanism for a number of presentations and events, including:

- Workshops
- Conferences
- Training
- Corporate communications
- News bulletins and timely information
- Focus groups

The content is not only extended, but also and arguably more importantly, enhanced by its presentation in a new format that responds to current and future learning trends in an increasingly fast-paced learning environment motivated by information technology.

Virtual learning through online technologies is a critical enabler to accelerate the pace of information transfer into agricultural practice and commercialization, and ultimately stimulate growth and prosperity for the agricultural industry. *Agriwebinar*TM uses information and communication technologies in such a way as to present farm business management in interesting, applicable, and accessible way.

Key Features of AgriwebinarTM

- Education & Training
- Accessibility
- Knowledge Transfer / Communication Technology
- Timely, Leading Edge

4. Education & Training – Lifelong Learning and Restoring Extension

For over a decade, there has been a significant lack of formal extension services to the agricultural community in Canada. Extension services provide education and training outside of formal educational programs offered by accredited institutions. Extension serves an important role in lifelong learning to continue to meet the demands of an increasingly complex and competitive society through ongoing educational opportunities.

A University of Illinois survey recognized extension services in farm business management benefit all producers, large or small. However, extension services must adapt to the changing demands for services (Irwin, Schnitkey *et al.*, 2004). *Agriwebinar™* provides a mechanism to bring together the expertise of academia, consultants, government, non-government, and producers, to share best practices, emerging trends and new opportunities. As an easily-accessible educational platform, *Agriwebinar™* provides learning opportunities that respond to and meet the need for easy-access, affordable learning.

It is often said by producers themselves that they respond best to “show and tell” learning. Demonstrating tangible payback from adopting farm business management best practices will continue to drive uptake and create a culture of business management in Canadian agriculture, strengthening the capacity of the sector as a whole. In keeping with this mentality, the webinars focus on practical learning, promoting success stories, and increasing access to and awareness of the suite of tools available for farmers to integrate their learning into business activities.

CFBMC also uses the *Agriwebinar* system to build partnerships for delivery to provide specialized content to a diverse audience – expanding the reach, impact and extension of the educational programming. *Agriwebinar™* also facilitates collaboration and coordination amongst industry stakeholders who are exposed to what is happening across the country (and globe) in their areas of interest.

5. Accessibility & Availability – There are No Limits

Using electronic media, *Agriwebinar™* provides greater access – putting key information into the hands of producers and agricultural stakeholders, without limits. *Agriwebinar™* provides an educational platform that users can adapt to their life stages, work schedules and learning needs and preferences.

Agriwebinar™ truly is exemplary in making pertinent information accessible to anyone. There is no limit to the number of attendees, presenters, or length of the presentation. Content captured through presentation archives adds permanence to traditionally one-time events, increasing reach and impact long after the live event takes place. *Agriwebinar™* complements, while enhancing traditional face-to-face learning. As an online platform, the cost to organizations to deliver information is substantially less than face-to-face learning events, and these savings are passed onto participants. The *Agriwebinar* platform can be used for both public and private access events.

Live and recorded webinars use a combination of:

- PowerPoint slides
- Video and/or audio
- Networking text chat
- Private questions to the presenter
- Resource files and links

This multimedia approach appeals to the diverse learning preferences and practices of participants, while also allowing the information to be manipulated and

repurposed for greater reach and impact. For example, audio can be singled out and provided to users in the form of podcasts to listen to the presentations without requiring access to the internet or a computer. This format also allows for users with slower rural internet connection speeds to access content. The information not only becomes more accessible, but to a wider, more diverse audience. As an online platform, International presenters are not uncommon, and this is an area of great potential.

6. Knowledge Transfer / Communication Technology – Connectivity, Cooperation, Collaboration

Knowledge and information transfer is essential to fostering a culture of farm business management, entrepreneurship and innovation towards improved sustainability and profitability for Canada’s farmers. The 2002 Odyssey Report (Odyssey Group 2010) cites the importance of having a mechanism to transfer knowledge and information: “...to take advantage of innovation and leading-edge technology and remain competitive globally, we must have a mechanism to transfer this information from the academic and research community into practical advice at the farm level.” Such transfer narrows the gap between research and practice; top performers and average or below-average achievers.

Effective knowledge transfer is achieved by employing more accessible, understandable, and applicable formats that use emerging communication technologies to create multimedia-rich learning experiences to address the unique learning needs, preferences and practices of the client (farmers and industry stakeholders). Information must be transferred in such a way that it can be applied at a practical level.

Education, training and knowledge transfer have traditionally been confined to face-to-face events – workshops, seminars and conferences. These means are not cost-effective, are often restricted to one-time events, and information is transitory and reaches a narrow audience. As a web-based tool, *Agriwebinar™* complements and builds upon existing technology transfer mechanisms for more timely and effective knowledge and information transfer. Partnerships and industry relations realized through this platform are reducing duplication of efforts, while providing collaboration and connectivity in the agricultural sector.

Agriwebinar™ shares expertise from not only government, academia, and consultants, but also successful, entrepreneurial and inspirational farmers.

“The over-reliance on scientific knowledge and the neglect of farmers’ tacit (informal) knowledge in agricultural extension practice has long been identified as an impediment to increased agricultural productivity...Since tacit and explicit forms of knowledge complement each other, it is imperative for agricultural extension experts to pay more attention in harnessing the tacit knowledge of farmers and complement that with their explicit knowledge.” (Boateng 2004).

Agriwebinar™ gives innovators and entrepreneurs of all occupations and positions a platform to share &

inspire. Knowledge is uniquely harnessed from the farm-level to researchers, academics, policy makers, etc., thereby fulfilling the need for comprehensive knowledge transfer.

Furthermore, traditional knowledge and information transfer mechanisms are restricted to one-way communication whereby information is presented to an audience in the form of a paper, seminar, etc. for consumption. *Agriwebinar™* provides users with a way to interact with the content and presenter. Participants can interact with one another and the presenter through text chat and question windows. Presenters can also upload files for download by users, giving users access to content outside of and supplementary to the presentation at hand.

Not only is knowledge transfer essential, but also the translation of information into formats that allow and encourage uptake and implementation of the information. The Agriwebinar platform uses a combination of video, audio, text and interactivity to present a complete learning experience that appeals to a diverse audience and recognizes the unique learning needs and preferences of the target audience. The multimedia-based learning format of *Agriwebinar™* makes the information more attractive, interactive, comprehensive and therefore more accessible and understandable.

7. Timely, Leading Edge – Quick Response Mechanics

In an increasingly complex and demanding industry, producers and industry stakeholders must stay informed. *Agriwebinar™* provides timely access to the knowledge, information and resources required to manage change and embrace innovation and entrepreneurship.

Planning a webinar takes virtually no time at all, as the system is set up to be user-friendly for all parties. If so inclined, one could host an Agriwebinar within hours of expressing the desire to do so. Training and technical assistance is available for presenters and users at any time. Likewise, *Agriwebinar™* mobilizes industry and partners with a means to get information out in a timely, accessible way to stakeholders and members.

To ensure effective response to sector needs, *Agriwebinar™* content is 100% client driven. An annual user survey provides feedback on system improvements, as well as speaker and topic suggestions. Thus, the platform and content undergo improvements on an annual basis to continue to serve the industry and its changing needs.

8. *Agriwebinar™* Series – The Results

The *Agriwebinar™* program began in 2006 and is now in its 5th season. The regular season typically runs November – April as this coincides with the off-season for farmers in Canada. Topics covered throughout the season include agricultural economics, business planning, succession, new entrants, marketing, sustainable agriculture, human resource management, value-added agriculture, local food, organic agriculture, and more.

CFBMC continues to host this series of online seminars every year due to its increasing popularity,

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positive feedback and demand by the agribusiness sector including government, non-government, producer groups, producers, advisors and other key industry stakeholders.

Speakers and topics are selected from the results of a client survey conducted previous to each new season of *Agriwebinar™*, thus content is 100% client-driven.

CFBMC's *Agriwebinar* Series

From November to April, CFBMC hosts a webinar every Monday at Noon Eastern Standard Time. Each webinar is an hour in length. These webinars are publicly accessible at no cost for live and archived presentations. The Agriwebinars are presented in both of Canada's Official languages – French and English.

Viewers from all over Canada and the world have signed up to the *Agriwebinar™* system. Currently, over nine thousand (9000) individuals including producers, educators, advisors and other agricultural stakeholders are subscribed to *Agriwebinar™*. Forty-four percent (44%) of subscribers are farmers and farm managers.

Performance is measured by tracking user statistics for live and archived presentations, as well as through an annual survey. CFBMC staff can log into the administrative system at any time to see exactly how many users were on for each session, how long each user viewed the presentation and who was participating.

Since its inception in 2006, *Agriwebinar™* has enjoyed exponential growth in its subscribers. Steady growth in the number of viewers accessing archived webinars, indicates a demand for increased access to information to fit around farm and family commitments.

2009–10 Highlights and User Statistics

Although there is no limit to the number of attendees for any given webinar, the 2009–10 *Agriwebinar* series averaged eighty-seven (87) attendees per live session. This represents a twenty (20) percent increase in live viewership, compared to the 2008-9 season. *Agriwebinar™* also welcomed 2,789 new subscribers to the system and 22,304 visits to the official website: www.agriwebinar.com, via 522 cities in Canada alone. On average, the *Agriwebinar™* archive was accessed over

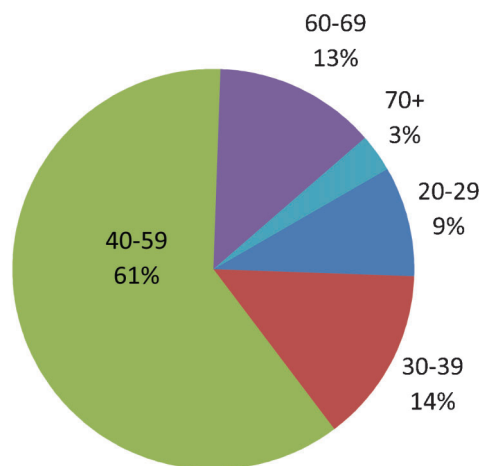


Figure 1: *Agriwebinar* participants by age, 2009–10

750 times per month, clocking close to one hundred (100) hours of viewing.

While users include government, associations, and academia, this year sixty-eight (68) percent of *Agriwebinar*TM subscribers were farmers or professionals providing a direct service to producers (such as consultants or advisors). The majority of participants are between the ages of forty and fifty-nine (61%), however an impressive 23% are under thirty years of age.

It is critical that *Agriwebinar*TM reach young and beginning farmers – to instill a culture of lifelong learning and farm business management to carry throughout their farming careers and ensure an entrepreneurial and innovative future for Canadian agriculture.

*Agriwebinar*TM is achieving immediate, intermediate and long-term results. Users testimonials indicate that the *Agriwebinars* are increasing the understanding of farm business management and the importance thereof, the application of farm business management best practices to farming operations and ultimately, helping Canadian farmers realize their business goals towards greater farm business prosperity and profitability.

The 2009–10 user survey revealed sixty-six (66) percent of respondents felt *Agriwebinar*TM had helped them better manage their business, and seventy-four (74) percent have recommended *Agriwebinar*TM to others, highlighting the valuable work that *Agriwebinar*TM does in bringing relevant and helpful information to the agricultural community.

Following, are some comments from participants:

The information is easily accessible. The presenters have experience and information not always readily available to me. I can use their experience and information to make more informed management decisions.

The farm succession webinar helped our two generations start a positive and productive dialogue that will help to ensure the farm's future viability. Before that, we were stuck.

Increasingly, *Agriwebinar*TM is being used to broadcast and record conferences and other face-to-face

events to increase reach to participants during and after the event. In 2009–10, the Canadian Farm Business Management Council hosted their regular series of twelve (12) webinars, while also broadcasting two conferences: *Managing Excellence in Agriculture* and the *International Farm Succession Conference*, archiving the presentations for future reference, increased reach, and impact.

Figure 2 shows topic popularity, as chosen by participants in the 2009–10 user survey.

9. Partnering to Extend & Effect

The Canadian Farm Business Management Council works with partners and third-party hosts to increase the reach and impact of *Agriwebinar*TM.

The regular *Agriwebinar* season focuses on broad topics of national appeal. Working with partners and third-parties gives Council the opportunity to enhance and expand its content; branching out into specific topics relative to the needs of target audiences. Council can mobilize quickly to partner for delivery. This allows the Council to use *Agriwebinar*TM to more effectively respond to sector needs and deliver information and updates in a timely, far-reaching, and cost-effective manner.

In 2009–10, partners brought an additional forty (40) webinars through the system via a combination of private and public events. Working collaboratively with other industry groups, *Agriwebinar*TM provides a significant opportunity to reach more producers in a way that substantiates the content for participants brought in from all partner groups. The content becomes trusted, reliable and far-reaching. The diverse viewership brought to the *Agriwebinar* platform also raises the profile and brand of the Council, *Agriwebinar*TM and affiliate programs and resources.

Partners and third-parties have the opportunity to use the *Agriwebinar* platform in partnership with the Council to expand public access offerings, or alternatively, host private events. While it is within Council mandate to offer its regular series to producers without

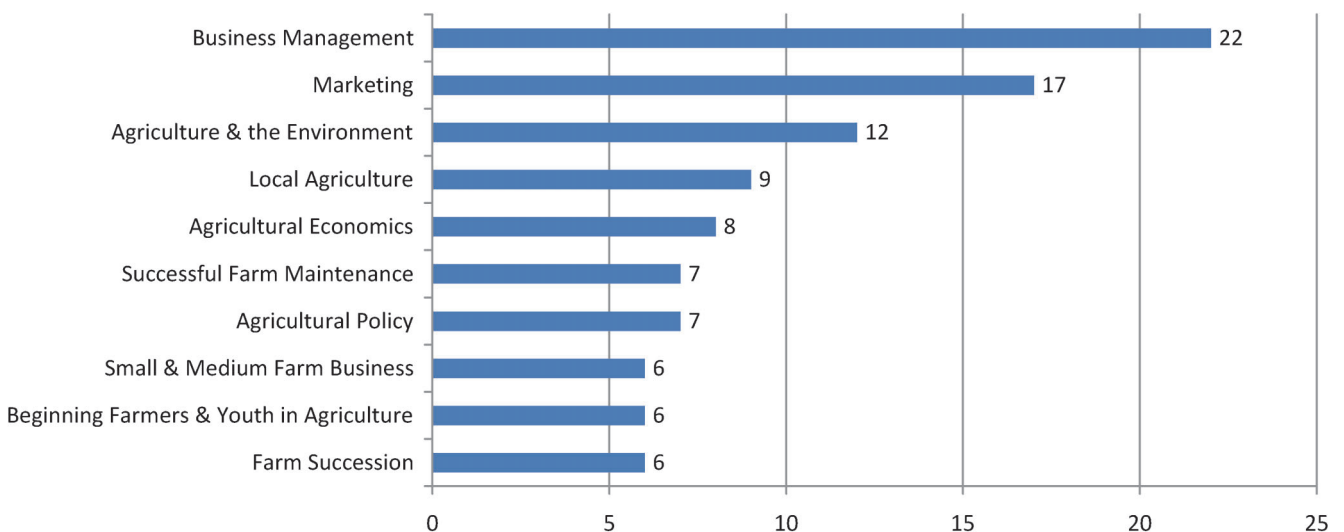


Figure 2: Top ten topic choices, 2010–2011 (by percent of total responses)

charging user fees (*au gratis*), partners and third-party collaborators can use *Agriwebinar*TM as a revenue-generating or cost-recovery stream from participant fees.

10. *Agriwebinar*TM and the International Stage

*Agriwebinar*TM was created as an educational tool to get timely, relevant information and knowledge to Canada's farmers and other industry stakeholders. As an online platform, *Agriwebinar*TM is, by default, international.

In 2009–10, users registered to the system from Africa, Europe, New Zealand and the United States.

On an International stage, *Agriwebinar*TM can be used in three ways:

1. Immediate - Exposure – anyone can subscribe to and participate in Agriwebinars from anywhere in the world
2. Intermediate - Partnership – with CFBMC to provide international perspective presentations
3. Long-Term - Adopt a Similar Program – replicate for your country

Using *Agriwebinar*TM immediately brings information and knowledge transfer into the 21st century and helps portray organizations as leading-edge, using the latest communication technology. No technical knowledge or special equipment is needed to use *Agriwebinar*TM, as it was designed to be easy-to-use by presenters and participants.

11. Conclusions

The Canadian Farm Business Management Council is uniquely positioned to play a leading role in fostering the collaboration needed to effectively reach Canadian farm managers with the information and resources they need to make sound business decisions; connecting agricultural stakeholders across provinces, production sectors, demographics and language groups.

Recognized as a credible, unbiased and nationally-mandated body, CFBMC continues to expand its partnership network; new synergies and opportunities are being realized to deliver real benefits to Canadian farm managers and other stakeholders in the agri-food continuum. Increasingly, industry groups are seeking partnership with CFBMC to network resources and drive farm business management across Canada.

For close to two decades, CFBMC has demonstrated a steady positive impact on the industry and we are committed to continue applying our resources in an effective manner to drive our mandate.

*Agriwebinar*TM is helping CFBMC achieve real results. Agriwebinars provide Canadian farm managers with the tools and inspiration to confront change with confidence and seize opportunity. Agriwebinars helps farmers assess risk, market potential, plan (marketing, business, succession, new venture), manage human resources, and understand the forces shaping the world around them.

Communication technology, as evidenced by the *Agriwebinar* system, provides a means to reach a broad audience in a way that aligns with current learning trends and increasing demand for accessible, convenient, timely, relevant, reliable, trusted and interactive information transfer and learning opportunities.

CFBMC looks forward, with confidence, enthusiasm and optimism, to continue to meet the demands of an increasingly complex industry with advanced learning tools to continue to create a culture of farm business management and lifelong learning for Canada's agricultural stakeholders.

About the author

Heather Watson (heather.watson@cfbmc.com) is General Manager of the Canadian Farm Business Management Council (CFBMC), the only national organization in Canada devoted to the development and dissemination of advanced farm business management information to Canada's farmers. Heather obtained her Bachelor's from the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada, and her Master's from the University of Warwick in Coventry, England.

Heather is passionate about education and committed to enhancing efforts to encourage better business management practices for a sustainable and truly remarkable agriculture industry in Canada. Heather grew up in South-western Ontario and now lives in Arnprior, just outside of Ottawa, Ontario.

Visit www.farmcentre.com to find out more about the Canadian Farm Business Management Council and subscribe to stay informed of farm business management initiatives in Canada.

Acknowledgements

The Canadian Farm Business Management Council is funded in part by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada and the Government of Canada, industry partners and members.

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