Selecting Farm Management Software

by Clyde Vandivort

Clyde Vandivort is President of Chek-Tech, Inc., a subsidiary of Purina Mills, Inc. Chek-Tech's principal business is providing information technology for agriculture and it offers a number of ag software packages for both the farmer and the country elevator.

Assisting farmer-customers in the selection of management software positions lenders as a resource; someone their farmer-customers can count on for advice. The counseling process is also beneficial to the lending institution, because farmer-customers are more likely to buy a software program that will improve financial record-keeping.

A computerized record-keeping system helps customers—and their lenders— spot trends early, and thus helps improve the quality of credit information available to lenders. This financial information not only helps the farmer-customer maintain profitability, it helps document lending needs for banks.

There are a number of suppliers for agricultural software. Which one a farmer chooses depends on many factors, including his experience, or lack of it, in working with computers. Selection of a computer software program not only affects how records are organized, but also the way the farm is operated and in many instances the profitability of the farm. It is a critical decision.

There are seven major steps to cover when evaluating a computerized farm management program.

Identify needs

The first step is for the farmer-customer to identify needs that should be satisfied by a computerized management program. Is he a grain farmer or livestock producer? Grain producers may require programs to track seed and chemical use, make marketing decisions, compare varietal differences, and maintain soil records, as well as financial accounting functions.

Livestock producers may need programs that provide information on individual animals, herd performance, fertility records, labor costs, facilities, feed costs and conversion rates and the financial accounting functions associated with any business enterprise.

The first step is to identify needs that should be satisfied by a computerized farm management program.

Those who produce both grain and livestock may well require a system to handle information on individual enterprises, along with specific production and input information. The final question, when considering any computer software program, is "How will it work for me and my farm?"

Consider training

Another important area of consideration is training, regardless of the customer's experience. Is on-site training available from the software suppliers? Will anyone work with the customer at all, or is it up to the customer to learn through trial and error. Does the software package include training in the base price, or is it an extra cost? Some suppliers provide free hands-on training at the suppliers' location, using hardware similar to the customer's hardware. This helps insure the customer a smooth start with a thorough understanding of the program and what it can and cannot do.

Consider support

Customers also should consider the availability of support in choosing a software program. Customers often

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question how a program works. These questions may pop up only when the program is being used, rather than in a sales presentation, demo or training exercise. Infrequently, there may be a "glitch" in the program. When this happens there must be an easy way to reach the supplier; for example, with a free 800-number. How quickly can the supplier answer questions about problems? If the program is defective, is the supplier willing to exchange the defective program, and how quickly will the exchange be made?

Consider enhancements

Finally, it's important to know if the supplier offers an on-going enhancement program. A quality supplier will continue to improve programs, adding certain features without deleting oth-

ers to make it easier or faster. Ask if the supplier is willing to listen to its customers when they make suggestions, and then incorporate those suggestions in future enhancements. After all, needs change, requirements change, and certain accounting functions may change.

A quality supplier will keep pace with the changes and offer enhancements.

Identify suppliers

Now that the farmer-customer has a list of all of the things he wants the system to do, it's time to check out suppliers. Many exist. How to contact them is the next question. Doane Publishing produces a very complete annual directory of agricultural software. The company can be contacted at 11701 Borman Drive, St. Louis, MO 63146.

As a further check, a company's membership in the Association of Agricultural Computing Companies indicates it is abiding by the association's code of ethics. For information on a supplier's membership status, you can contact the association at PO Box 122, Claytonville, IL, 60926. When considering suppliers, look at how long they have been in this market and whether supplying agricultural software is their core business. If not, they may not provide much help after the sale.

Suggest to your farmer-customer that he contact a few companies directly to obtain information about programs. Then it will be time to start talking with company representatives.

Suppliers can also validate the needs list prepared by the farmer-customer and can often point out other needs

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that should be added to the farmer's list.

Talk to current users

It is also good to talk to current users of programs being evaluated by farmer-customers. This provides the opportunity to see how easy or difficult the program is to use, to learn first-hand about what is good and what is bad about the program, and how it meets the needs of a neighbor with a similar farming operation.

Users enjoy talking about their programs and the companies that supply them. Talking to a dissatisfied customer makes a decision to eliminate that supplier a lot easier. Talking to a satisfied customer is a clear signal to give that supplier a closer look.

Review program capabilities

Next, give each program a close look. Match the program's capabilities with the needs list. Take a "test drive" with a program. Use a neighbor's program or ask a supplier to provide a demo program. Read the documentation.

A satisfied customer is a clear signal to give that program a closer look.

Is it easy to read and understand? If not, the farmer may want to pass on that particular program.

Are "help screens" in the program easily accessible and do they help answer the question or lead to more confusion? Do the program's on-line tutorials exist and are editing features easy to use? It's much easier to eliminate programs with these questions

before the sale, than to try to live with them after the package is opened.

Unless a farmer is willing to bear the expense of custom programming, it is unlikely that a farmer will find a single program that meets all of his needs. Thus, some informed compromises will be required on the part of each customer.