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THE WORLD AT YOUR DOOR

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ABSTRACT

The Internet has provided a door to communications with the world. Opportunities to communicate with people of common interests in remote and geographically distant areas provide a variety of comment, different experiences and learning potential for everyone connected to the system.

This paper reviews my Internet learning process as a non-computer specialist; several different approaches to earning money through this medium; and where farm managers are able to benefit in the future. For people on the information supply side of the Internet, five major means for making money are discussed:

- (1) contracting with business and government to provide specific information;*
- (2) providing an advertising service;*
- (3) providing courses and newsletters at a fee;*
- (4) collecting a finder's fee for linking potential customers with manufacturers; and*
- (5) providing information on specific topics for a fee.*

On the demand side, farm managers benefit from the wide variety of information available on the Internet, electronic mail for fast communication, newsgroups on specific topic areas and mailing lists, all at reasonable cost.

INTRODUCTION

Agriculture in Canada is evolving from single-desk marketing in the west, relatively few crops and types of animals produced, and few handling/processing companies to a more diverse marketing system involving many companies, many new crops and animals and new systems to handle the new crops.

The Internet has been available to government, university and research personnel for a few years. Industry and the general public have become acquainted with the potential for information flow via this computer network over the past year through much media attention. Many Canadian farmers already own computers and modems for farm accounting and for market information. The step to the Internet costs no more than a daily newspaper.

Opportunities are available to learn from others in similar occupations all over the world, messages can be sent and retrieved at times convenient to the user, and advertising of products can attract world-wide attention. People in remote locations can receive information and communicate with others quickly.

When I attended university in the late sixties and early seventies, I avoided computer courses -- someone else was going to generate the computer cards and all I needed to know was the capability of the university computer to handle statistical data so computations could be made without spending hours on the calculator. During the seventies and eighties computers became user friendly and relatively inexpensive. This paper will review my Internet learning process as a non-computer specialist; several different approaches to earning money through this medium; and where farm managers are able to benefit in the future.

LEARNING

My association with the Internet began two years ago with a home page advertising a bioenergy newsletter. I am not a trained computer specialist but have a vision of how the Internet concept can assist farm managers to receive information about crops from around the world and to participate in news and discussion groups with people in similar situations far away. My years working in the grain industry as a farmer, researcher, consultant, and Commissioner at the Canadian Grain Commission give me wide experience gathering information.

There are primarily three ways of addressing agricultural issues:

- posting complete information on the Internet
- compiling comprehensive "link" lists, and
- maintaining business homepages describing role of a business within an industry.

Posting complete information is the most satisfying to those searching for details of a particular subject. Universities and government present the most likely sources of unbiased information about an industry. Industry organizations can serve as factual sources of industry information. Companies can provide very good information about products but the public views the company statements as advertising and biased.

When information is available on the Internet, how is credibility established? Within Canada there is the Agricultural Institute of Canada, an organization of professionals in agriculture. Such an organization could perform a function similar to peer review for scientific journals and provide links to pages considered accurate and informative. Link lists are beneficial to those seeking information and many private companies do

not have links as they are advertising their own products and services. Business homepages are essentially advertisements and must be considered in this context. They can provide much information about the named company but an unbiased assessment is needed to allow the consumer or client to determine the best provider of a product or service. Governments and associations are attempting to provide this assessment. Universities could be a good source of accurate information, however, this seems to be left to the enthusiasm of individual professors.

Search engines provide much information but often they are incomplete and they include many superfluous items e.g. restaurants included with search on noodle making, or music groups being included with search for names of companies. A good link list at an agricultural source is better than a search engine.

Getting Started

When I decided I wanted to become part of the Internet system, I had a modem for file transfer as I did report writing and information research as a consultant. I accessed several bulletin board systems, which provided me with a knowledge of how these systems work.

In early 1995 my connection was to CompuServe, which had a low monthly fee. It was frustrating because as soon as an interesting topic was displayed, additional cost was involved to see the information. Instead of the initial \$10 per month charge it soon ballooned to \$30 or \$40 per month. During this time I purchased several books on the Internet. Courses are available and some people find them very helpful. Because of my work, I found it easier to learn with books and on my own time than by taking courses. Twice I paid for a technical computer consultant to spend an hour with me at my computer to help me understand problems with new software programs.

About the time I realized the expense of retrieving information from CompuServe, many Internet servers surfaced in Calgary. My first service provider was geographically close but never even got me connected to the Internet after two months of \$30 per month charges. I then changed to a service provider who charged about \$100 per year and have been satisfied with this service provider since June 1995.

The choice of a provider is very important as access to the Internet can be difficult if there are not enough access lines. The help provided in using the Internet is important. Since connecting with my current provider, no extra money has been paid for connection time. There is supposed to be a 40 hour per month limit and I have accessed the system as much as I want -- on average between one and two hours per working

day. The provider advertises courses and I did take one course on setting up homepages. This course was extremely helpful and was given in one morning session for a \$90 charge.

Many of the telephone company service providers limit monthly access to several hours and then charge a fee for further use. Telephone companies have become a major provider of Internet service and eventually it may be necessary to subscribe to their service. However, practice is very important and finding a provider with low rates allows you to access and learn the system. Downloading information to one's own computer while on the Internet is a great time and money saver. Just remember you do have to read the information if it is to be helpful!

EARNING MONEY ON THE INTERNET

Business or government paying to have information provided.

The first contract I had was to survey the Canadian bioenergy industry as to interest in using the Internet. A survey was conducted in June of 1995. Response was poor and the industry was small so potential for financial reward limited.

My second contract was with the Farm Business Development Program. During the summer of 1996, confirmation of a proposal to the Farm Business Management Initiative was received to compose and mount pages on the Internet describing Canadian crop quality and how the Canadian grain grading system reflects end use of the crops grown.

For farm managers to make good decisions related to the diversity of crops available for growing and the potential market for each, there must be an understanding of the importance of quality resulting from varying weather conditions, different soils and world-wide demand for the crop.

A home page was assembled for mounting at my site. Necessary up-to-date information was collected from the Canadian Grain Commission in Winnipeg about crop quality from the 1990 to 1995 crop years. Information was collected from provincial government agriculture departments (particularly Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta), and the Universities of Guelph, Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta. From the start of the project information was added to the initial homepage as viewing for critique is easier via the Internet than by using mail or fax transmission. Specific individuals can be given the URL (address) of the site and there is little likelihood of others stumbling on the site. The URL of my site was provided to Canadian Grain

Commission personnel responsible for the different crops. Specific crop pages were submitted to industry groups and University researchers for comment.

When the site is sufficiently developed, the URL can be disseminated through search engine listing. The URL of my crop quality site is:

<http://www.cadvision.com/violetbook/crop.htm>.

An initial quality section explains the quality factors applying to all crops followed by specific information about wheat other than durum, durum, malting barley, general purpose barley, oats, rye, canola, flax and peas. A links page completes the set and links viewers to some other sites where quality information is available. On the links page, links were included for Canadian Grain Commission, ACEIS, Environment Canada, Alberta Agriculture Food and Rural Development and some sites where specific production and processing information can be obtained. Because my homepages were simply and economically mounted, with no pictures, sites which were found, such as a brewery tour added interesting and more elaborate information sources for those interested.

With counters on each page a good estimate of interest is obtained. The counters started on November 18 and continue to date but were reported for the FBMI report on January 31, 1997 (table 1).

Table 1

Viewing of Crop Pages

<u>Page</u>	<u>Nov 18</u>	<u>Nov 30</u>	<u>Dec 11</u>	<u>Dec 31</u>	<u>Jan 15</u>	<u>Jan 31</u>
Home	74	113	113	152	179	212
Quality	2	5	9	10	16	20
swht	2	10	13	20	29	38
dwht	2	6	9	10	13	17
mbal	2	8	11	14	18	23
fbal	2	8	12	14	12	17
rye	2	4	5	7	9	12
canola	2	6	10	13	18	24
flax	2	4	6	7	11	13
peas	2	7	10	12	15	16
links	2	12	16	21	29	43

To give some comparison of other pages and access, a homepage mounted by an American fuel ethanol consultant was accessed 350 times since June 14, 1996. Many pages do not have counters.

The homepage URL was sent to the Web search engines Alta Vista, Webcrawler, and submit-it in addition to agricultural sites in Canada asking for links. Messages were sent to Alberta Agriculture webmaster for including on links page, Alberta Wheat Pool, Saskatchewan Agriculture, ACEIS (Agweb) Agriculture and Food Canada, Cargill, Saskatchewan Wheat Pool, Westco, Western Producer and UGG.

The most significant observation about the access to the pages is how few people accessed the quality page in comparison to those who accessed the home page itself. As a result of this observation I added a sentence on the home page, prior to the Quality link, indicating that material in this section applies to all the crops and is not repeated in the specific crop areas.

Another observation relates to the number accessing the home page relative to the other pages. The November 30 and December 11 home page count was the same at 113 and yet individual page access increased, indicating browsers had recorded the address of specific home pages rather than proceeding via the home page. Updating pages is important so the pages once found will continue to attract the reader on subsequent occasions.

Providing advertising service to a business

Small and medium-sized businesses could afford a simplified explanation of their products with minimal financial expenditure.

Courses, newsletters and other information can be provided at a fee

As a result of my first contract, I decided to publish a bioenergy newsletter on the Internet. All the people who had been surveyed were sent notices about the newsletter. Little positive response was received. I decided to go ahead with the newsletter and see if I could attract more response with activity. The URL of these pages is <http://www.cadvision.com/violetbook/Beth.html>

The objective was to search the Internet for Canadian research and news connected to the bioenergy industry and make this available to subscribers. Very little original publication was intended. One of the very convenient aspects of an electronic newsletter is the ease with which material can be saved and added to another document. This is

also one of the problems associated with electronic mail -- original scripts can be altered. Confidence in the originator of the newsletter is extremely important for the success of the communication.

There was minimal interest expressed from people accessing the pages. Other newsletters have come to the same conclusion, people will read your available information but do not want to pay for the newsletter.

Finder's fee

Collecting a finder's fee for linking the potential customer with manufacturer if a sale is made is a variation of the advertising idea. One small company, Bercan, agreed to supply me with information about their product and share with me a percentage of any contracts received as a result of contacts made through viewing my pages. The URL of these pages is

<http://www.cadvision.com/violetbook/bugs.htm>

Providing information

Providing an information service to management of small and medium size businesses in defined areas has potential. These companies cannot afford the time or money to have major involvement with the Internet. Searches of the Internet can be made by people with knowledge in specific areas so that unnecessary information is discarded from the information provided to the client.

BENEFIT TO FARM MANAGERS

Australian report

An Australian report on an Internet survey in their country, found that:

- few providers seek to use the Internet as a major means of information delivery
- current weather information is popular with the agricultural community
- technical production information is available
- farm news is available
- marketing information is weak.

The greatest potential for the Internet is with interaction through newsgroups, e-mail, mailing lists and chat lines.

User needs

- farmers need to be educated about what can be provided by the Internet

Study needs

Users expectations before access and then deficiencies after using Internet for awhile. Those on the Internet are mainly interested in weather and price information. Some interest in other areas.

Search engines need to be more specialized, have more detail about site content, have a compendium of information and increase the human interface. The survey found that Internet usage substitutes for TV watching, and does not substitute for talking to neighbours or participating in community activities. There is potential for education and training but people have to know who has credentials.

After reading the report of the survey, my comments comparing these findings to the Canadian situation are in two areas. Pricing and marketing information is fairly good in Western Canada, primarily due to the Internet interest of the Pools and United Grain Growers. There could be a role for the agrology professional organization, the Agricultural Institute of Canada, or provincial institutes, to provide peer review of sites.

Putting information from research on the Internet can provide facts to the interested farmer quickly. Newsgroups for particular interest groups provide good critique potential for mounted pages. Lists exist for specific interests. I joined the bioenergy list to receive bioenergy communications. This list has yielded more information for me than special interest newsgroups. Questions are posed and any member of the list can give a response. If other members of the list disagree with the initial response or want to add additional information about the original question this can be done easily. Each question and response is sent to all on the list. With newsgroups you must access the group at least once a week to see the questions and answers, or search on www.dejanews.com for specific topics.

Farm managers can benefit from current weather and market information, research results, extension information, technical information and communication with other farm managers. Communication is at the user's convenience and available twenty-four hours a day, 365 days a year. During the two years of my association with the Internet, there has been rapid development of web page sites and explosion of information resources. The future can bring much information from around the world to your door. Open the door and welcome the new visitor.