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Best Management Practices for Beginning Farmer Support

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Abstract: Many beginning farmers have little previous contact with Extension, yet they will comprise an important part of our future base of support. We present those educational activities directed toward beginning farmers that represent high impact, outcome-based Extension programming, given an educator's time limitations. This checklist of insights will provide educators with a clearer sense of how they can most effectively spend their beginning farmer support time. The lists are divided into workshop strategies and one-on-one strategies.

Introduction

Extension educators receive many inquiries each year from individuals and families sincerely interested in starting a new farm. Increasingly, educators are recognizing the significance of providing high-quality assistance to beginning farmers. Whether these inquiries are handled on an individual basis or as group workshops, Extension educators working with beginning farmers usually agree that helping agriculture entrepreneurs plan out their vision is as meaningful as all the referrals and production guidelines.

Although several older studies and papers provide useful guidelines for beginning farmer education (Griffith, 1991; Trede & Whitaker, 1998), drastic changes in where and how people get information about starting a farm compel us to improve upon our new farmer education efforts.

We have identified those educational activities directed toward beginning farmers that represent the highest impact, outcome-based Extension programming. The insights should provide Extension educators with a clearer sense of how they can most effectively spend their beginning farmer support time.

It is helpful to think of these as "Best Management Practices for Beginning Farmer Support" (BMPs for BFS)—techniques and actions preferred by new farmers, straightforward for the educator, and more likely to

develop a successful farmer-educator relationship.

We developed this list of BMPs for BFS by testing different contact techniques over the past 5 years in rural, semi-rural, and semi-urban communities. Additional ideas came from new farmers responding to the question, "What aspects of new farmer training are working well for you?" We also convened a group of Extension educators in New York who specialize in serving beginning farmers to distinguish *good* practices from *best* practices.

Working with Beginning Farmers One-on-One

- Gather key information over the phone first, and use an "intake sheet" to keep your data organized (see example at <http://www.nybeginningfarmers.org/educators/index.php?page=intake>). Your records of phone calls and walk-ins will give you hard formative data on what social, agronomic, and land use trends are occurring.
- Recognize that many beginning farmers come to us with "lifestyle" goals, and a business plan does not naturally flow from that mindset. Let them get to the point where they want a business plan to continue developing the farm. This pace will be different for each entrepreneur. After all, even veteran farmers do not necessarily have business plans.
- It is better to visit the prospective farmers on their land if possible. While this used to be the norm in Extension, time limitations have made farm visits more rare. Your visits will give you more information about infrastructure and marketing possibilities.
- Be considerate of their intent to jump right in to farming. Help define a measurable goal for the next few months as they get started. Write that goal down in a letter or e-mail and help them achieve it. Our job is to guide beginning farmers from one success to another.
- Before breaking off the meeting, set a follow-up appointment in a few months. Avoid the temptation to say "call me if you need help." You might not hear from them again.

Working with Beginning Farmers in a Workshop Setting

- Nothing beats having farmer speakers explain the details of raising a crop or livestock in their own words; this always resonates strongly with beginning farmers. The farmer presenter should be a successful farmer, not one who would lament on problems or be discouraging. This could leave new farmers confused. Encourage farmers presenter to bring along the books or resources they finds most helpful in running their farm.
- Blend farm business topics with production topics—do not treat them as separate subjects. For example, refer to cash flow, tax programs, and marketing while you discuss crop planting, harvesting, and storage. In real life, they are intertwined.

- A planned series of shorter classes has more impact on the participants than a one-time event. The time between sessions allows them to think of questions to address in class.
- If you can only do a 1-day event, present it as a sampler of possibilities, knowing that follow-up may be difficult. Classes should not be longer than 2 hours—the information can be overwhelming to take in all at once.
- Plan for an informal period (30-45 minutes) for participants to talk to each other or the presenters one-on-one. Many participants will be reluctant to ask questions in front of the group and prefer to make personal contact with others.
- Build in a way to follow up directly with each participant at least once after the workshop. Place them on an announcement list to keep them updated.
- You do not need to separate those "exploring" farming possibilities from those who have already started farming. Both have a lot to learn from each other and from experienced farmer speakers.
- It is worth the effort to host a beginning farmer class at a working farm, though the logistics can be difficult. The overall experience is very valuable, because many beginning farmers have not been on a farm lately to see modern small farm features (e.g., plasticulture, intensive rotations, drip irrigation, and fencing).
- Provide time for participants to write down their questions at the beginning of a workshop or series and again part-way through. Answer these questions in writing for the benefit of the whole class.
- Use a skills and knowledge checklist so beginning farmers can see which they have mastered, which they are developing, which they had no idea they would employ, and which to target for additional training.

BMPs Work Only When They Are Used

Many new farmers are also new to Extension. The impression they form of your Extension program at the outset will affect their participation in the future. The ideas presented here are meant to help you make the most of the time you spend working with new farmers, even if it is just a few hours each month. Like BMPs in any other realm, it is not enough to know about them; they are techniques that will deliver great results if put into action.

References

Griffith, K. (1991). Finding the niche: Case studies of beginning small-scale farmers with recommendations for programs for beginning farmers. Mount Horeb, WI Wisconsin Rural Development Center.

Trede, L., & Whitaker, S. (1998). Beginning farmer education in Iowa: Implications to Extension [On-line], 36(5) Article 5FEA3. Available at: <http://www.joe.org/joe/1998october/a3.php>

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