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Factors of Success for Large Agricultural Field Events

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Abstract: Traditional crop management field days at research stations in Minnesota and Wisconsin were attracting a declining number of attendees. These events present a wide array of topics to a diverse farmer and agricultural professional audience. To increase participation, we created single-theme events for farmers called "Expos." These Expos offer multiple opportunities for receiving new information, including educational presentations, interactive farmer panels, static equipment displays, and vendor booths, coupled with the attraction and interaction of in-field side-by-side equipment demonstrations. The result has been a series of expos in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa that have attracted up to 750 participants each.

Introduction

Traditional crop management field days at research stations in Minnesota and Wisconsin were attracting a declining number of attendees. These events present a wide array of topics to a diverse farmer and agricultural professional audience. The attendees, usually on tour wagons, listen to speakers standing in static field plots, with little one-on-one interaction between speaker and farmer. In past years, this was a successful format (Reisenberg & Gor, 1989). However, land grant universities are no longer the primary source of crop and livestock education (Lawson & Dail, 1966). They share the arena with a multitude of agricultural businesses.

To reverse the trend of declining participation, we created single-theme events, called "Expos," for farmers and agricultural professionals. The expos focus on in-depth information for a single management topic. Davis (2006) indicated that for education to be effective, educators need to address multiple learning styles. Numerous studies show farmers prefer a combination of communication channels when getting their agricultural information and specifically prefer interpersonal communication methods (Licht & Martin, 2007; Reisenberg & Gor, 1989). Within the expo format, we offer multiple opportunities for receiving new information, coupled with the attraction of in-field side-by-side equipment demonstrations. The result has been a series of expos in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Iowa that have attracted up to 750 participants each. This article describes the development and factors of success of this format.

Program Design and Planning

The initial event was the Wisconsin Manure Expo conducted by University of Wisconsin Extension and the Professional Nutrient Applicators Association of Wisconsin in 2001 and in 2003. The manure expo rotated into Minnesota in 2005, followed by two Minnesota strip tillage expos in 2006, and expanded to multi-state strip-tillage expos in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin in 2007 and 2008.

The expo format includes four components:

1. Side-by-side field demonstrations of equipment and practices focused on the theme of the expo.

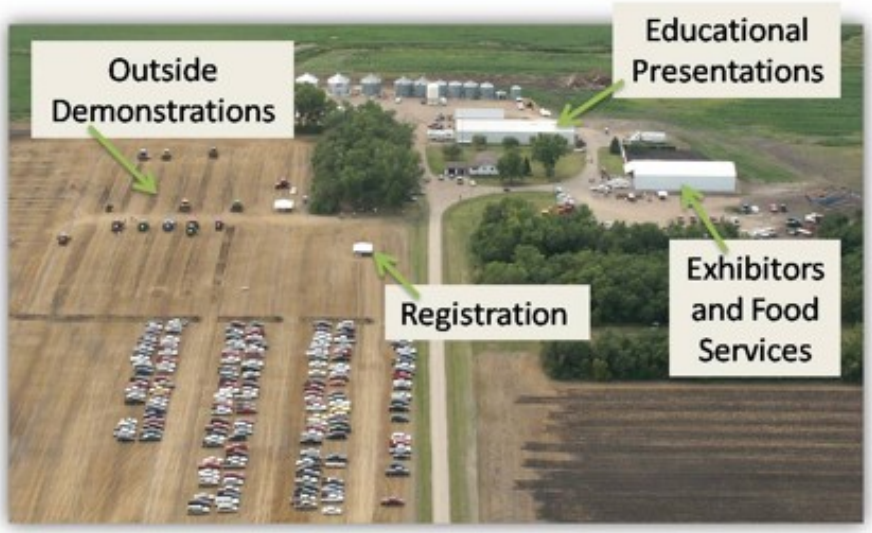
2. Static displays of equipment and information booths, consistent with the theme of the expo.

3. Presentations by researchers and other specialists.

4. A panel of farmers experienced in the area or practice addressed by the expo.

Combining these components in one event is most easily carried out at a university research farm that has fields for demonstrations near buildings appropriate for displays and speaker presentations. However, one expo was held at a commercial farm that had sufficient building space for displays and presentations (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Aerial View and Layout of the Strip Tillage Expo in Rothsay, Minnesota



The field demonstrations are managed by Extension staff and carried out by equipment vendors (e.g., strip tillage, guidance systems, and manure application) and others (e.g., manure spill response). This requires an agricultural field pre-marked for individual equipment assignments, a portable sound system, and transportation or direct access to the inside presentation and display areas. Equipment offloading facilities are necessary at the site or nearby.

Static equipment displays and information booths require a combination of outside and inside display space. Given the large audiences attending these expos, speaker presentations are most effective with appropriate sound systems, projection equipment, and room lighting, all of which are more available at university research farms than commercial farms.

Planning begins the preceding year to reserve the site, arrange for the appropriate demonstration field crop management, inform equipment vendors, and invite speakers. A combination of university and government agency staff, farmers, crop consultants, equipment vendors, and other agricultural industry representatives working in committees for speaker selection, vendor invitation, publicity, site preparation, food service, and other arrangements has worked well. Firm guidelines regarding the scope of the presentations, demonstrations, and exhibits are essential to maintain the focus of the expo. Guidelines are also needed to conduct the field demonstrations, both to ensure fairness among vendors and to adhere to the educational objective of the expo.

Financing the expos has been accomplished by a mix of grants, corporate sponsorships, and vendor fees. Entrance fees have not been charged because of the difficulty of securing a large site. The largest single expense has been publicity in regional farm magazines and radio networks. However, the educational mission is advanced by engaging these media outlets, because they often publish companion articles and broadcast stories on the topic of the expo. Vendors also assist with publicity to their large client lists.

Program Results

All expos conducted by individual states attracted participants and exhibitors from neighboring states. The single-theme focus enabled participants to gather in-depth information from the demonstrations and presentations, and also from other participants. This was evidenced by the large attendance at and questions for the farmer panels.

Recognizing that participants do not have the patience for long surveys during these events, we were able to obtain some basic information on their location (zip code), size of operation, and farm practices relating to the topic (e.g., tillage practices relative to crop rotation). We did not provide participant addresses to vendors. Examples of summaries from four expos are in Table 1.

Table 1.
Attendee Information at Four Expos Offered Across Minnesota and Wisconsin

Location	**Waseca, MN**	**Lamberton, MN**	**Rothsay, MN**	**Sauk City, WI**
Approximate Attendance	295	300	450	550
Occupation	72% producers	57% producers	67% producers	39% producers
	8% crop consultants	12% crop consultants	6% crop consultants	28% crop consultants, professional applicators
	14% gov't agency	15% gov't agency	11% gov't agency	30% gov't agency
Acres Owned or Managed	> 333,000 acres	> 700,000 acres	> 1,518,000 acres	N/A

A more detailed evaluation of 48 attendees was conducted at the 2007 Wisconsin Manure Expo (J. Blasczyk, personal communication, March 2009). Key findings of this detailed assessment included the following.

- The "hands-on" style of the Expo is preferred.
- Live-action equipment demonstrations are essential.
- Networking opportunities, listening to farmers speak about their needs and current practices, and having people with common career interests together were key.
- Attendees prefer to avoid busing from site to site; one large site is ideal.

Summary

We were able to create a successful, educational event and increase participant numbers by using a single production management topic. These expos have strengthened relationships among Extension, farmers, and equipment manufacturers by providing multiple modes of engagement. Partnerships have developed at research stations from both the strip tillage and manure expos, allowing researchers to use newer

technologies in existing research trials. By showcasing new technology and featuring farmers using the techniques during the educational sessions, the expos have also brought Extension back into a leadership role in the eyes of crop consultants and producers.

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