

Field Day Success Loop

Abstract

Field days continue to be useful for Extension professionals conducting outreach with farmers, so long as those events incorporate an interpersonal, farmer-led instructional style and are followed up with an evaluation strategy that documents the long-term influences field day attendees have on their peers. At Iowa Learning Farms, we have formulated a successful method for conducting field days that has led to a set of progressive impacts we refer to as the "field day success loop." By drawing on the multifaceted approach to evaluation that contributes to the success loop, Extension professionals can strengthen their own field days and track the long-term impact of farmers' influence on their peers regarding implementing conservation practices.

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Introduction

Iowa Learning Farms (ILF) began in 2004 as an Iowa State University Extension and Outreach program to promote improvement of Iowa's water and soil quality through education about conservation farming practices. Faced with Iowa's recently established nutrient reduction strategy goal of reducing nitrate and phosphorus loads in waterways by a total of 45% through voluntary compliance (Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, & Iowa State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, 2016a, 2016b), those of us on the ILF staff asked, "What outreach method will have the greatest success in helping farmers get the knowledge and tools they need to adopt conservation practices?" We determined that the answer lay in talking to them and encouraging them to talk to others. Specifically, we have found field days to be the most successful outreach method with farmers when those events incorporate an expert presentation and opportunities for farmer-to-farmer interaction. Moreover, by using an evaluation process that monitors both farmers' commitments to conservation practices and their networking influences on other farmers, we have been able to track the long-term impact of field days.

Field Day Structure and Evaluation

Over 13 years of conducting farmer outreach, ILF staff members have taken seriously the program's role as that of "information filter" (Licht & Martin, 2007) for farmers looking for concise, up-to-date information on agricultural conservation practices that are both effective and economically feasible. We communicate with farmers in a variety of ways, including via field days, landowner/tenant meetings, appearances with our Conservation Station and Rainfall Simulator, Conservation Chat podcasts, webinars, articles in agricultural

magazines, and blogging.

Field days have been at the heart of ILF interactions with farmers from the beginning. Studies have shown that farmers' preferred method for learning about the application of new land management practices is accessing new information through interpersonal communications with experts and other farmers (Licht & Martin, 2007). ILF field days are cohosted by experts on agricultural conservation research and farmers who are already using the featured conservation practice on their land. The importance of farmers' learning from other farmers cannot be overstated, as studies have shown that farmers value the experiences of their peers and enjoy teaching one another (e.g., Franz, Piercy, Donaldson, Westbrook, & Richard, 2010). We seek to follow the suggestion by Franz et al. (2010) to "use this interest in peer teaching as an educational delivery method and as a way to enhance adoption of new practices" ("Discussion," para. 7).

The structuring of field days around expert presentations and farmer-to-farmer interaction and the use of a multifaceted approach to evaluation are two important aspects of each ILF field day. We employ a four-component process to evaluate our field days:

1. *Event evaluations.* ILF staff complete event evaluations that highlight audience level of engagement, questions asked throughout the event, and the overall positive and negative elements of the experience. These internal evaluations guide planning for future field days.
2. *Comment cards.* All participants are asked to fill out comment cards, on which they provide contact information and identify how they found out about the event.
3. *Follow-up evaluations.* Mailed to all field day attendees within 3 weeks following the event, follow-up evaluation forms contain questions about the clarity and accessibility of the information presented and whether participants are planning any land management changes as a result of what they learned at the event.
4. *January evaluations.* In January, we send evaluations to farmers and landowners who attended ILF field days the previous year. These one-page surveys include questions asking whether farmers implemented the changes they said they would, what obstacles prevented their implementing conservation practices, and whether they have networked with or influenced other farmers related to conservation.

Evaluation Outcomes and Implications

We consistently get a 40% response rate to our two mailed evaluations. A summary of evaluation outcomes and their implications is shown in Table 1. A pattern emerges in the evaluation data that begins and ends with attending field days, thereby demonstrating the progressive impacts of field day participation. We call this phenomenon the "field day success loop," and it is further explained in the next section of this article.

Table 1.

Iowa Learning Farms (ILF) Field Day Evaluation Data and Implications

Farmer action related to field

day success loop

Evaluation data^a

Implication of data

Attends field day

89% of field day attendees were

ILF is reaching direct decision makers with

	farmers/operators (2016 data)	education on land management practices.
Gains knowledge and support	30% of attending farmers reported lack of knowledge as a barrier to implementing additional conservation practices; 93% of attendees reported that the overall quality of field days was good or excellent (2016 data)	The interpersonal, farmer-to-farmer presentation style of ILF field days is preferred by farmers seeking knowledge and instruction.
Increases confidence related to adopting conservation	66% of attendees went to two or more field days during the year (2014 data)	The more field days a farmer attends, the more likely he or she is to demonstrate confidence with regard to conservation by networking with/influencing other farmers (see "Networks with others" row).
Adopts conservation	48% of attendees who had planted cover crops in previous years were adding more; 21% of attending farmers planted cover crops for the first time (2016 data)	Field days reach both early adopters as well as farmers who are new to conservation practices.
Networks with others	52% of those who attended one field day reported networking with others; 66% of those who attended two or more field days reported networking with others; 83% of those who attended three or more field days reported networking with others (2016 data)	The more field days a farmer attends, the more likely he or she is to network with others about conservation practices.
Increases influence	Of those who networked, 71% reported that they were successful in influencing at least one other farmer to adopt conservation (2016 data)	Farmers are extending ILF's influence to 48% more farmers than attended the event. If 100 farmers attended a field day, 48 additional farmers heard about the information. In this way, farmers become Extension "extenders" through their networking influence. ^b

^aData were compiled from the following sources:

Iowa Learning Farms. (2016). *Building a culture of conservation: 2016 evaluation report*. Ames, Iowa.

Retrieved from <https://www.iowalearningfarms.org/content/ilf-reports>

Iowa Learning Farms. (2014). *10 year report*. Ames, Iowa. Retrieved from

<https://www.iowalearningfarms.org/content/ilf-reports>

^bDillman, D. A., Engle, C. F., Long, J. S., & Lamiman, C. E. (1989). Others influencing others. *Journal of Extension*, 27(1), Article 1FEA5. Available at: <https://joe.org/joe/1989spring/a5.php>

Explanation of the Field Day Success Loop

The actions and implications described in Table 1 illustrate the field day success loop (Figure 1). Farmers attend field days seeking information before implementing conservation practices. ILF strives to provide the knowledge and tools farmers are looking for, and our data show that the more field days farmers attend, the more likely they are to implement conservation practices, such as planting cover crops. Additionally, ILF evaluation results indicate that field day attendees who planted cover crops in previous years are adding more and that others are adding cover crops for the first time. Those who plant cover crops are eager to share their experiences with peers, and those with more cover crops have greater influence on their peers. Word of mouth is a strong tool for bringing farmers to field days, and the more field days a farmer attends, the more likely he or she is to adopt practices.

Figure 1.

Field Day Success Loop



Farmers' attending multiple conservation field days increases both their implementation of conservation practices and their networking effectiveness. ILF field days are reaching not just early adopters but also those who are new to conservation practices through the networking efforts of field day attendees. In other words, we preach it to the choir, and they sing it in the coffee shops.

Conclusion

If Midwest states hope to meet the goals of reducing nutrient loss through voluntary compliance, field days should be a key part of farmer outreach. ILF field days offer farmers a chance to hear from experts about fresh research on conservation farming practices and to discuss those practices with other farmers currently using them. Farmers who attend field days are more likely to implement conservation practices and to network with

peers and influence peers to consider practices. These activities extend the impact of field days to new audiences, as is illustrated by the field day success loop.

ILF's interpersonal approach to outreach, its evaluation process, and farmers' own networking efforts comprise the field day success loop. Extension professionals are encouraged to use the success loop model and our evaluation process to better track the effectiveness and long-term impacts of farmer field days.

References

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Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship, Iowa Department of Natural Resources, Iowa State University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. (2016b). *Iowa nutrient reduction strategy annual progress report*. Retrieved from <http://www.nutrientstrategy.iastate.edu/sites/default/files/documents/1516progress.pdf>

Licht, M. A. R., & Martin, R. A. (2007). Communication channel preferences of corn and soybean producers. *Journal of Extension*, 45(6), Article 6RIB2. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2007december/rb2.php>

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