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Harvesting FARMERS' OPINIONS

Everyone in agriculture benefits when good market research is happening. But some research practices can be abusive.

Now that spring is well under way, farmers are busy with the myriad of activities that make for a successful operation. Other parts of the agriculture industry also swing into action with the receding snow. Market research starts with a vengeance in April, but why is it that just as you begin your 12 hour days, the phone never seems to stop with someone wanting "just a few moments of your time?"

Because farmers buy so many inputs, they are among the most intensively researched business groups. I have heard of farmers who have participated in five questionnaires per week. All the major chemical companies, equipment manufacturers and even Statistics Canada are busy monitoring farmers' activities, probing for opinions on products and trying to predict what they will do next year. Is it all necessary? How does this research benefit the average farmer? When should you participate in this research? When should you refuse?

I must lay my cards on the table. Our company often performs market research for ag industry clients. We call farmers with questions about their plans and their experiences. We probably have called some of you in the last three years.

While I believe that the information farmers provide benefits all participants, I also freely

admit that some practices used by market researchers are tiresome, even abusive.

How do farmers benefit from the research? Just as with any product, to develop, test and register a new chemical is a multi-year process costing many millions of dollars.

Developing a new system, such as transgenic canola and other herbicide tolerant crops, is a high stakes gamble. Mistakes in predicting the market, setting the wrong price or missing a

critically needed feature will cost the company market share, profits and ultimately may require layoffs. The information provided by growers offers insights into where to develop new products. Measuring the willingness to pay for a new chemical allows the company to decide whether it can set a price that justifies the development costs. It also allows the company to develop advertising and promotions that increase market share and allow the firm to expand.

No reason exists for a farmer to be interested in the welfare of one business or even one of its employees. Anyone may refuse to participate in a survey. Still, consider this. The competitive process is very efficient at introducing innovations. Farmers have clearly benefitted from the competition among machinery companies with improved productivity of the equipment. It's

unlikely that a single firm or a government agency would have introduced innovations as quickly. Market research is an important tool that the industry uses to present farmers with new products.

Responding to a survey or attending a focus group can benefit the farmer directly. We often get participants in our research expressing pleasant surprise over the value of the process. By asking interesting questions and probing for information you may not have thought about, much can be learned. When we conduct a focus group, where fewer than a dozen farmers consider issues such as advertising, pricing and product features, we usually find that everyone has learned something. Often the informal meeting will continue for an hour after the group session has stopped.

Some research is abusive to the participant and often leads to poor information for the sponsor. I am constantly puzzled why so much survey research is done in July, August and September. Everyone does it. Statistics Canada confirms planting activity and the major chemical companies are starting their pricing and promotional designs for the next crop year. However, questionnaires that keep the farmer on the phone more than 30 minutes after he or she has had a long day in the field cannot pro-

duce valid data. All research companies are finding increased refusals from farmers and this is directly attributable to the increasingly unreasonable demands of research companies.

Things are changing. Most simply, researchers are paying farmers for their time. While these are token amounts for participating in a telephone survey, payments of \$50 are common for attending a focus group session of two hours. We are also exploring the use of faxed questionnaires and Internet surveys that allow farmers to answer when convenient and not at 11:00 p.m. after a day in the fields. Toll-free lines are being used to track farmer opinion and especially their complaints. Finally, we are exploring how to form consumer advisory panels so that growers can offer direct opinion to the manufacturer.

Although participating in market research may seem pointless, it has clear benefits for the farmer. Our obligation as researchers, is to make the experience pleasant and, if possible, to create a setting where the farmer can learn something. ♣

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