Small/midsize Iowa farmer marketing, entrepreneurship, business planning training

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Small/midsize Iowa farmer marketing, entrepreneurship, business planning training

Abstract
This highly customized training program was targeted to small and midsize farmers as well as off-farm ag-related (food/fiber) entrepreneurs in northeast Iowa.

Keywords
Business management distribution and marketing, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs, Market research and feasibility studies

Disciplines
Agribusiness | Business Administration, Management, and Operations | Entrepreneurial and Small Business Operations | Marketing

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Abstract: This highly customized training program was targeted to small and midsize farmers as well as off-farm ag-related (food/fiber) entrepreneurs in northeast Iowa.

**Question & Answer**

**Q:** What are the factors that prevent individuals from participating in training programs that might help them gain business and marketing skills?

**A:** Time/season, cost, method of delivery, program content, length of training, and location of training are barriers to successful program delivery.

**Background**

Farmers and ag-related entrepreneurs interested in differentiated value chain agriculture enterprises need skills in marketing, entrepreneurship, and business planning. A major obstacle is the amount of time needed to gain these skills, as well as time to receive ongoing support. It is essential that training be matched to the farmers' specific interests, needs, and availability. A first step is to identify how many individuals are interested in these enterprises, their education level, barriers that may prevent them from participating in training, and their level of commitment to training. Following the training, a support network should provide continuing training and assistance. MyEntreNet (through the UNI Regional Business Center) provides ongoing training online at www.uni.edu/rbc.

Three phases were implemented in this training program:

- Market research,
- Curriculum development, delivery, and evaluation, and
- Ongoing support network.

**Approach and methods**

Mail surveys were sent to 4,000 farm families. In addition, 80 MyEntreNet subscribers participated. Responses were received from 356 individuals.

**Results and discussion**

Results of the survey suggested that small and midsize farmers were highly interested in training and most are already engaged in some kind of off-farm income-producing activity in northeast Iowa. These farmers are very price-conscious and sensitive to demands on their time, but a majority indicated their interest in increasing their non-farm income over the next few years. Farmers showed a clear interest in all 10 business topics offered, but marketing, production, and finance/bookkeeping were of particular significance.

Based on these findings, the UNI Regional Business Center developed three workshops:

- Marketing I: A Rural Business Owners’ Guide to Finding Information on the Internet
- Marketing II: Branding Your Company—Crafting Your Advertising Strategy

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**Budget:**
$26,000 for 18 months
Money In-Money Out: Securing and Managing Business Capital

The workshops were scheduled for a three-week period in February 2006 (the time identified as optimal in the survey) and marketed through mailings and media (newspaper and radio) publicity. Only two farm entrepreneurs registered, so the series was cancelled.

The Regional Business Center staff questioned the mechanics of the mail marketing that was done, and decided to reconfigure the workshops and follow up the mailing with direct phone contact to targeted farm households.

The workshops were rescheduled for August 2006, another month cited by respondents as acceptable for training. The sessions were reformatted to be shorter, and to occur on one day. Cost was $20 for the workshops, plus lunch. Nineteen participants registered for all three workshops and 17 attended all the sessions. All workshop sessions were supported by an interactive online learning community.

Conclusions

Relevant program content, as identified by survey results, does not guarantee participation by the target audience. Relevant program content must be accompanied by low cost, low time commitment for the users, and convenient delivery location.

Impact of results

Evaluations of the August workshops by participants were very favorable. Those who attended were exceptionally pleased with the low price and high value for the time they invested.

Education and outreach

As part of the workshop, participants received a web tour of existing resources and networking opportunities online, and were encouraged to return to the MyEntreNet site for further discussion forums of interest. The day after the workshops, participants received emails with some conversation starters, and a healthy round robin discussion was launched.

Leveraged funds

No funds were leveraged by this grant.

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