



# EXTENSIONNET

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## Business improving? Continue!

### Using the Better Practices Process to improve the outcomes from working with groups of dairy farmers in Victoria

by Melinda Mann

DPI Victoria, Kyabram

Victorian dairy farmers have found ways to improve on-farm performance not only by using specific management tools but also by thinking hard about which tools they need.

As part of a strategic initiative within Target 10 (a dairy-based extension project), the Continuous Business Improvement (CBI) program was developed to complement the existing suite of programs for the Victorian dairy industry. After an initial development phase four pilot programs were trialed across the state.

The emphasis of this extension research project was to develop a program that aimed to integrate all aspects of the Dairy farm as a system and allow farmers to measure performance and make improvements to their business.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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#### From the editor

In an era when budgets are making it increasingly more difficult to travel, APEN chapters and members are bucking the trend by organising more events. There really is simply no substitute for face-to-face contact, and this edition is full of information about forthcoming events (we're very excited about the APEN Forum in Tasmania!). Do your best to get along to one or more of these events and help keep the professional community alive. It's guaranteed you'll meet some interesting people.

The APEN National Executive recently met in Melbourne to revisit the strategic plan and evaluate its role in making the plan happen. The strategic plan was largely left as is, but NE portfolios - the system we use to actually do the work we're asked to do - were slightly reshuffled thanks in part to the influx of some new NE members with plenty of marketing savvy. These new NE members are introduced on page 11; if you have ideas for how to market APEN more effectively, be sure to get in touch.

Darren Schmidt

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## Business improving? Continue! (cont'd from p1)

The expected outcome from the pilot programs was:

"Dairy farmers are continuously using improvement processes to identify and act on specific opportunities which improve the enterprise, financial, people and environmental aspects of the farm business".

Overall, there was a strong and diverse interest in the CBI program. A total of 32-farm businesses were involved across the four pilot locations, carrying out 73 group activities within 12 months. The wide range of activities were: 21 meetings, 3 farm walks, 35 farm visits, 1 two day workshop, 2 mini field days, 8 interviews, 1 bus trip and 3 phone conferences. In addition, each business committed substantial amounts of time to their own projects between group activities.

Each of the four pilot groups were delivered using a flexible approach where the farmers controlled the direction and operation of the program. Each program worked towards achieving the 6 steps outlined in the Better Practices Process (BPP) and individuals were required to have an action plan. See diagram, below.



The Better Practices Process

### Key Messages from the Pilot Programs

Over time facilitating the process was more about getting the philosophy and ethos embraced rather than a rigid 6-step BPP. The time taken to go through each step depended on where the farmers were up to, individual projects and the group's technical focus.

Facilitators put less emphasis on technical information and more on empowering farmers to improve their thinking processes to find answers for themselves. The focus was on individual farmer goals, particularly in relation to individual action plans.

Process (including the BPP) is not something that everyone seeks to engage in but it has the potential to achieve significant

gains and assist change. The challenge with all the pilots has been to develop an acceptable method of using process. All pilots had difficulty with process and as a result it has been suggested that process shouldn't be pushed "too hard too early". The skill in the future will be in keeping the theory to a minimum and ground the process in practical applications.

A challenge in the pilot phase was getting individuals to document and record their progress. This required a change in mindset and needs to be encouraged in future work. At a minimum each individual needs to write a detailed action plan (step 3), which includes key performance indicators (how they will measure the changes/improvement).

### Future Challenges for using the BPP with Farmers

#### Philosophy

Facilitators and farmers alike need to understand and be committed to the philosophy of continuous improvement and innovation. Individuals need to be committed to meeting regularly, changing practices, participating and supporting others in the group.

#### Better Practices Process

The BPP should be transparent (to farmers); it is a simple practical process that can be used for a broad range of issues or situations. It is essential that each step of BPP is clearly defined and grounded in practice. Early success is recommended and identifying a short-term focus will achieve this. Experience suggests that the BPP should be used up front and at the pace set by the individual groups.

#### Tools and Techniques

A range of tools and techniques is essential to help individuals work through the cycle, however to avoid confusion between the BPP and the tools fewer tools should be introduced. The recommended approach is to have two simple and practical tools that can be used at each step in the cycle.

#### Jargon

The pilot phase of CBI identified that new terminology or jargon was distracting and not widely accepted by farmers. In future the use of jargon needs to be reduced or replaced with relevant words.

For further information or a copy of the final report please contact Melinda Mann, DPI Kyabram (03) 58520 500.



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# Marketing magic

## You're an extension officer? You're probably also a marketer

**At the APEN Qld Chapter's "Information Resources" forum in February, marketing consultant Mark Casey delivered an intriguing presentation that left some attendees scratching their heads. Some thought marketing was "purposive lying". Others suspected marketing was the answer to all of extension's problems. Who's right? Here's the lowdown on Mark Casey's presentation to Qld APEN .**

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Extension and marketing have a lot in common. Both enterprises are about influencing people to make a decision and then act. If extension is about change management, then extension is, at its core, a marketing exercise because this is precisely what marketing sets out to do. There are some differences in intent, to be certain, but a long hard look at the process will reveal an abundance of similarities.

So what are the differences? Extension might be thought of as an 'outreach' activity. It is often a public investment in a small section of the community with the skills and ability to communicate with as many people as possible who might benefit from 'the message'. Traditionally, 'the message' has been about managing natural resources, about learning, and about managing changing environments. Extension trades on the understanding that its outcomes are in the interests of the public good, and that the benefits from these outcomes can be accessed easily and equitably.

Marketing, however, might be thought of as an activity that 'reaches in' to the resources of the organisation in order to develop better relationships with those that it deals with. Client databases, existing client contacts and established relationships are used to obtain the maximum commercial benefit. Marketing has emerged, quite simply, to make more profit for organisations that practise it. However, that does not necessarily mean that marketing is about promoting dubious services or pushing the 'hard sell' (though sometimes it is). Good marketers go to extraordinary lengths to avoid any taint of impropriety. At its base, though, marketing is about money and market share.

### Different name, same challenge

It is getting more difficult to reach people and get 'mind space'. Not only has there been an explosion over the last decade in the number of messages sent, so too have the avenues for delivery expanded, as any victim of high-volume spam can attest. There are many voices competing for 'top-of-mind' attention.

Some recent research estimates that in the United States the media spends \$1861 per person to transport messages. For some extension officers in Australia, that figure might actually represent their annual operating budget. One marketing rule of thumb has it that for some campaigns, a consumer needs to register a message eight times before it 'gets through'. In high noise environments - for example, cities like Sydney or Melbourne - it might be as much as 20 times before anyone takes the slightest notice of a message.

Marketers are desperately trying to get their message to 'stand out' from this noise. And the challenge is the same for extension officers. So what hope have we got with miserly budgets, slim resources and, sometimes, complex messages to deliver? Time to look at some 'first principles' of marketing.

### Marketing concepts

Marketing has many definitions, but basically it's a process whereby individuals and groups *get what they need and want* by creating and exchanging goods and value with others. Good marketers are expert in discovering clients' needs.



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Mark also runs a marketing course through *crri.q* - see ad on back page for details.

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**“Excellence in marketing translates to knowing and understanding the customer *so well* that the product or service ‘fits’ more or less exactly with what the customer expects.”**

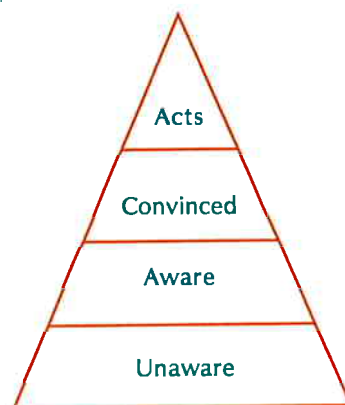
‘Selling’ is only a small component of marketing. In fact, according to Peter Drucker, the aim of marketing is to make ‘selling’ - as it is conventionally understood - virtually superfluous. Excellence in marketing translates to knowing and understanding the customer *so well* that the product or service ‘fits’ more or less exactly with what the customer expects. The product or service sells itself.

### **A marketing plan for extension?**

How can extensionists make their message ‘sell itself’? How can we be assured that what we do and say ‘fits’ with the myriad people we’re trying to communicate with?

*Ask them*

What are the perceptions of clients, funders, the CEOs or their equivalents in your organisation? What do they know about your message? About you? Start asking anytime, anywhere, but start. And record the responses. Look at the ‘Promotion Pyramid’ and see where the responses fit.



*Who are my clients?*

There may be more than one, and they may need to hear different messages. Have you ever noticed how McDonald’s will play very different TV advertisements at different times of the day to accommodate divergent market segments? The same principle applies to extension.

*What am I marketing?*

This is often very difficult to answer. Are you marketing your department? Ideas? Change? Information? Or are you marketing the more conventional services and products? Sometimes, depending on the targeted segment, it is necessary to market your group or yourself. Sometimes it is extension itself that needs to be marketed. The most important thing to consider is that

marketing two or three or more of these ‘commodities’ to the one segment using the one message can get confusing for the client. Decide what you’re marketing and market it.

### **What are the differentiators?**

Differentiators are what makes us different. They answer the question: ‘why would they use us instead of somebody else?’.

Government extension services in particular have some widely publicised and welcome differentiators that are not exploited as nearly as often as they might be.

Government-funded extension is often held to be:

- credible
- independent
- reputable
- low-cost and high value, and
- supporting and based on science.

### **Plan plan plan**

An *ad hoc* approach to marketing is expensive. A shotgun might kill the duck, but at what price to your dinner? Draw up a marketing plan and draft a marketing budget, regardless of how tight the purse is (even more of a reason to draft a budget!).

Use a targeted approach and avoid distractions. With a good plan, dry gullies are easier to avoid. Marketing plan templates can be found anywhere these days - on the web, in graduate texts and so on. Measure results as soon as they’re available and *don’t forget to use them* to finetune your marketing strategy.

### **Key ideas**

- *Don’t presume. Check it out.*
- *Know your clients and keep in touch*
- *Avoid the ‘same old approach’*
- *Provide an experience rather than just an event.*
- *Evaluate and improve*
- *Never never take clients for granted*
- *Use “WIIFM” (what’s in it for me?)*
- *Use “one percenters” (the little things make the difference)*
- *Customer service is marketing*
- *Put on the client’s shoes*
- *Use word of mouth - look for key influencers*
- *Lemons leave a bitter taste - doing the right thing pays off*