



# EXTENSIONNET

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## Why we need to “groundtruth” information products

by Noel Vock

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

In the last edition of ExtensionNet, Mark Casey from Drawbridge Communications outlined a comparison between extension and marketing and argued that – at their core – both enterprises set out to influence people to make a decision then act. In a continuation of this theme, Queensland DPI’s Noel Vock argues that if marketing extension products is about giving clients what they ask for, then extensionists still have some way to go.

Nobody likes hearing their pet project, pet product or newly delivered service has flaws. In private, people may suspect their recently established phone hotline service is a bit light on for answers from the public or that their newly printed glossy brochure might have been somewhat overdone with 15 different fonts and a arty-looking paint spatters across the text. But we generally get a bit miffed when the job into which we’ve invested so



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much energy, love and labour (and money) earns a rebuke from a supervisor or – worse still – clients.

*Continued page 2 ...*

### From the editor

I compiled this edition twice, and backed up every 10 minutes second time round (sorry this one’s a bit late!). Technology can really let you down, but it’s also a boon when everything works well. Extension professionals have never had it so good with effective and efficient toys that make their job so much easier. Think back 10 years about the technology available to get a message across to people (OHT? Slide projector? Butchers paper?). Now think about the data projectors,

powerpoint software, electronic whiteboards we have at our fingertips. There’s little that can’t be communicated.

Take the toys away, however, and extension is still fundamentally the same thing: people helping people to manage change. It doesn’t matter how flashy the presentation (or how badly the file gets chewed), technology is just another tool to help us “do” extension. Nothing more.

Hope you’re all excited about Tasmania. I am! Get busy writing some papers.

Darren Schmidt

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## Groundtruthing information products (cont'd from p1)

But regardless of how well we think we've done a job, we should be prepared for criticism. In fact, one of the advantages of hearing criticism is that at least you have something concrete on which to improve the next product or service.

Much worse is when people (clients, supervisors and others) don't think your product is up to scratch but stay silent out of indifference, lethargy or because they don't think the criticism will have any impact on your future work.

On a different tack, and possibly more problematic, is when people view your product or service, give a nod of satisfaction and say something like "looks good!", and then fail to use it. On the face of it, you've done a good job and people are happy with the time and energy you've invested, but ultimately the product or service is of little use because people *don't use it as a tool for decision making*.

The reason this scenario is problematic is that a cursory evaluation of your product or service would reveal clients that are 'satisfied' or generally happy that funds have been allocated to produce something *intended* to be useful to them. Whether it is or isn't useful to them may possibly be forgotten in the glow of a 'positive' evaluation that shows 90% (or some other impressive figure) of interviewed clients are 'happy' with the product.

### Groundtruthing the product

All of this serves as a background to explain a recent push in my organisation (Queensland DPI's horticulture group) to start "groundtruthing" some products and services that have been offered to clients over the years. Behind that push is a wider imperative to align the provision of our products and services more closely with established marketing principles. In essence, my organisation has been asking whether our products and services actually carry out the function they are intended to (help fruit and vegetable growers make decisions) and whether they could do it better.

The horticultural industry, in Queensland and elsewhere, is characterised by a high information demand. Clients are often new to the industry, having made a lifestyle or

industry change to move to the wetter tropics and sub-tropics (often nearer the sea). They have a vast hunger for information. On the other hand, established clients also know that pest-affected produce brings sharp market punishment and will demand information quickly if an infestation is suspected. Crop protection in horticulture may mean the difference between huge profits or losses.

Horticulture is also characterised by its large diversity of crops, technologies, client groups and client needs. This makes the challenge of providing "one-size-fits-all" information products extremely difficult, and, as a result, a long history of information product development has occurred in order to service the changing and diverse demand load. This history has seen its share of both ad hoc responses to client demand as well as carefully planned and researched kits that have met with fair commercial success.

### The cream of strawberry information

To get an idea of the progressive evolution of these information products, it's useful to look at one commodity – strawberries – to see how different client demands have generated different product responses over time:

#### The strawberry example

- Crop summary booklet – black and white, written in government speak, but one of the first attempts to capture 'all-there-is-to-know' about growing strawberries
- Farmnote series – updateable 1-2 page documents, but required immense cataloguing skills
- Crop calendars – an attempt to mimic the on-farm work program
- Growing handbook – an update on the old Crop Summary Booklet, but more "book-like"
- Agrilink kit – full colour kits in hard folders for a range of horticultural crops. The boldest attempt yet at a one-stop shop for all horticultural enquiries. Many kits have been sold to date.
- CD-ROM – the "obvious" next step in providing information to clients, but actually fraught with difficulties
- Proposed subscription web site – still in



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**"One of the advantages of hearing criticism is that at least you have something concrete on which to improve the next product or service."**

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the planning stages, but developers are obviously looking closely at more generously-funded internet services of this type and noting that the sailing is not all smooth.

Other commodities have generated similar product histories in line with client demand or – crucially – *perceived* client demand. In the end, we've had to have a hard look at whether the products we've generated have been of *demonstrable use* to clients or merely *fit our perception* of a market need.

## How did we get here?

We looked at some of the features of the process that generated, for example, the history of strawberry information products.

### On the positive side, there's been:

- Lot of reflective thinking and re-design of information products
- Objective analysis of enquiry records undertaken
- Some limited evaluation of use and user reactions completed
- Close collaboration with Better Berries Project has aligned products more closely with industry requirements
- Input from industry representatives has done the same
- High level of interest/purchase has indicated relevance (but not necessarily use)
- High regard from interstate and overseas growers.

### On the other hand, we've learned that

- The target markets for our products have often been poorly defined
- Development of the products have been based on 'perceived' needs rather than 'identified' needs

- Industry representatives may not be representative of the whole industry
- Products have been 'product centred' rather than 'user centred'
- There has been no serious evaluation or impact analysis.

## So what?

So where does that leave us? I believe the way ahead is in 'ground-truthing' our current and future information products and services. Some techniques for informing this process might include:

- An industry-wide needs analysis and concept bazaar using in-depth 'listening' interviews at individual business level
- Incorporating a user-centred design approach
- Interrogating a stratified sample by farm size and experience level for market research
- Critically examining industry needs compared with the needs expressed by industry representatives
- Seeking industry funding
- Using participants as a reference for 'ground-truthing' new products/services and analysing impacts.

In essence, these concepts simply bring some of the 'hard' marketing theory more closely to bear on our work-a-day efforts in developing or improving our information products. Evaluating the *impact* of these products – rather than merely industry opinions of them – will not be easy. But ultimately there is no other way to ensure that the work invested in developing new and innovative information products and services is providing a good return to funding agencies.



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*Have other APEN members "groundtruthed" information or other products? Anyone else been through a process of "deep" evaluation? Please contact Noel (details on front page). Better yet, report your experience on these pages!*

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# May we use your mailbox?

APEN membership is growing, and while we don't want a 'bloated' organisation, we are keen to keep that growth bubbling along. One of the benefits of a growing membership base is that it brings in more subscription money. While money isn't everything, even APEN could do with some more cash! One way of doing that is to keep attracting new members, but it's not the only way.

Large companies are often eager to get their message across to a narrowly defined target market. 'Extension professionals' could

conceivably be one of those markets, so the APEN National Executive (NE) is keen to hear your thoughts on allowing promotional materials to be included with your ExtensionNet when it's posted out.

All objections will, of course, be considered carefully and a significant number of objections will force the NE to re-think or abandon the concept. But if there are no or few objections, it could be an easy way to expand the revenue base. Let Roe at the APEN Secretariat know your thoughts. Her details are on the back page.



# Policy talks extend APEN's horizons further

APEN's National Executive (NE) met in Sydney in July for a specially convened meeting to discuss an APEN 'policy platform'.

NE member, Greg Leach from Queensland's Department of Natural Resources and Mines, said the APEN 'policy issue' had been building for some years but it was now time to take APEN's policy position forward.

"There always seem to be issues other than policy that beg the attention, but I've felt that for APEN to mature as an organisation there needs to be some direction set and some boundaries drawn," Greg said after the Sydney meeting.

"That's why I helped convene some meetings to flesh out some policy direction to be able to say 'APEN says this or that on a particular issue'," Greg said.

"APEN is definitely not a union of any sort, but I think it's the mark of a mature organisation to be able to criticise certain decisions or positions or officially comment on an issue if that is warranted," he said.

"A mature organisation knows and is able to represent the interests of its members."

Some of APEN's funders agree. Project leaders from the Cooperative Joint Venture for Human Capacity Building attended the APEN policy meeting in Sydney and were keen to hear the NE clarify their ideas about what

would constitute an organisational policy.

Some interesting definitions of "policy" were generated. One of the shortest of these defined policy as the difference between advocacy and activism; in other words, APEN - as an organisation - goes further than merely advocating the role of extension in professional circles ... it actively promotes the status of the profession and defends attacks on it.

Of course, the "vigour" of any defence of extension would be a matter for further discussion because any response would inevitably tip APEN into a political arena.

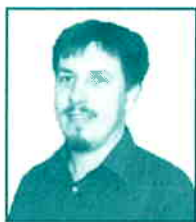
However, as Greg Leach points out, "it's a political world and one of the central tenets of our profession is that we deal with people - it's what sets extension apart."

"Politics, policy and people all derive from the same Greek root so it's counterproductive to keep them separate," Greg said.

"The challenge for APEN is to sharpen the focus on policy because if we don't it's too easy to drift into a zone of irrelevancy and not speaking up when there's a need to," he said.

APEN policy will be discussed and progressed at the Tasmanian Forum (see *opposite*) and all members are encouraged to contribute their views. A number of actions are planned for before and after the Forum and members will be targeted for input and agreement.

Greg  
Leach



## Chapter activities – making them happen in *your* area

Is your chapter finding it hard to maintain momentum when running activities? Even if activities are happening why not make life easier?

The National Executive (NE) is aware of the effort it takes to organise an activity and is keen to help where possible. Often the hardest part of organising an activity is identifying what chapter members want. The NE has consulted with many members and brainstormed the issue themselves and has come up with some of the following ideas:

- Contemporary skills required by extension practitioners
- The new roles that extension needs to play

- Extension achieving collective action with multiple stakeholders
- Applying new skills for extension
- Negotiating how we negotiate
- Extension research
- Capacity building and extension
- Information technologies/ tools for extension
- The new future for extension/change management
- Community engagement in extension
- Extension's role in bushfires/drought management

Over the next month we intend to develop two of these topics into a workshop that can be run as a Chapter activity "off the shelf".

To also ease the burden of staging the event the APEN Secretariat can be called on to help with promotion, finance control and organising the event. Once you have identified the event you wish to run the APEN Secretariat, Rose-

mary Currie is available to work with you (to what ever level you would like) to get the event happening. This work would be additional to Rosemary's other commitments in running the APEN Secretariat and costs will need to be built into the event fees.

Have you any other ideas for a "off the self" activity? You may have already run a successful workshop that focused on the development needs of extension professionals and are keen to share the workshop outline with others. If so, or if you would like to provide any comments or suggestions for this process or activities, please feel

free to contact Paul Ainsworth on 0407 861 735 or email [paul.ainsworth@natfoods.com.au](mailto:paul.ainsworth@natfoods.com.au)

**Paul Ainsworth, APEN NE,  
Chapter Support and  
Membership Services Portfolio**

