

Don't be afraid to try something new

Jayne Chamberlain

Zespri, 400 Maunganui Road, Mount Maunganui, New Zealand, 3149

Email: jayne.chamberlain@zespri.com

Abstract. Zespri Orchard Productivity Centre (OPC) is responsible for communicating science and best practice knowledge to around 2,500 New Zealand kiwifruit growers. The team is constantly challenging themselves on how to be more innovative and effective in disseminating information. The use of webinars to communicate in a convenient, timely way seemed like an obvious medium to try. To encourage greater learning and uptake of the topics presented, the team concluded that the best format would be to have groups of growers sitting together watching the webinar followed by a discussion afterwards on the implications for them as individuals. The OPC webinar programme proved to be very successful. The benefits included: facilitating engagement between scientists, industry, growers and other Zespri staff; consistency of message; growers across New Zealand having the opportunity to hear the same information at the same time; flexibility and timeliness so that information was transferred when it was most relevant.

Keywords: webinar, innovation, new, adoption, technology, connectivity

The launch of Zespri's monthly webinar programme to New Zealand kiwifruit orchardists was undertaken with some trepidation. Would the technology be reliable in all areas, was it too far "out there" for New Zealand kiwifruit growers? The response surprised us, not only have the webinars been well received but participant numbers continue to grow!

A bit of background

Zespri Orchard Productivity Centre (OPC) is responsible for taking science and best practice knowledge out to around 2,500 New Zealand kiwifruit growers, with an average age of 59, across ten growing regions. OPC's end goal is to ensure the best quality product is grown to meet Zespri's consumers' preferences. With a growing industry and more complexity being demanded in growing practices, the team is constantly challenging themselves on how to be more innovative and effective in disseminating technical information to growers. The use of webinars to communicate in a convenient, timely way is increasing in popularity and, with technology and connectivity advances, it seemed like an obvious medium for Zespri OPC to try.

The OPC Webinar Series kicked off with the first screening in June 2014. The purpose of the webinars is to efficiently and effectively share timely science outcomes and technical knowledge. The webinar uses Microsoft Lync software and is hosted by an OPC team member. Typically the webinar presenters are scientists and a small group of experts who discuss a topic and are available for Q&A sessions through the webinar.

Bringing groups of growers together to learn from each other

From feedback after a pilot webinar conducted in 2013, which initially aimed to connect growers and technical staff individually on their computers, the team concluded that the best way to encourage greater learning and uptake of the topics presented would be to have groups of growers sitting together watching the webinar and then having a discussion afterwards about the implications for them. The OPC team approached industry technical staff to act as the central hub, bringing their growers together to watch the webinar at a comfortable venue with good internet connectivity. An OPC promotion pack was provided to industry to encourage them to get involved. The pack included computer speakers, instructions, evaluation sheets, and some nibbles and drinks vouchers. A cartoon was developed which became the 'logo' and was used on the promotion packs and subsequent advertising to convey the type of environment envisioned for the webinars.

Planning and consultation is important

The programme and format of the webinars were confirmed with the help of a pan-industry project team named Project BIGTIK (Bringing Innovative Growers Technology in Kiwifruit) whose members included industry leaders, innovative growers and Zespri staff.

Figure 1. The 'logo' for Zespri OPC Webinars – kiwifruit growers coming together to hear new knowledge via the internet and then discussing the implications with peers and sharing their experiences.



Buy-in and good planning were important aspects of why the webinars were successful. Some key tips are:

- Confirming topics and presenters at least six weeks before the webinar screens.
- Have at least one planning session with presenters and one practice run of the webinar to a 'real' audience. This is important to ensure messages are clear, presentations run to time, slides are easily understood and the technology works.
- Have a warm-up session at the start of the webinar. This ensures viewers can see and hear okay and starts a bit of a rapport.
- Start and finish on time.
- Leave adequate time for Q&A; this is a valuable part of the webinar. Q&A in OPC's webinars is as long as the formal presentation.
- Planning for multiple speakers helps keep the audience engaged. Depending on the topic, OPC can have three speakers presenting for 10 minutes each with Q&A sessions after each presenter.
- Get feedback from the audience and communicate this back. OPC created a Webinar eNewsletter to feedback new ideas, improvements and notify readers when the video of the webinar was on the website.

In total, OPC screened five webinars in 2014. The video from each webinar and supporting technical information is posted on the Zespri Kiwifruit grower-only website on an OPC Webinar Series page. Each webinar runs for around 1 1/4 hours, starting at 4pm.

How successful have the webinars been?

The uptake and support from industry technical staff surpassed expectations. At the last webinar, all major entities were involved and most regions. This has helped to build stronger relationships between OPC and the various industry entities, as well as provide additional opportunities for industry to engage directly with their growers.

Other positive aspects/feedback from the webinars include:

- Webinar 1 had 150 viewers while Webinar 5 was viewed by 280 people.
- Facilitates engagement between scientists, industry, growers, OPC and other Zespri staff.

- Consistency of message. All growers across New Zealand have the opportunity to hear the same technical information at the same time.
- Efficient and cost effective. Ability to transfer information to all regions at one time. Historically scientists have been taken 'on the road' where it takes 2-3 weeks to get around all the kiwifruit regions.
- Supporting technical material can be packaged alongside the webinar video on the Zespri grower website, making the webpage a 'one-stop' shop for each topic.
- Timeliness of information. Easier to ensure technical information is transferred when it is most relevant.

What about continuous improvement and opportunities in 2015?

Comprehensive feedback was sought from participants in December 2014 to provide direction on the OPC Webinar Series 2015. There was consensus that the webinars should continue into 2015.

However, it is important to note that face-to-face extension is still important and that webinars form part of our larger multi-faceted extension programme.

For others in the kiwifruit Industry, webinars provide a proven new way to communicate effectively and efficiently to industry groups across New Zealand and 'offshore'.

Plate 1. Zespri OPC Webinars – example of introductory slide



OPC WEBINAR SERIES

Webinar V: 26th November 2014

IT'S ALL ABOUT TASTE

Hosted by: Jayne Chamberlain

 

ORCHARD PRODUCTIVITY CENTRE

