

## Commercial Farmers—What Are They Like?

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## Commercial Farmers—What Are They Like?

### Abstract

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# *Commercial Farmers— What Are They Like?*

DELMAR HATESOHL\*

IN STARTING MY DESCRIPTION of commercial farmers, I recalled the parable of the blind men and the elephant.

Six blind men each touch different parts of the elephant and jump to the conclusion that they know what the elephant is really like. They all are partly right but mostly wrong (5).

The parable illustrates how difficult it is to get an accurate and total picture of an individual—or a group.

Right now, I'm less sure I know how farmers think and feel than I did six months ago when I was asked to discuss this subject.

This paper is supposed to describe commercial farmers—but what do we mean by that? The census definition is not suitable for this discussion. Let's think primarily about farmers who gross from a minimum of \$10,000 on up to \$50,000 and more—farmers who are doing a reasonable job of farming and look like they will be farming for awhile.

## *What Good Are Statistics?*

There are some statistics which can help describe our audience. For example, these are numbers of farms in Missouri in 1964:

<i>Gross sales</i>	<i>No.</i>	<i>Five-year change, pct.</i>
\$10,000 and up.....	29,162	+ 6
\$2,500-\$9,999.....	48,666	-10
Less than \$2,500.....	17,257	+17

These figures provide information in absolute numbers and show trends.

It will be interesting to see what has happened the last five years.

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	<i>Commercial farm operators</i>	<i>Per cent*</i>
Up to 8 years.....	46,907	50
1-3 years of high school.....	12,678	13
High school graduate.....	26,851	28
1-3 years of college.....	4,849	5
College graduate.....	3,343	4

\* Figures are rounded.

These are the kinds of statistics that, if evaluated carefully, have some merit in describing the farmer audience.

There are other sources of statistical information that may be useful. *Wallace's Farmer* has many reports on its subscribers.

A report on the use of ag chemicals tells what per cent of subscribers treated for alfalfa weevils or corn borers, and what kind of fly control methods were used.

Another report gives an idea of what farm equipment and household items subscribers intend to buy this year.

Wayne Swegle of *Successful Farming* sent me copies of some of the magazine's audience profile studies. One of them, for example, tells a good deal about the leisure time activities and equipment of their subscribers.

Again, some statistics can be useful as long as you recognize their limitations.

### *Factors Affecting Receiver*

Let's look now at the commercial farmer in the way that we keep telling other people to look at their audiences. According to the AAACE Handbook, communication with a receiver is affected by his communications skills and habits; knowledge; attitudes, values, and goals; and socio-cultural context.

Before I start describing farmers, using this format, try this short true and false quiz.

1. Writers often over-estimate the technical vocabulary of farmers.
2. We are not able to predict very accurately who will make a successful farm manager.
3. Farmers have quite a different value system from non-farmers.
4. Farmers attend church more often than most other people.

5. The “dollar and profit” appeal is the best for reaching farmers.

Watch for the answers to these questions in the following discussion.

### *Communication Skills*

Let's come back now to the communication skills of farmers. The National Project in Agricultural Communications told us that one of the most useful pieces of information about an adult's reading ability is the highest grade reached in school (8). Our table on the census educational data showed that in Missouri, we have farmers who range all the way from less than 8th grade graduates to college graduates. From personal experience we know that we may have this range in farmers who attend a meeting or come in and ask for a bulletin. So where does that leave us when we think about preparing messages to fit this audience?

What about information habits and sources? The studies I've seen show farm magazines still out front as a source of information on farm technology.

An informal survey of 27 top young Michigan farmers (10) showed they ranked six sources of agricultural information this way:

	<i>Mean rank</i>
Farm magazines.....	1.7
Extension bulletins.....	2.0
Radio.....	3.9
Direct mail.....	3.9
Newspapers.....	4.0
Television.....	5.0

There are two items that don't show up too well here but we in Missouri think have potential: direct mail and newspapers. We are encouraging our specialists and agents to put their technical information in newsletters—specific letters to hog men, to cattle feeders, or to cow and calf men. And then we suggest the agents do an occasional feature, maybe once a month, about a local farmer doing an outstanding job. Main problem is to get agents to stop sending papers detailed technical subject matter which only fills space or ends up in the wastebasket.

Now when do farmers read? You get all kinds of answers—at noon—at night—when it rains.

I heard one cute young wife say about her husband, "I can't even get him to come to bed, he always stays up to read."

This subject of sources of information merits more detailed discussion by the technical or media groups within AAACE.

## *Knowledge*

Moving on to the question of farmer's knowledge, several studies indicate that technical terms can be a real stumbling block in communications with farmers. Baxter's study (1), which was reported in the *ACE Quarterly* showed that Wisconsin hog farmers had trouble with many genetic and nutritional terms:

	<i>Per cent selecting correct answer</i>
Palatability.....	53
Crude protein.....	50
Hybrid vigor.....	49
Heterosis.....	38
Hog futures.....	29

Another study by Frederick and Powers (6) reported the apparent lack of understanding of pesticide terms among a group of farmers made up of early users of a pesticide and persons who had obtained information from these early users:

	<i>Per cent selecting correct answer</i>
Fungicide.....	39
Infestation.....	54
Herbicide.....	66
Antidote.....	66

A more recent study at Illinois by Salcedo, et al. (15) on how well people understand pesticide labels indicates farmers possibly are becoming more familiar with certain pesticide terms—but they can still be a problem.

This problem with terms is not hard to understand. Just think of the number of new technical terms that a farmer who raises hogs, cattle, and some field crops has thrown at him. He must deal with terms related to genetics, nutrition, and diseases, insecticides, herbicides, machinery, taxes, farm management, and now, pollution.

We talk about the specialized farmer who may know more than our extension agents—but sometimes we forget that we still have many farmers who are not really specialized. I talked to

one farmer who said, "I try a little of everything just to make a living." Making our materials easy for this group to understand is a continuing challenge.

**So in answer to the first true and false question, I'd say it is true that writers often overestimate the technical vocabulary of farmers.**

You get into still a different situation when dealing with economic questions. Some farmers start getting quite emotionally involved when you start talking about bargaining, imports, parity, corporation farms, and subsidies. This is understandable. Many farmers feel that they are being treated unfairly by the pricing and marketing system, giving them low incomes and low return on investment. In addition, many farmers find within themselves conflicting values—the desire to produce and sell as they wish with resulting erratic prices and income, as opposed to contractual marketing and quotas, more stable income, but with some loss of freedom (7).

One of the farmers who serves on the editorial advisory board for *Drover's Journal* livestock paper said recently: "It seems to me all the remedies offered (marketing quotas, contracts, etc.) are rather bitter pills to take. Most of us farmers wish to keep our independence (19)."

Farmers have told us they want more help on marketing. Have we responded to this request?

Willard Cochrane, writing in 1965 about his experience as economic advisor to Secretary of Agriculture Freeman, said: "The economic literacy of farmers generally is distressingly low. . . . Most livestock producers, and many of their leaders have no conception of the indirect price and income support provided producers of animal products through the support of feed grain prices. Most producers do not understand the differential effect on their income from an output increase on their particular farm resulting from a technological advance, and from an aggregate output increase resulting from the industry-wide adoption of new and improved technology (4)."

What are we doing about this so-called low level of economic literacy? What per cent of the materials that we produce are strictly production oriented?

This is not an easy problem to answer. It's not very easy or rewarding for a specialist to tell farmers they face certain hard

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choices. Sometimes politics are much involved. But perhaps its time we start asking more questions on why we are not doing more in this area of marketing and economics.

### *Goals, Values, Attitudes*

The most helpful reference I found on the subject of goals, values, and attitudes is North Central Research Publication 184, (18).

Determining goals and values is not easy. An individual usually has several goals. And then you must add a time dimension. What may be considered as a goal for an individual at one point in time may actually be a means for accomplishing a long-range goal. An individual may want to maximize profits from his business in the short run—but only to satisfy such longer run goals as status, pleasure, or security.

There is another factor which affects goal behavior. Two people may have the same goals—but one may be willing to work a lot harder to reach his goals.

Some of the studies reported in this publication were aimed at predicting management success. They did find some relationships between certain variables and success in management but this relationship still left much to be explained. We still have much to learn about predicting who will make a good farm manager. We may even have trouble agreeing on a definition of a successful farm manager. Do we base it on economic results alone, or do we also consider family life and community participation? **I'd say that the answer to our second question is true.** We are still not able to predict accurately who will make a successful farm manager.

Turning to goals, a 1962 Michigan study by Nielson (14), listed goals under two headings: farming goals and head of household goals. The seven goals listed most frequently under farming goals were:

1. Good or comfortable living
2. Growing good crops and livestock
3. Security
4. Just make a living
5. Debt-free farm



6. Attractive farmstead

7. Be a successful farmer

The highest ranking goals as head of household included:

1. Comfortable home

2. Education for children

3. Peace and harmony in the home

4. A good living

5. Bringing children up right

6. Leisure, recreation, and travel

7. Happiness for self and family

These goals probably haven't changed much since 1962. Most of them look similar to ones that we might have.

We need to recognize that a family's goals change over time—as children grow up, as farm operation changes, and as retirement approaches.

Thirty years ago rural society was considered quite homogeneous, and characterized by consensus in values and belief. Descriptions of rural values and beliefs focused primarily on the differences between rural and urban groups and not on the value and belief conflicts within rural society (2).

More recently Olaf Larson (9) made this generalization: "On the whole farmers share the major value orientations, the counter-currents, and the contradictions which are found in American society; moreover farmers are moving toward rather than away from central value orientation. There is wide diversity among farmers in the extent and intensity of adherence to these values. In addition, this diversity increases as one examines value orientation more locally, more situationally, and in relation to specific variables."

**So the answer to the third true and false question, "Farmers have quite a different value system from non-farmers," is false.**

### *Socio-cultural Context*

Let's take a brief look at the socio-cultural context of commercial farmers today. Again, we see great diversity. Some farmers are in areas where there are many abandoned farmsteads, their local small town has pretty much dried up, and local government is hard pressed to provide the needed services, such as maintaining roads.

On the other hand, many farmers find themselves surrounded by urban growth, with strong competition for their land for non-farm uses, and facing the question of rural zoning.

Commercial farm families are certainly not an isolated group but very much a part of modern day society. The children may go to a large consolidated school and the wife may work in town. *Successful Farming* found that 52 per cent of its subscribers took a vacation of three days or more last year. And you certainly can't tell farm families by their dress. Today, bib overalls may be more popular with the city people than with farmers.

### *Individuals Also Differ*

In attempting to describe an individual commercial farmer, the only thing I can say with certainty is that farmers differ a great deal. Some are optimists, some are pessimists. Some want stronger government programs, others want none at all. Some are making good money, others are going broke and selling out.

Some farmers take an active part in community affairs, others concentrate their whole life on farming. Some go to church, others do not; in fact a Missouri survey showed that church attendance was lowest among farmers and laborers (12). So, based on one survey in one state we can say that farmers do not attend church more often than most other people. **The answer to our fourth question is false.**

### *Common Concerns*

But do farmers have common concerns? The common concern I heard expressed most often was that "Our costs are killing us;" "I had a big gross but very little net;" "Wages keep going up and everything costs too much;" "Something has to be done about taxes." And related to this, many are worried about welfare programs. They are sincerely afraid that too many people have no incentive to work.

Some survey work on farmers' reading interest also shows great concern about costs. I gave farmers 35 magazine titles and asked them to tell me which they would be most likely to read. The title "Ten Ways To Cut Farm Expenses" came out clearly as the article most would read. Other high scoring titles were:

"Look For These Features When You Buy That New Tractor"

“Credit—Use Money To Make Money”

Titles that scored the lowest included:

“Our Family Council Works”

“Is Night School For You?”

I should emphasize that this sample of farmers was not a random sample—it was a “drive down the road—catch ’em at home” sample. I’ll refer to this study again later.

But just when I began to think farmers are worried primarily about money, I talked with a farmer—an ag college graduate, who has beef cattle, hogs, and crops. I asked him what he worried about most? He didn’t say anything for a minute, then turned to his wife and said, “Oh, I don’t know, she probably knows that better than I do.” But then he said, “I suppose I worry most about time . . . just trying to get everything done.” Then the young wife, who helps a good deal with the hogs, said, “I suppose we worry most when our pigs or calves aren’t doing well—when we lose some.”

Finally, I asked them, “Do you ever worry about money?” And he replied, “Oh not much as long as we can pay the bills.”

I asked them what their major goals were, and they said: “A new house to replace the trailer we’re living in, and some labor-saving equipment to help save time.” Incidentally, this matter of labor saving was emphasized strongly by farmers in Iowa who had adopted Bacon Bins as a way to raise hogs (16).

What a refreshing experience to talk to this young couple. They liked living on the farm very much—being outside, working together. I wonder if that isn’t true of many other people who live on the farm. About two miles down the road I talked with an older fellow with part of his family grown. He was quite outspoken about high costs, big gross, and little net, but he said, “You know my wife and kids wouldn’t let me leave, they like it out here,” and I suspect he does too.

I wonder about the statement we sometimes use that farming is no longer a way of life, it’s just another business. I’m not so sure. If it were true, many farmers could sell out, invest the proceeds, and have as much or more income than they do now. If it’s just another business, why have some of the big corporations like Gates Rubber and CBK Industries had a losing experience in their attempts at farming. The phrase is true up to a point, but

it overlooks some of the human elements which are still a vital part of most farming.

I'm not saying that farmers still hold to the old agricultural fundamentalism which said that farming is the most honored of all occupations and that farms produce the best citizens. I do, however, believe that many farmers still find some special things they like in farming: being outdoors, working with growing crops and livestock, the whole family working together, and a measure of independence.

You may have read an article by Jerry Carlson in the April issue of *Farm Journal* (3). He wrote: "If all you think of is profits every time you climb on the tractor, you're not at all typical of the hundreds of young farm couples who gathered at the National Young Farmers Educational Institute in Wichita, Kan., recently."

These farmers told Carlson that, "Sure we'll grow. Got to, just to stay even. But we have a son and daughter coming on. We look at our farm as a place to build a pretty good life, not just a way to make money."

**What's the answer then to question 5, "The dollar and profit appeal is best for reaching farmers?"** Perhaps the best answer would be: Not necessarily—certainly not all the time. Other appeals could be based on saving time and labor; interest in what's new in crops, livestock, and machinery; pride in raising good crops and livestock; security; and even, getting more fun out of farming.

In this discussion I hope I have made clear that there is great diversity among commercial farmers. The next question then becomes: Can we classify farmers into types? We have been doing this to some extent for a long time with our innovators, early adopters, informal leaders, majority, and laggards.

In a little different vein, a graduate student in our University's School of Journalism did a study for the American Angus Association trying to determine what breeders thought of the Association (11). Using the Q-sort technique and factor analysis he came up with several types of cattlemen. Among them were:

1. Tough competitor—He has a keen and personal interest in the dollar bill. He is an individualist and not afraid of breaking tradition. He feels that knowledge is power and likes to get the facts when he attempts to solve problems.
2. Diligent underdog—This type is ambitious, but reasonably

so, and his ambition runs to improving his herd more than to racking up dollars. He likes being in the cattle business but he is not tough minded enough nor is his operation large enough for him to compete head on with those he calls the "big money cattlemen."

3. Gregarious promoter—This easy going type is a decided contrast to the tough competitor. People are important to him and he thinks the Angus Association should get all the members it can. He is especially interested in better promotion.

4. Frugal deacon—He has found or inherited his economic and social class and resists any encroachment upon the natural way of life of the cattle breeder. He is clannish and has an outright dislike for "outsiders" who would defile the way of life. Money is important to him but he is more concerned with preserving his means of getting money than with making every dollar he can.

At least one agribusiness firm is using a similar approach in making plans for the 1970's (20). The article told how Allied Mills classified farmers for the coming years: The elite, commercial, beginners, innovators, stagnant, part-timers, and hangers-on. The goal of this work is to get each dealer to think more analytically about his market.

Whether or not you agree with these specific types, I think it is a useful approach to looking at farmers.

### *Q-Sort Technique*

Incidentally, are you familiar with the Q-sort technique I mentioned earlier (17)? It is being used a good deal for communication research in our School of Journalism. I mentioned earlier that I had given 35 magazine titles to farmers and asked them to tell me which they would be most likely to read—and those which they would be least likely to read, using the Q-sort technique.

In addition to the farmers' opinion, I asked other staff members in our office and editors of our major state farm magazine to rank them as they think commercial farmers would rank them. I have done some preliminary work on factoring these but still have some analysis to do. I hope to report on this later. But, in the meantime, I've brought along some copies of the titles and some brief instructions on doing the Q-sort. I invite you to do this sort, and have others in your office do it, again ranking the titles as you think commercial farmers would rank them. Then

have some of your farmers do this, and see how you compare. You may want to change magazine titles to more closely fit your situation.

Now just a few other ideas on research that we might consider:

1. Do we spend enough time trying to find out just how helpful our materials have been to farmers? Just because you have to reprint to fill demand doesn't necessarily mean a publication is all that good. In fact, Don Murphy (13) has an interesting chapter title in his book, entitled "Just Getting Read Isn't Enough." He stressed the need to ask farmers if they had learned something new or something they could use out of reading an article.

Perhaps we need to work hard at getting our specialists more interested in this type of evaluation.

We also need to look for better ways to evaluate. The picture editor of one of Detroit's newspapers has a unique research method. Some afternoons when his wife has the car he has to take the bus home from work. So he takes along two copies of the paper and throws one on an empty seat near where he sits. Then he watches closely what happens. He says he can learn more from half an hour that way on the bus watching people read and look at the pictures in his paper than he can from a whole pot-full of surveys.

Perhaps we could try something similar when we place materials in seed and feed stores, or auction barns. Another way to get farmers' reactions would be to let them judge some of the ag-related entries in our AAACE contests instead of letting other editors judge them.

2. Can we piggy back more communications questions on surveys that our sociologists, economists, and others are going to do anyway. Earlier this spring, I found our ag economists were going to survey farmers on how they feel about cooperatives. I suggested they might want to add two questions about the major goals of these farm families, and the major obstacles to reaching these goals.

3. How about working more closely with other commercial people in the agricultural press and broadcasting? I believe there are more research questions that we should be working on together.

4. Perhaps we can make better use of our travels out in the state. One speaker at our Journalism Week this year was a photo

editor of *National Geographic*. He told about how some journalists and other travelers spend some time in another country, yet they have never really been there. He told of a professor friend of his who was a specialist on Far Eastern affairs. This professor had been studying in Saigon about a year and had never eaten at a Saigon restaurant. He always ate at a club for Americans.

I wonder if we don't sometimes go out to the country, visit a farm or two with a county agent, go to lunch with the agent, stay for a farmers' meeting where the agent or a specialist does 95 per cent of the talking, and then head for home, feeling like we really know what it's like out in the country. Just as a starter the next time you're out, instead of eating your meal at a Howard Johnsons, try the restaurant at the auction barn, or another one that has lots of farm trucks parked around. Then go in — and listen — don't talk — just listen. Do the same at some farm auctions, country elevators, and so forth.

Perhaps the most valuable part of my survey was the listening I did after the farmers and I had finished talking about the formal survey.

### *A Matter of Priorities*

We would all agree that it is easier to talk about research than to actually get it done, but again it becomes a matter of what kinds of priorities we put on our work.

Dr. S. H. Wittwer, Director of the Michigan Agricultural Experiment Station, has made a point of telling AAACE audiences that only one-half to about two per cent of the total budget of state experiment stations is allocated to dissemination of information (21). Do we know how much of this goes for communications research and evaluation? What would be a reasonable percentage to spend on research and evaluation?

When gathering material for this presentation, I queried the USDA's Current Research Information System (CRIS) for reports on research being done throughout the country related to commercial farmers and communication. I thought one report illustrated clearly this matter of priorities. This was a report from an ag editorial office. Title of the project was "Research Communication Methods." Objectives, among others, included to determine effectiveness of research magazines and to determine im-

portance of form, art, color, readability, and usefulness of specific publications.

The approach was to survey readers for ideas on readability, content, appeal, and usefulness.

And then we get to the section where progress is to be reported, and I quote: "Research outlined in original statement was inactive. Additional activity of the editorial department, however, included processing and publishing . . . bulletins and circulars (including . . . reprints), publishing a bi-monthly magazine, and writing and distributing news stories and features to newspapers and magazines."

I haven't really told you what commercial farmers are really like. I hope I have pointed out some ways of looking at farmers and some sources of information. To really know what farmers are like, you will have to continually study and read about them on your own, and then listen to them on their farms, and in their homes, and in their towns.

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