Role of Helpline Services in Technology Dissemination

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ABSTRACT

Communication is the web that holds a society together and it is a collection of small and relatively isolated agricultural communities. Considerable time of extension worker is spent for administrative work and travel. Cyber extension is the new approach, which can be defined as the extension over cyber space, means "Using the power of on-line networks, computer, communications and digital interactive multimedia to facilitate dissemination of agricultural technology". Keeping in view the problems in agriculture, an investigation on 'Role of helpline services in technology dissemination' was conducted during 2005 in Uttar Pradesh. The study was carried out in Kanpur Dehat and Saharanpur districts where public and private sectors were engaged in operating helpline services. 200 farmers were identified for the study, out of which 100 farmers from the service area of public helpline service provider and 100 farmers from the service area of private helpline service provider Indian Tobacco Company were selected. Twenty experts were also included as respondents from two selected districts to know the constraints. The respondents were interviewed with the help of structured interview schedule. Poor level of use of helpline services was observed in the study area. The frequency of seeking information related to improved varieties, plant protection, seed availability, seed treatment and market related information of crops were relatively high. Poor connectivity, lack of awareness in farmers and incomprehensible technical information provided through helpline services were perceived as constraints in effective on-line information dissemination to the farmers. Timely and relevant technical information in agriculture should be provided to the farmers. Frequently asked questions may be analyzed and accordingly experts may be oriented for effective functioning of helpline services.

Key words: *Helpline services; Technology dissemination; Constraints in helpline services*

Communication is a basic need of all human beings and it is a continuing process throughout one's life. It is a natural demand of an individual and requirement for social existence. Communication is the web that holds a society together and it is a collection of small and relatively isolated agricultural communities.

Independent farmers of past is dependent on many players today for information, input and marketing. Present extension is already under pressure due to wide ratio between extension worker and farmers i.e. 1:1000. Considerable time of extension worker is spent for administrative work and travel. Under these circumstances, is it possible to serve all the farmers, all the time for all the problems? Telephone including mobile are of great help in disseminating information & providing timely advice to the farmers. Computers are the great discovery of 20th century but when all the fields are surging ahead to use information technology, agricultural extension is yet to device proper ways and means to use it to benefit the farmers. Cyber extension is the new approach, which can be defined as the extension over cyber space, means "Using the power of on-line networks, computer, communications and digital interactive multimedia to facilitate dissemination of agricultural technology". Keeping in view the problems in agriculture, an investigation on 'Role of helpline services in technology dissemination' was conducted in Uttar Pradesh with following objectives: i) to study the level of use of helpline services; ii) to study the role of private and public interventions in helpline services; and iii) to find out the constraints and work out strategy for making helpline services effective for farmers.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in Kanpur Dehat and Saharanpur districts of Uttar Pradesh where public and private sectors were engaged in operating helpline services. Two blocks from both the districts were selected for the study. Selection of villages was based on availability of farmers accessing helpline services. The telephonic helpline service provided by CSAUA&T, Kanpur since 2000 and computer based on line communication provided by Indian Tobacco Company (ITC) in agriculture were selected for the study. In total, 200 farmers were identified for the study, out of which 100 farmers from the service area of public helpline service provider and 100 farmers from the service area of private helpline service provider

(ITC) were selected. Twenty experts were also included as respondents from two selected districts to know the constraints. The respondents were interviewed with the help of structured interview schedule.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Use of On-line Services : Farmers were using helpline service more frequently for weather related forecasting whereas very less farmers were interested in information on amount of rainfall received. Therefore, the knowledge and application part were not emphasized in the communication taking place regarding weather forecast through on-line services. Public and private services were found equally used for accessing soil related information (11%). Wasteland management is an issue which was found closer to farmers as compared to others and helpline services must provide more information on this aspect.

Among different cultural practices, farmers were more keen to know about method of seed sowing and thus, 16.50% questions asked by farmers were related to sowing of seed. The level of use of on-line information about improved varieties of crops was much higher than the information on management and other practices. Information related to cash crops was sought by more number of farmers (23%) through private helpline (Table 1). In case of rice, farmers (56%) used private helpline service of ITC to get information on basmati rice. In case of oilseeds, 17.5% farmers used helpline services. Among cash crops like potato, 8.0% farmers asked about varieties followed by 6.5, 4.5 and 5.0% farmers sought information about seed treatment, insect and diseases, respectively.

Two types of online services were being provided by two different organizations. The public sector organization i.e. C.S. Azad University of Agriculture & Technology, Kanpur provided telephone based helpline service through toll free number whereas the private organization i.e. ITC provided computer based information access based on requirement and feedback of farmers in district Saharanpur.

Table 1. Level of use of helpline services N=200

S. No.	Particulars	Number of helpline users		Total
		Public (n=100)	Private (n=100)	
1.	Monsoon forecast	12 (12.0)	z10 (10.0)	22 (11.0)
2.	Soil fertility management	13 (13.0)	19 (19.0)	32 (16.0)
3.	Soil testing	12 (12.0)	10 (10.0)	22 (11.0)
4.	Information about soil treatment	4 (4.0)	18 (18.0)	22 (11.0)
5.	Waste land management	25 (25.0)	23 (23.0)	48 (24.0)
6.	Crop rotation	19 (19.0)	24 (24.0)	43 (21.5)
7.	Use of water saving	0 (0.0)	10 (10.0)	10 (5.0)
8.	Seed sowing	16 (16.0)	17 (17.0)	33 (16.5)
9.	Nursery raising	7 (7.0)	16 (16.0)	23 (11.5)
10.	Improved varieties of cereals	32 (32.0)	28 (28.0)	60 (30.0)
11.	Oilseeds	15 (15.0)	20 (20.0)	35 (17.5)
12.	Cash crops	12 (12.0)	23 (23.0)	35 (17.5)

Note : Figures given in parentheses are percentage.

Table 2. Information sought about different crops through use of help-line N=200

Crops	Variety	Seed availability	Insect	Weed management	Nursery raising	Disease	Seed treatment
Wheat	40 (20)	16 (8.0)	7(3.5)	30 (15.0)	-	-	-
Rice	20 (10)	16 (8.0)	11 (5.5)	-	23 (11.5)	16 (8.0)	-
Gram	11 (5.5)	17 (8.5)	12 (6.0)	-	-	-	14 (7.0)
Moong	7 (3.5)	-	-	-	-	-	15 (7.5)
Urd	11 (5.5)	15 (7.5)	-	-	-	-	-
Mustard	35 (17.5)	12 (6.0)	-	-	-	-	-
Potato	16 (8.0)	-	9 (4.5)	-	-	10 (5.0)	13 (6.5)
Sugarcane	19 (9.5)	-		16 (8.0)	-	15 (7.5)	23 (11.5)

Note: Figures given in parentheses are percentage.

Table 2. reveals that the farmers were concerned with information on variety and seed availability. The use of on-line information for fertilizer related information was very low. No significant use of public and private helpline services was found for information related irrigation.

Credit and Market Related Information : The data reported in Table 3 shows that 8.5% farmers sought information about source of credit while 17.0% farmers inquired information related to agriculture loan. The most of the farmers were interested to know about market related information and used both types of helpline services through out the year.

Table 3. Details about credit and market related information N=200

S. No.	Particulars	Number of helpline users		Total
		Public(n=100)	Private(n=100)	
1.	Source of credit	5 (5.0)	12 (12.0)	17(8.5)
2.	Agriculture loan	12 (12.0)	22 (22.0)	34(17.0)
3.	Price of product	-	-	-
4.	Whole sale market	17 (17.0)	26 (26.0)	43(21.5)

Information Related to Animal Husbandry/Small Scale Industries : Farmers frequently obtained information

related to animal husbandry/small scale enterprises through helpline. From public helpline service, 12% farmers sought information about mushroom cultivation while 7% farmers got information on poultry farming through public helpline service. It was interesting to note that private helpline service was not accessed for animal husbandry related information (Table 4)

Table 4. Accessing information related to animal husbandry/small scale industries N=200

S. No.	Particulars	Number of helpline users		Total
		Public (n=100)	Private (n=100)	
1.	Cattle related	4 (4.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (2.0)
2.	Poultry farming	7 (7.0)	0 (0.0)	7 (3.5)
3.	Mushroom cultivation	12 (12.0)	0 (0.0)	12 (6.0)
4.	Bee keeping	9 (9.0)	0 (0.0)	9 (4.5)

Constraints of Helpline Services: It is revealed from Table 5 that maximum perception score was obtained towards 'less co-operation from the farmers' followed by 'adoption of prescribed technologies by the farmers is very low', 'lack of confidence in government programmes', 'slow progress of the programme', single telephone line', 'funds not provided timely by the government, and 'poor condition of the equipments'.

Table 5. Constraints related to helpline services as perceived by people engaged in these services N=20

S. No.	Constraints	Perception Score	Mean Rank	Rank Order
1.	Farmers don't know the number of help line services	47	5.9	I
2.	Poor condition of equipments	25	3.1	VII
3.	Single telephone line	28	3.5	V
4.	Adoption of prescribed techno-logies by the farmers is very low	42	5.3	II
5.	Slow progress of the programmes	31	3.9	IV
6.	Lack of confidence in Govt. programme	38	4.8	III
7.	Funds not provided by the government timely	27	3.4	VI

It was found that unawareness about help-line numbers was the biggest constraint in making help-line services effective. Concerned workers also realized that the level of adoption of recommended technologies was very low at the level of farmers. Thus, the major constraints are unawareness about helpline number, low use of existing services and low adoption of recommendation through helpline services.

Strategies for Effective Helpline Services:

- Identification and preparation of directory of Frequently Asked Questions and making them available to the helpline agents in local language both in the printed form and soft copy is very essential. It will increase the efficiency of the helpline centre in providing information to the farmers.
- Verification of the correctness of the answer given by the helpline centre should be made integral part.
- Availability of competent experts in Kisan Call Center during working hours should be ensured so that common questions could be attended at that level and only difficult questions are diverted to the technical institutions and universities.
- The accessibility of toll free phone numbers by field functionary should be checked and any problem noticed should be informed to the nearest telephone exchange. This measure will also help in proper functioning of the helpline services.
- Helpline service should be popularized through several mass media by the government departments and SAUs.
- Agricultural extension agents can effectively access and share knowledge on crops, pest management, irrigation and other aspects of small scale agriculture relevant to the needs of the poorest.
- Proper orientation to be given to the farmers about the procedure of accessing the on-line information services through helpline centres.
- Location specific problems should be prioritized and technological intervention should be formulated to address such problems to make the helpline service more effective in solving the problems of a particular region.
- Empowerment of small and marginal farmers with suitable technical knowledge and technical skill for cultivation of improved crops should be encouraged and ensured. This is possible only with effective and meaningful combination of different extension teaching methods along with information technology.
- The experts need incentives and regular training on subject matter & communication skills to talk to the farmers.
- The impact assessment of helpline services should be regularly conducted.

CONCLUSION

Poor level of use of helpline services was observed in the study area. The frequency of seeking information related to improved varieties, plant protection, seed

availability, seed treatment and market related information on crops were relatively high. Poor connectivity, lack of awareness in farmers and incomprehensible technical information provided through helpline services were perceived as constraints in effective on-line information dissemination to the farmers. Timely and relevant technical information in agriculture should be provided to the farmers. Frequently Asked Questions may be analyzed and accordingly experts may be oriented for effective functioning of helpline services.

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