Topic-Oriented Field Days—Tools to Build Attendance at Agricultural Research Centers

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ABSTRACT

The number of farms declined by 28% from 1965 to 1990 in the five-county area surrounding the Cornbelt Experiment Field, a regional agricultural research center located in northeastern Kansas. A decrease also occurred in attendance during that same period at the annual main-field day, an important tool in information transfer for that station. In addition, many farmers now attending field days are associated with commodity or producer associations, management organizations, and other groups interested in specific types of agricultural information. In an attempt to increase attendance of participants while improving the educational delivery of varied subjects, an additional series of topic-oriented field days was initiated in 1986 and continued through 1990. The increased number of field days, each with specific subject matter, increased attendance and included new groups such as local soybean [*Glycine max* (L.) Merr.] association clubs, no-till farmers, and organic producer associations. Small topic-oriented field days efficiently utilized a small staff at the station and were judged by area extension personnel and research center staff to be of value to both the local farming community and Kansas State University's effort to reach producers in that region of the state.

University agricultural research and derived recommendations are generally regarded as necessary steps in the process of technology transfer to local producers (Rzewnicki, 1991). The use of field days to deliver this research information is an important educational tool for many regional research centers of a university agricultural experiment station (Leuthold, 1980). They deliver locally generated information to producers, highlight important ongoing research in a specific region of a state (Dyer and McCutchen, 1983), and maintain university contact with area producers. They have been described as *show-windows* for extension and research activities of a state land-grant university (Haney, 1977).

Field day attendees normally consist of individuals from the local vicinity who have an interest in agricultural research conducted by the land-grant university, and these participants generally attend such functions regularly (Leuthold, 1980). The size and number of field days held each year varies widely from state to state; however, at the Cornbelt Experiment Field, two types of field days are held. First, an annual main-field day is used to highlight as many research projects as is logistically possible. There are three to five subject matter stops at these field days. Many research fields also have at least one topic-oriented field day focusing on research that is either very important to a region, which is not available at the main field day, or is of interest to a specific group or type of producer. A small-grain field day held for wheat (*Triticum aestivum* L.) producers in an area that grows primarily spring-planted row crops or an irrigation field day in an irrigated-crop area of the state are examples that meet such criteria. These topic-oriented field days target a specific subject matter area and do not attempt to cover other topics.

At the Cornbelt Experiment Field, near Powhattan, KS, the main field day is held on the third Thursday in August and a small grains tour is held in the last week of May. These field days have been held annually since the 1960s and are regularly attended by farmers from dairy and diversified crop/livestock farms, which dominate the area. However, the number of farms in the five-county region surrounding the Cornbelt Experiment Field declined by 28% from 1965 to 1990 (Farm Facts, 1965; Kansas Farm Facts, 1990, annual reports by the Kansas State Board of Agriculture). A decrease in attendance at the main field day also occurred during this time (Fig. 1). These smaller audiences also had a diverse subject matter interest. By the mid 1980s, varied commodity,

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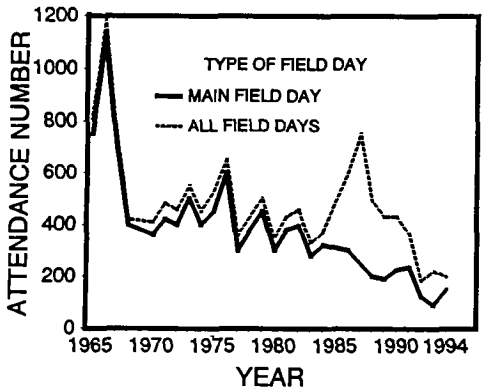

Fig. 1. Field day attendance during the period 1965 to 1994 at the Cornbelt Experiment Field.

producer, and management groups, including members of county soybean clubs, local cooperative associations, and farm management groups as well as no-till farmers and organic producers were attending these field days.

The Cornbelt Experiment Field is a relatively small research facility located on 90 ha (220 acres), with one faculty member and two technicians. In an effort to increase attendance and reach new or previously underserved audiences and to appropriately use the small staff available at the Cornbelt Experiment Field, a decision was made to develop a series of topic-oriented field days, which were in addition to the traditional main-field day and the small-grain field day. Extension and Cornbelt Experiment Field staff concentrated on specific subject matter or topics that were of interest to targeted groups of producers and interested parties such as USDA agencies.

METHODS

The following criteria were used for developing topic-oriented field days: They would fulfill a perceived need, complement farm production practices, and utilize existing research. Based on these criteria, three or four topic-oriented field days were added to the existing field days each year at the station. Most additional field days were held the week before or after the main field day to reduce field maintenance. These field days were planned months in advance to avoid having several such events in 1 yr and none the next.

A second set of criteria were used to judge the effectiveness of the topic-oriented field day. These criteria included: (i) Was total attendance increased? (ii) Was a new audience being reached? (iii) What new audiences were reached? and (iv) Did the topic-oriented field days decrease attendance at the traditional main-field day held in the summer?

Criterion 1. Attendance was measured by counting the number of attendees at each event. The average yearly total attendance, main field day attendance, and topic-oriented field day attendance were compared for two time periods, 1980 to 1984 and 1986 to 1990, with an unpaired *t*-test. In addition, long-term attendance of the main field day was compared graphically with attendance at all field days, including the main field day and topic-oriented field days.

Criterion 2. To determine if a new audience was being reached, attendees at all field days during each time period were asked to register their names, occupations, home towns, and previous attendance. Registered individuals that had not attended a field day in the preceding 5 yr were considered a new audience of the Cornbelt Experiment Field. The average yearly new attendance and average yearly percentage of new attendees were then compared for both time periods, with an unpaired *t*-test.

Table 1. Average yearly attendance for different types of field days held on the Cornbelt Experiment Field during two time periods.

	Time period	
Type of field day	1980–1984	1986–1990
Topic-oriented	52	307*
Avg./event	52	64
Main-field day	335	233*
All field days	387	540*

* Significantly different within rows at 0.05 level.

Criterion 3. The third criterion involved listing the audiences and their total attendance to determine the diversity of interests of those reached during the period 1980 to 1984 compared with the period 1986 to 1990.

Criterion 4. It was particularly important to detect if regular attendees of the main field day switched to the topic-oriented days. This analysis was performed by comparing producers who regularly attended the main field day (4 out of 5 yr) during the 1980 to 1984 period with those who also attended field days during the 1986 to 1990 period.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Criterion 1. Total attendance increased during the time period 1986 to 1990, indicating that the use of topic-oriented field days could increase the field day audience (Table 1). The average yearly attendance over the 5-yr period from 1986 to 1990 was 540 people. There was also a reversal in importance of the topic-oriented field days compared with the main field day. Main field day attendance decreased during the 1986 to 1990 period, but topic-oriented field day attendance increased. When comparing attendance over the long term (Fig. 1), the total field day attendance in 1987 reached 750, which was the highest total attendance since 1966. The large increase in attendance in 1986 and 1987 probably resulted from the newness of the topic-oriented field day concept. Several new ideas for field days, such as regional U.S. tours with out-of-state involvement, were also attempted early in the process but eventually gave way to a more settled pattern of field days for local producers. Attendance at the main field day after 1990 has also continued to decline, decreasing to 90 people in the flood-plagued year of 1993 and 150 in 1994. Total attendance also declined after the experiment in the use of topic-oriented field days ended in 1990.

Criterion 2. Increasing the attendance was an important goal; however, it takes on greater importance if the numbers also include individuals who have not previously attended. There were nearly twice as many new attendees annually at field days during the 1986 to 1990 period as during the 1980 to 1984 period (Table 2). This was, in part, due to the increased number of field days; however, the percentage of registrants in the audience that were new attendees also increased during the later time period. Topic-oriented field days either reached those that had quit attending or reached an underserved

Table 2. Average yearly attendees at field days held on the Cornbelt Experiment Field during two time periods.

Attendance	Time period 1980-1984	1986-1990
New attendees	48	99 *
% New attendees	21.1	32.2*

* Significantly different within rows at 0.05 level.

audience. Some of the attendees did indicate that they had never before attended a field day at the Cornbelt Experiment Field, although the field had existed since 1954.

Criterion 3. New and very diverse groups were afforded the opportunity to see agricultural research at Kansas State University's Cornbelt Experiment Field (Table 3). Attendees included not only alternative farm groups, such as the Kansas Organic Producers, but also more conventional producers at events such as the soybean field day sponsored by the American and Kansas Soybean Association through their local county clubs. The focused approach of a soybean field day, in particular, proved an excellent opportunity to take the teaching experience to a higher level. In-depth descriptions of the breeding methods and pedigrees of varieties and more complex presentations of weed management techniques were given. This situation was the result of increased interaction between researcher and producer, with excellent questions being asked by knowledgeable top producers.

Criterion 4. The new topic-oriented field days held during the period 1986 to 1990 reduced regular attendance at the traditional main-field day by 9%. Of the 74 regular attenders during the period 1980 to 1984, 67 still regularly attended the main field day during the 1986 to 1990 period. Producers who had switched indicated they were not dissatisfied with the main field day, but felt they could pick and choose the subjects that interested them. They also indicated that the new topic-oriented field days offered them additional opportunities for attendance if farm work or other business prevented them from attending the main field day.

SUMMARY

Topic-oriented field days reversed the trend of decreasing attendance at agricultural field days and increased the number of new attendees by offering more diverse subject matter that was of particular interest to them. The topic-oriented field days did detract some from the main field day, but were judged successful by extension and Cornbelt Experiment Field personnel.

Table 3. Audiences at field days held on the Cornbelt Experiment Field during two time periods.

Residence of audience	Time period 1980-1984		1986-1990	
In-state	General farming	1865	General farming	1871
	College	20	College	33
	Extension council	NA	Extension council	90
	County agents	50	County agents	45
			Kansas rural appraisers and farm managers	23
			Kansas Soybean Assoc.	238
			Kansas Organic. Prod.	45
			Cooperatives (COOP)	58
			Kansas Soybean Comm.	10
			USDA-SCS	15
5-yr total		1935		2428
Out-of-state			Regional extension agents	22
			Cooperatives (COOP)	153
			USDA/USAID/World Bank	50
			Univ. of Nebraska Sustainable Ag Tour	45
5-yr total		NA		270
Grand total		1935		2698

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