

BCG DROUGHT INITIATIVES 2005

Supported by the Victorian State Government

BCG thought hard about what its role should be in ensuring that all farmers feel empowered, to some extent, to deal with the situation they are in. BCG identified some key areas where meaningful input could be made.

Through various activities BCG aimed to reduce the feelings of hopelessness and the negative impact of social isolation on farmers and their families by **developing a support network for farmers which encouraged farmers to support each other in a way that 'forced' them to re-engage with their families, peers and community.**

With support from the Victorian State Government, BCG designed and developed a number of drought support initiatives.

BCG Expo

The BCG Grains Research Expo is a unique event that brings the latest in agricultural research directly to a farmer audience. The 2005 BCG Grains Research Expo, themed '*For Love or Money*' and open to the whole family was hailed as an outstanding success.

The Premier of Victoria Steve Bracks opened the Expo over breakfast. The breakfast was an excellent new initiative with the Premier and the Minister for Agriculture, Mr Bob Cameron enjoying local hospitality washed down with a touch of live jazz whilst networking with farmer members and exhibitors.

Scientific work from around Australia is showcased every year at the BCG Expo. The event is unique in that it offers an opportunity for farmers to question and explore new science as well as the opportunity for scientists to publicise their research. The relationships that are developed between farmers and researchers during this time are very important in facilitating the exchange of ideas and information. The closer the farming community is to the science, the more rapid the adoption and incorporation of new technologies and ideas into everyday farming practices.

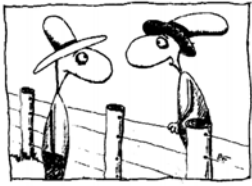
Fifty-seven research and industry exhibitors displayed new and relevant information for growers. These displays were complemented by a series of discussion sessions that ran throughout the day on relevant issues being faced by farmers in the grains industry. These discussion forums provide information about the current situation and provide robust debate on topical issues. Topics included Foliar Disease Management, GMO's, Weed Busting, Nitrogen Management, Grain Storage, Greenhouse, Commodity Prices, Exceptional Circumstances and Making Conservation Pay. The major discussion forums for the day were 'Local Farmer Partnerships' and 'Boosting Rural Communities'.

Side-show alley, 'real' fairies and Story Book animal farm also contributed to ensuring that the small folk in attendance were fully occupied with terrific entertainment.

What was delivered: The Expo was made FREE for the whole community (normally non-members are charged an admission fee.) By delivering a free event some of the financial pressures and feelings of isolation felt by every farmer were alleviated. It allowed free access to information that the community otherwise may not have received, if admission had been at cost. Knowledge is power in times of uncertainty. We were also able to provide free breakfast for participants, attract more exhibitors than previous years, present a conference program that was engaging, stimulating and entertaining and introduce free family activities in an effort to attract more parents during the school holidays.

Given that many were still in the process of completing their sowing programs the number of farmers attending the expo was very pleasing. As one farmer quipped 'I have cut costs and ceased my membership of many organisations but I have kept my BCG membership because they are one of the few that are genuinely trying to help us'. BCG is proud to be able to offer up-to-date information and the latest innovations through this annual expo to all farmers in the Mallee Wimmera regions.

Farmer to Farmer: ‘Over The Fence’



Knowing what other farmers are up to can restore confidence and help relieve anxiety. Sometimes seeing your neighbour out spraying makes you feel reassured that it’s okay for you to be out doing the same!

For this reason, with the financial support we developed a new initiative – a way of solving practical problems, sharing ideas, providing support validating everyday decisions and reducing the feelings of isolation.

We called it ‘Over the Fence’.

What was delivered: Throughout the 2005 growing season, once a week for sixteen weeks, four different farmers across the Wimmera and Mallee were asked to share their thoughts on a range of issues affecting their business and day-to-day operations. A total of fifty-two farmers were involved, sharing their thoughts and opinions on a range of issues.

The series of set topics were identified by local farmers, and addressed current issues on which they were seeking clarification or help, such as decisions around dry sowing, new technologies, brome grass control, farm management deposits and communication.

Published in The Weekly Times and 14 regional newspapers, ‘Over the Fence’ quickly became a weekly talking and reference point for regional farmers and community members.

The response from the farming community and regional newspapers was so supportive that ‘Over the Fence’ may well re-emerge in future years.

The Dimboola Banner recorded a circulation increase of 250-300 each time ‘Over the Fence’ was published.

Friends for Life

At the end of the Over the Fence series, the 52 farmers and their partners were invited to be formally honoured with representatives of DPI, The Weekly Times, the 14 regional newspapers involved, and staff and committee members of BCG at a **Friends for Life** dinner. An enormous amount of anecdotal evidence from many of the 90 people present proved that the participants thoroughly enjoyed meeting each other and receiving a booklet containing the complete Over the Fence series and contact details for each of the participants. New friendships were formed and from all reports back to BCG, new ones continue to develop. Participants commented that they enjoyed meeting face-to-face those farmers whose thoughts, experiences and opinions they had read during the series and took advantage of the opportunity to further discuss those ideas.

What was delivered: The friends for life program primarily offered significant social benefits for the drought affected farmers but also offer benefits for farmers in general.

Benefits include:

Discussion by farmers with farmers from different regions about different farming practices, challenges and positive experiences

Networks being established between different farmers

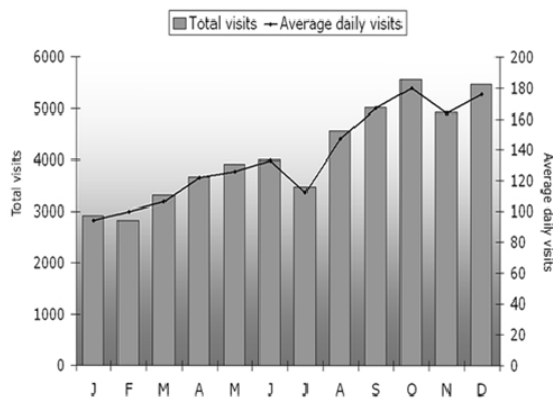
Greater understanding of agricultural challenges between different farmers

Socialization with other farming families

Life-long friendships could be developed.

Website Forum

What was delivered: In conjunction with the ‘Over the Fence’ newspaper articles, BCG established a web forum where farmers could go online and add their own thoughts to those already published in the local newspapers. This also allowed the series to be read more widely than the readership of the 15 newspapers involved.



The online forum facilitated interaction and empowered decision-making processes.

Our website (www.bcg.org.au) usage statistics continued to rise in 2005, with both the total number of visits to the site and the average number of daily visits almost doubling by the end of the year (Figure to left). Not only were the forums amongst the most visited pages on the BCG website during the series, they continue to be the second or third most looked at pages on the site.

Radio Programs ‘With the Grain’ & ‘Communities Under Pressure’

Members of BCG regularly receive agronomic information via direct communication with BCG. BCG has a wealth of up-to-date experience and information. Non BCG members are not receiving all the information that is available. Some farmers cannot afford to be BCG members and therefore cannot access this information. The broader community is generally unaware of the complexities of farming.

Objective

To disseminate agronomic information to the wider community

To openly discuss a range of agronomic topics ‘on-air’

To raise the profile of farming and the issues and complexities associated with it

What was delivered: BCG developed two radio concepts with ABC Victoria and ABC Bush Telegraph. These were designed to raise issues from the rural area, with other rural people and with the broader community. Local farmer and Councillor Robyn Ferrier co-hosted and featured on ‘Communities Under Pressure’ an ABC Victoria radio program running from August to December 2005.

In 2006 *Bush Telegraph’s* ‘With The Grain’ project, listeners go online to make decisions that will affect the yield, profitability and soil health of a paddock owned and managed by Mallee wheat farmer John Ferrier. Making decisions however, won’t be made blindly. *Bush Telegraph’s* audience will draw on the science of the CSIRO and the technology of the Birchip Cropping Group to employ an online dry land crop simulator called Yield Prophet.

“Have been hearing you on the radio even before found you email. You sound great. A number of people have commented---*What a great thing to do*. It certainly gives people a shock when they hear what a *gamble* farming is. Haven't heard the program much this week but I did come in and catch Robyn being interviewed last week.”

Speaker Database

Some terrific speakers have attended BCG events over the last five years. To facilitate further access and information seeking, BCG has created a searchable database of speakers on the BCG website. People can search via topic, event or date to obtain contact details of experts and practitioners in particular fields.

What was delivered: A total of 108 speakers from BCG events since the year 2000 have given their permission to be listed in our online speaker database. Web users are able to contact the speakers for further information after hearing them speak at a BCG event, or they may wish to find a speaker for an event that they themselves are organising.

The speaker database was made available in the public area of the BCG website on 23 March 2006. Since then, it has received an average of 35 hits per week.