

Banana Industry Communications Program

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Australian Banana Growers Council Inc

Project Number: BA09066

BA09066

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Summary

The Banana Industry Communications Program BA09066 has delivered an extensive and integrated program of communications materials and activities for the banana industry.

The Program was conducted by the Australian Banana Growers' Council (ABGC). The start date was October 1, 2010 and the Program concluded on December 31, 2013.

Key achievements of the Program are the establishment of the systems, materials and activities required for an effective communications strategy. Importantly, this strategy can now be utilised on an ongoing basis in future communications activities to assist the industry achieve its future strategic objectives.

Background

At the time of the program's commencement, the banana industry had a number of communications tools and tactics. However, these were insufficient to ensure effective and timely communications to all stakeholders in a way best supporting the industry's objectives as set out in the Strategic Investment Plan. The existing outputs also needed to be integrated into an overarching communications strategy to maximise outcomes.

Additional communications tools were required for the primary audience of banana growers, including both tropical and subtropical growers, and for industry stakeholders who work with growers in areas such as research, extension and supply chain. These communications needed to span a range of pathways, including both electronic communications, traditional printed publications, media and industry events.

It was also important to represent the industry's activities to selected external audiences.

The development of a communications strategy, including annual operating plans, was also essential to ensure an integrated approach that would deliver communications in a timely and effective fashion.

Program aims

As stated in the original program proposal, the Australian Banana Growers' Council is committed to adopting a strategic approach to communication and engagement as part of the mission to make the Australian banana industry more "profitable, competitive and united".

The Program identified the practical steps that needed to be taken to ensure that communication activities contributed to the successful accomplishment of these industry objectives.

Aims were to:

- Focus on key audiences
- Use influential communication channels
- Build internal capacity.

Program activities

The program's strategy was to carry out activities to:

- Develop an appropriately resourced communications infrastructure to enable effective communication with internal and external audiences
- Develop and distribute compelling information
- Meet and exceed grower expectations

- Build a clear profile for the industry on national issues that impact the industry.

Key outputs

The Program's key outputs were:

- Communications systems and infrastructures including a database
- Image and information resources
- Identification and training of industry spokespeople to comment on industry issues
- Establishment of a communications team to deliver Program outputs
- Annual operating plans and a system for program review and evaluation
- A suite of publications and communications materials distributed at scheduled intervals
- New website including frequently updated sections for notices, media releases, industry information, online publications and information videos
- Use of communications materials and services to assist the extension of information from other programs and projects. For example, the website also hosts material generated by other projects, such as the Best Management Practices Project, BA11006.

Key outcomes

The Program has:

- Created a communications resource and integrated communications strategy that can continue to be utilized by the industry
- Developed systems for managing communications channels
- Created a suite of industry publications and communications materials and activities and a resource of industry spokespeople
- Established connections among banana industry stakeholders and a common understanding of banana industry issues
- Enhanced the banana industry's reputation as an industry that is capable of assessing and managing important issues and communicating on these issues to its audiences.

Importantly, the program's communications strategy has longevity and can continue to be used for future industry communications. This will continue to assist the industry's efforts to achieve the objectives of the industry's new Strategic Investment Plan which was being developed at the time this program concluded and is due to commence at the start of the 2014-15 financial year.

Recommendations

The Communications Program has greatly assisted the banana industry to pursue the objectives set out in the Strategic Investment Plan.

It is recommended that the existing communications systems, materials and activities continue to be utilised for industry communications.

Also, as the industry prepares its new Strategic Investment Plan, it is recommended that future communications strategies and annual operating plans be considered to ensure activities continue to best facilitate the achievement of industry objectives.

A full list of recommendations appears later in this document.

Keywords

Suggested keywords and terms are: communications, strategic communications, stakeholder communications, key audiences, banana industry, banana industry website.

Introduction

Prior to the commencement of BA09066, the banana industry's main communications tool was the industry's flagship publication, Australian Bananas magazine. There was also a subtropical communications project, BA08013, which operated from February 2009 to July 2010 with outputs including a newsletter produced only for subtropical growers.

The industry's Strategic Investment Plan had stated that a whole-of-industry approach was required to achieve the industry's vision. To support this, industry communications needed to be directed to a range of industry stakeholders and partners.

Prior to the commencement of the program, the Australian Banana Industry Communication and Engagement Strategy and Implementation Plan was completed in December 2009. This report identified steps that needed to be taken to assist the industry to achieve its objectives through stakeholder communication and engagement.

Key recommendations included:

- Develop an appropriately resourced communication and engagement infrastructure that will enable effective communication with internal and external audiences for the banana industry
- Develop and distribute compelling content to ensure the industry messages are clearly understood by all audiences
- Meet (and exceed) grower expectations in the area of communications and engagement
- Implement a program of external communication activity that builds a clear profile for the industry on critical national issues and policies that impact on the industry.

It was noted that a targeted approach was required with particular attention to be given to stakeholders who could assist with the achievement of industry objectives.

Methodology

The Program proposal for BA09066 outlined an overview of the banana industry's communication strategy, including:

- Industry challenges – including geographic diversity, industry transition and sustainability pressures and community interest in areas such as environmental issues
- The need to focus on key audiences
- The need to develop influential communications channels
- Building internal capacity through strengthening communication systems and infrastructure
- Using communications to assist in achieving outcomes for the banana industry
- Measurement and continual improvement.

Communications activities were undertaken to address the challenges and achieve the stated outcomes. A review system included the provision of survey and feedback forms and a midpoint Program review which included qualitative and quantitative surveys of industry stakeholders and an assessment of activities. Communications activities included attendance at and involvement with grower events and these were used as opportunities to gain feedback on the Program.

Program activities included:

1. Communications systems and infrastructure

- Establishing and maintaining Platform Direct Database of growers, industry associations and other banana industry stakeholders. This database is used for the distribution of communications and tracks recipients' receipt of electronic communications
- Establishing and maintaining ABGC media database
- Identifying and training grower spokespeople who speak on industry issues with key audiences
- Construction of a single-integrated website and information database which is a centralised knowledge base for the industry
- Establishment of industry resources, including a photo library, fact sheets and publications.

2. Developing content sources for communications

- Australian Bananas magazine
- Australian Banana News newsletter
- Growers' e-Bulletin
- Industry fact sheets
- Media releases and industry notifications
- Event-specific communications, including those assisting communication of information for industry events such as the Banana Industry Congress.

3. Stakeholder relations

- Promotion of and attendance at industry events, including grower field days, grower association meetings and the Banana Industry Congress
- Relations with key audiences
- Facilitation of extension of industry research utilising industry communications.

4. Developing the banana industry story for external audiences

- Industry information and fact sheets
- Establishment of archives of information and images supporting the industry's story
- Stakeholder relations activities
- Industry website.

5. Risk and Issues Management

- Industry reporting
- Media monitoring.

Communications activities during the program were carried out by a Communications Manager and communications consultants.

The services of designers, photographers and other contributors were utilised as required to assist with the production of communications materials.

At the commencement of the project, the Communications Manager was Jamie O'Brien. Following Jamie's departure from the role in March 2012, Rhyll Cronin was appointed as Communications Manager. Prior to her commencement in the role, Rhyll Cronin, conducted the Program's midpoint review, submitted with Milestone 104 in March 2012.

Additional communications services were provided by contractors Green PR and Cape PR.

Outputs

Annual Operating Plans

Annual Operating Plans were developed for each year of the Program.

As outlined in the plans, the principle communications materials produced during the Program were:

- Australian Bananas magazine – published three times a year (April, August, December)
- Tropical newsletter – published every two months (January, March, May, July, September and November). Printed for mailed distribution and also distributed by email
- SubTropics newsletter – published every two months (January, March, May, July, September and November). Printed for mailed distribution and also distributed by email
- Growers' e-Bulletin – circulated monthly with additional editions as required to assist with the timely dissemination of news and information.

Following a review process in 2012, the two newsletters were amalgamated to provide a single national newsletter. The principle communications materials at the conclusion of the Program were then:

- Australian Bananas magazine – published three times a year (April, August, December)
- Australian Banana News – published every two months (January, March, May, July, September and November). Printed for mailed distribution and also distributed by email

- Growers' e-Bulletin – circulated monthly with additional editions as required to assist with the timely dissemination of news and information.

A full list of materials appears in the Calendar of Activities and the Activity Tracker, the latter being used to assist workflows and ensure a consistent flow of communications activities.

Calendar of Activities

A summary of publications and activities appears below:

Activity/Communications tool	Timing
Growers' e-Bulletin	Initially distributed every two months at the commencement of the Program, distribution was increased at the end of 2012 to monthly distribution
Australian Banana News	Bi-monthly, colour eight-page newsletter, distributed by mail, email and available on website. Unified the previous regional publications, Tropical News and SubTropics News
Australian Bananas Magazine	Three editions, full-colour, glossy publication. Initially 32 to 36 pages at the commencement of the Program and expanded during 2012 to 44 to 48 pages
Website	New website completed in early 2013. Continual updates – project material, videos, announcements, media releases, publications in electronic form and photo galleries
Media Releases	Continual release of announcements and other commentary to support and promote industry initiatives
Other Communications tasks	Media monitoring, media relations, discussions with industry project leaders
Banana Industry Congress	Pre-promotion of the event (May 29 – June1) as well as communications during and post event
Other Stakeholder interaction	Attendance at Banana Grower Association meetings in NSW (Nambucca, Coffs Harbour and Murwillumbah) and Qld (South Johnstone and Mareeba)
Grower events	Field days at South Johnstone Research Station and the industry Banana Plant Protection Program's Duranbah trial block
Communications plan reviews	Conducted every four months. Includes feedback forms and a survey responses.

**Communications activity
tracker**

Task Description	Date	Date												Activity	
		January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December		
COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS															
Growers' e-Bulletin															Published
Australian Banana News															Published
Australian Bananas Magazine															Published
Media Releases															Distributed
STAKEHOLDER ACTIVITIES															Published
Activities with stakeholder groups															Meetings, field days and agricultural shows
Industry events															Banana Industry Congress preparation and convening 2011 and 2013 events
REVIEW															
Ongoing reviews of Strategic Communications Plan															Periodic reviews conducted

Outcomes

The Program successfully established a co-ordinated communications strategy that delivered communications materials throughout the period of the Program. Importantly, the Program has established resources that can continue to be used by the industry.

As mentioned in this report's summary, the Programs aims were to:

- Focus on key audiences
- Use influential communication channels
- Build internal capacity.

Challenges for the industry included its geographic diversity, industry transition and pressures, community interest in farm-management issues and the lack of strategic management of communication and engagement.

These aims and challenges have been addressed through the following outcomes:

- Establishment of an effective communications strategy targeting key audiences
- Use of communications to effectively deliver extension of R&D projects
- Ensuring audiences receive timely and effective communications
- Maintaining existing communications channels and establishing additional communications channels as required to meet the needs of audiences
- Identifying additional audiences, such as those in the industry supply chain who can assist with industry objectives, and extending appropriate communications to them
- Establishing a dedicated communications resource and identifying industry stakeholders who are able to communicate the industry's messages
- Analysis of breadth, depth, frequency of communications and targeting of information.

Evaluation and Discussion

As discussed in the report summary, the Program has established a cohesive Communications Program that has assisted the industry to:

- Better manage its challenges
- Assist the industry to pursue its objectives under the Strategic Investment Plan
- Produce outcomes that have assisted to build the industry's relationships with internal and external audiences
- Establish systems allowing for future replication of the Program using the already-established foundation of resources and activity calendars and timelines.

The Program was evaluated using the following methods:

- Surveys and feedback forms included with the distribution of Australian Bananas magazine
- Website comment facilities
- Tracking of statistics available through the Platform Direct system to show percentage of openings of emailed publications
- A midpoint review which conducted qualitative research on the Program's performance
- A survey conducted at the Banana Industry Congress
- Discussion of the Communications Program at grower association meetings and the encouragement of feedback on the performance of the Program.

A benchmarking survey was conducted in March 2010, prior to the commencement of the Program. The survey was conducted with subtropical growers as, at the time, the major communications publications were Australian Bananas magazine and the Subtropics Banana News. At the time, there was no newsletter for the tropical region as this was introduced in March 2011.

Key findings, which were reported in the Program's Milestone 102 in March 2011 were:

- Both *Australian Bananas Magazine* and *Subtropics Banana Newsletter* were seen as the best places for information among growers, and the next was - other growers
- It seems that the frequency of the newsletter is on track - 19 people said every 2 months was best, while five said every three months and six people said every month
- Readers wanted more research, general industry news and stories about other growers
- The most popular articles are about growers, regional news and the National Banana Bunchy Top Project
- A total of 29 readers said subtropical communications was either excellent (6) or good (19)
- A total of 22 said that the ABGC was a good or medium source of information
- A total of 25 found the research and best practice sheets a good or medium source of information
- A total of 21 respondents were members of local grower associations
- A total of 25 have access to the internet and email (I have only 30% of growers overall who have supplied an email address).

As part of the Midpoint review, a qualitative survey was conducted and key findings were:

- While some information may be repeated in multiple sources, ie. in the ABGC newsletters and Australian Bananas magazine, this is appropriate given that different communication channels have different target markets, formats, distribution channels and production timeframes. For example, the purpose of the newsletter is to convey information quickly and in a timely fashion whereas the magazine can examine a number of issues in more detail. Most respondents did not feel there was repetition of information
- There appears to be a range of preferences and requirements for communications distribution channels. Some stakeholders rely on face-to-face or word-of-mouth communication with sources known personally to them, some do not use electronic communications such as email, Internet page views or social media. For others, electronic communications were the primary source of information
- In terms of content, there appeared to be a preference for the timely communications of regionally-based information that would assist in making business decisions about the most opportune banana production and transport times

- In terms of rating the effectiveness of current communications, responses were rated on a four-point scale ranging from "very effectively", "effectively", "not very effectively" or "poorly". Most respondents rated the effectiveness as very effective or effective, one respondent considered it not very effective and no respondents rated the effectiveness as poor.

In summary:

- There is generally a recognition of, and satisfaction with, improvements achieved in communications through the Banana Industry Communications Program
- At the time of the Midpoint Program Review, there was oversupply in banana production and this prompted comments and suggestions on what additional benefits could be gained by timely communication of "alert" style information concerning production levels, current and forecast market prices and other production, transport and market issues
- A broad range of communications channels needs to be maintained to ensure effective contact with all stakeholders, including those who do not currently, and may not intend to, utilise electronic communications channels.

A further survey was undertaken at the Banana Industry Congress when participants were asked to rate the importance of eight identified industry issues, including the importance of industry communications.

There were 68 responses and, of these, 35 ranked communications as very important, 16 as of medium importance and 17 ranked it as one of the least important issues. It can be concluded from the responses that industry communications continues to be considered as an important contributor to the industry.

Throughout the project there was feedback on the Program via reader survey responses, verbal responses volunteered at grower meetings where growers were asked for comments and feedback and comments made via the website.

These comments were in most cases favourable and supportive of existing communications and some also requested changes and additional information including:

- Market information on banana wholesale prices, including market reports
- Information and discussion on banana production levels – including any instances of overproduction
- Discussion on banana farm sustainability.

The use of the Platform Direct database and email marketing system also allowed tracking of responses to emailed campaigns. At the commencement of distribution of the Growers' e-Bulletins in December 2011, fewer than 10 per cent of emails were opened by recipients. Continued familiarity with the bulletins as well as improvement and expansion of the database has led to substantial improvements to this figure with 30 to 35 per cent of emails now being opened – a figure at the higher-end of the success range for email marketing campaigns.

The Program's use of analysis and evaluation processes yielded the following outcomes during the program including:

Publication improvements

As mentioned, following consultation with growers in tropical and subtropical regions and feedback from industry stakeholders it was decided to amalgamate the Tropical and SubTropics Banana News newsletters.

There is now one newsletter, Australian Banana News, with the first edition published in January 2013. The newsletter is an eight-page publication whereas the two previous newsletters were usually four-pages each (with some editions of the SubTropics Banana News being eight pages).

This has achieved:

- A larger publication with more space for coverage of significant issues and better options for displaying images and text
- The retention of dedicated sections for tropical and subtropical news, such as information on regional grower meetings
- A more informed grower base with growers now informed about information and events relating to their region, other regions and national issues affecting all regions.

Review processes also resulted in the following actions:

- Improved publication design and content to achieve higher-impact publications that are more readable
- Increased publication content – newsletter increased to eight pages from four pages with flexibility to increase publication size further – for example a 12-page publication was produced to allow additional content about the Strategic Investment Plan process
- Increased frequency – the growers' e-Bulletin had distribution increased to monthly from bi-monthly.

Website improvement

The website upgrade was completed in early 2013. The website is also a resource for other projects, for example, the industry's Best Management Practices guidelines is housed on the website in both a downloadable and online interactive version.

Information on the website is frequently updated and includes industry announcements and media releases, notices, fact sheets and video segments.

Events

The Communications Program assisted with the organising and management of the industry's major information event, the Banana Industry Congress in 2011 and 2013. For the 2013 event, there was a greater emphasis on utilising information from the Congress in industry publications to further leverage the value of the event.

During the course of the Program, there was increased publicising and reporting on industry field days in tropical and subtropical growing regions.

Program learnings

Learnings from the Program are that:

- A strategic communications Program is essential for the industry to work as a whole to achieve its objectives
- The Program plays a central role in informing all stakeholders about the industry's issues and required actions and assisting with a unified and effective response
- The industry is geographically diverse meaning there is a role for regional communications, however the communications strategy must have a national focus to assist with industry unity
- A dedicated communications resource is essential to ensure effective, relevant and timely communications activities
- The Communications strategy developed during the Program will be a valuable resource for ongoing communications activities as it has created a foundation of resources and information.

Recommendations

The Communications Program has greatly assisted the banana industry to pursue the objectives set out in the Strategic Investment Plan.

The following recommendations are made:

- That an overarching communications strategy be recognised as essential in ensuring the banana industry can communicate effectively with its target audiences. This Program's use of a strategy, rather than sporadic communications activities, has greatly assisted with the effectiveness of industry communications
- Communications systems, materials and activities established as part of the Program should continue to be utilised in future industry communications to take advantage of valuable, established resources including website, database, information resources and publications. Future communications strategies give consideration to the industry's upcoming new Strategic Investment Plan to ensure that the communications strategy continues to support industry objectives
- Future strategies also explore new communications channels including social media which were not fully explored during this Program
- Strategies should also give consideration to their desired key audiences. There may be additional opportunities for communications to target existing and new key audiences and also to assist other industry projects and initiatives to effectively communicate to these audiences.

Publications Arising

Not applicable

IP/Commercialisation

Not applicable