

Remote extension tips and tools



Introduction

Disruption to Australian meeting and travel arrangements from the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic has affected agricultural extension services and traditional extension delivery across the country. Agricultural extension by nature involves the dissemination of information and provision of learning opportunities to growers and others involved in the supply chain in geographically dispersed locations.

This document was brought together by the Hort Innovation Extension team to assist delivery partners navigate this changing environment and to provide insight into how to best undertake extension activities remotely.

There is potential to turn these challenging times into an opportunity to facilitate the development of new skills, particularly in the use of online resources.

This ‘tips and tools’ document includes information on the following:

- Current extension delivery activities
- Suggested alternatives for face-to-face extension delivery methods
- Tips for keeping participants engaged.

Current extension delivery activities

Traditional extension delivery methods include:

- **Conferences** – delivery of new information usually over a few days from a variety of expert sources (researchers, advisors and officials) with opportunity for one-on-one interactions
- **Research and development forums** – delivery of research and development outcomes over a day or two (usually around the practical application of new techniques/technology) with opportunity for one-on-one interactions
- **Industry or regional workshops and consultation forums** – facilitated sessions of varying length with high levels of interaction designed to develop plans and/or identify and solve problems shared by a group
- **Farm walks and field days** – observation and participation in practical hands-on activities
- **Networking events** – direct engagement between peers and experts, which may or may not be part of a larger event (breakfast/cocktail hour/dinner)
- **Seminars and lectures** – delivery of face to face sessions by experts (or a range of experts) in a particular field of work, which may or may not be part of a conference/forum
- **Webinars** – delivery of an online version of a seminar or lecture (this can either be done interactively or a pre-recorded static model)
- **Podcasts, recorded interviews and video clips** – delivery of content via podcast apps or YouTube
- **Coaching/mentoring programs** – provision of learning support either face to face or via telephone, chat rooms (social media such as Facebook) or other online communication mediums ([Skype](#), [WhatsApp](#) or [Zoom](#))
- **Online tools** – downloadable access with training and support (e.g. benchmarking platforms and decision support tools)
- **External training courses** – delivery using traditional hard copy materials and/or online learning platforms.

Traditional extension delivery should not be confused with advisory services. Generally, advisory services are provided under a fee for service arrangement and involve one-on-one and face-to-face delivery. In a similar way, formal certified education programs delivered by universities and colleges are not the same as extension services, although often linked.

Suggested alternatives for face-to-face extension delivery methods

When considering which alternative online delivery method to use, the first thing to think about is what resources are available to potential participants. They may have limited access to and experience with required technology. In many cases, there may be issues with internet connectivity and the use of social networks or learning platforms. In addition, growers are busy people and may not be able to engage live at a given time.

Be brave with your approach and try not to simply reach for the webinar or power point presentation, as there is the risk of webinar saturation. Podcasts or television/radio interviews may be a more appropriate choice as these allow the listener to be doing something else at the same time (like driving a tractor).

The table below provides suggested alternatives to traditional face-to-face extension delivery methods that you could consider.

Extension delivery method	Suggested alternative delivery method
Conferences, seminars and lectures	<p>Video documentaries</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> For example, have a look at this YouTube video on 'Drones, robots, and super sperm - the future of farming'. <p>Webinar or podcast series</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Making use of multiple mediums e.g. Microsoft PowerPoint, video, audio or printable materials Delivered by subject matter experts with a predetermined schedule that links themes (i.e. where one topic leads to another)
Research and development forums	<p>Video or podcast series</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of applications such as YouTube, Vimeo, or a Podcast App featuring researchers and growers reporting on project outcomes, case studies or farm trial results Presentations followed by question and answer (Q&A) session. <p>Online discussion rooms and workspaces:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of forums such as LinkedIn or Mindhive to discuss ideas or access expert advice.
Industry or regional workshops and consultation forums	<p>Online forums and workshops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of communication platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams which have the capacity to host a large audience Taking advantage of functions such as screen sharing and timed break-out rooms, as well as other tools such as social media closed groups with chat rooms These platforms are available as web-based apps or can be downloaded on a mobile device e.g. smart phone or tablet. <p><i>Pro-tip: Program support and capacity varies, so check before deciding what to use. Zoom for instance has a Help</i></p>

	Centre , which provides video tutorials and articles on how to use the system.
Farm walks and field days	<p>Video clips, edited and combined to create a documentary:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>School of the air</i> format (also known as flipped learning) – involves pre-reading, fact sheets and worksheets completed prior to an interactive session, which allows for peer to peer communication and Q&A. Work is returned to the coordinator for assessment and informs future content development • Use of an appropriate communication platform (with or without video).
Coaching or mentoring programs	<p>Online mentoring or coaching sessions (individual or small groups):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a range of tools available that can assist scheduling mentoring programs online (e.g. MentoringComplete). <p>Whiteboard sessions via teleconference:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants can present to the group via camera and using a whiteboard to present their findings/data.
Training courses	<p>Online learning platforms:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of formal platforms such as Blackboard • Use of online forms (e.g. Survey Monkey).
Networking	<p>Posts and blogs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of platforms such as LinkedIn, generic or purpose-built blog sites. <p>Teleconferencing or videoconferencing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of meeting platforms that allow for individual or group based 'chat' (e.g. as Zoom, Skype, WebEx and Microsoft Teams).

General tips

Most adults have a preferred learning style (there are six including visual, aural, print, tactile, interactive and kinesthetic). In the case of agricultural professionals and farmers learning is often related to 'doing' (kinesthetic). Providing the opportunity to put things into practice is extremely effective and including videos of action topics may also help the kinesthetic learner.

In addition, farmers often appreciate and benefit from the opportunity to discuss ideas with their peers. Engaging participants by ensuring the information flow is multidirectional will bring added value despite its challenges in an online format.

Try to keep the sessions to less than an hour and if you are running a program with multiple sessions ensure you schedule in regular breaks of 10 minutes or more and a lunch break. Another way to break it up is to use multiple presenters with a range of presentation styles.

Networking is one of the most significant benefits gained from in-person interaction as it enables the exchange of information that isn't always put in writing. Thus, facilitating the exchange of contact details and allocating time after presentations for phone calls may be beneficial.

Extension events bring together people that might not otherwise bump into each other, so including time for online introductions is important and if feasible, providing a list of who is in the virtual room will provide the opportunity for connections to be made after the event. Consider providing a speed dating chat schedule using an online communication platform such as [Skype](#) and a list of suggested conversation starters.

To overcome time constraint issues, it may be useful to record your online session so that participants may view at their convenience. It is important to be conscious of the file size and method of sharing with those who are interested. Using conversion software to the reduce size may help increase the number of potential viewers. Limiting the timeframe over which this remains available might help to protect the intellectual property and ensure that content does not become obsolete. It may be safer to record the session using your own device rather than the program itself.

Preparation is key, to make sure that expectations are appropriately set in terms of the topics to be covered. Getting input on the agenda (topics and formats) from potential participants prior to the session can help better contextualise and tailor the content according to the audience.

Tips for keeping participants engaged

To make presentations as seamless as possible:

- Be organised with an agenda and double check all systems needed for the presentation
- Do a practice run through several days before
- Provide participants with a list of ‘ingredients’ (what they will need on the day including access to apps, software etc.) and ensure preparatory material is distributed well in advance with clear instructions
- Provide contact information ahead of time for troubleshooting technology issues
- If possible, have one person facilitating and another to manage technical issues if they come up.
- If there are connectivity issues and/or large numbers of participants it may be necessary to turn off the video function or switch to audio by phone.

To encourage audience participation and interaction:

- Promote your online event to a wider audience by using tools such as social media channels, bulk SMS or an email campaign tool such as [MailChimp](#) or [Constant Contact](#).
- Collect feedback during the presentation to discuss later by using an in-app chat facility or a separate tool such as [Swipe](#) or [Slido](#).
- Allow opportunities for participants to both ask questions and answer them. You could also include a panel session at the end of the presentation where experts can answer any questions raised by the audience
- Use surveys before the session to gather information on topics of interest, during to conduct polls and gauge opinions and after to evaluate satisfaction levels and collect suggestions for improvement e.g. [SurveyMonkey](#) or [Pollevewhere](#).
- If you are using video, encourage participants to contribute using hand signals (e.g. thumbs up/down).

To keep participants engaged and awake:

- Mix it up as much as you can using different presenters, presentation approaches (for example the use of games or story telling) and other tools such as surveys

- If using a slide presentation, it is much better to use pictures rather than words so take advantage of the fact that presenting remotely makes it easier to reference notes as you go
- As a rule of thumb in slide presentations, try to use less than six lines with less than six words per line to keep it short and sweet and avoid font sizes less than 24
- Keep the participant's WIIFM (whats in it for me) in mind always because that is after all why they came.

More tips and tools for effective remote engagement can be found online:

- Fact sheet – [Effective engagement is possible without being face to face](#) from RMCG
- Webinars – [Communities of practice using online tools and Using video in Extension](#) from APEN, available via Leanne Isaacson Consulting
- Webinar – [Top tips for effective webinars](#) from Enablers of Change
- Blog – [The best remote working tools for meetings and presentations](#) from Skillcrush
- Blog – ["It has to be in person" is an excuse, even in agriculture](#) from Sarah Nolet, Agthentic
- Various resources from the Australasian Facilitators Network available [here](#).
- Examples of videos edited by a professional service provider at Sunshine Coast Videography blog are [available here](#).