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ARE FARM PUBLICATIONS DANGEROUS?

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To make an assessment of the economic value of farm publications would require a very extensive study in itself. However, such a study could reveal the cause of success or failure of many farm operations.

Why is this means of agrarian communication so vital? Today the farm business is no longer a refuge for the youngster who doesn't have the ability for higher education. The young man who is considered too unintelligent to seek another agricultural occupation, is not qualified to keep pace with the rapid changes in farming methodology today. The businessman, and the farmer-businessman,, who is making progress is generally an avid scholar of current innovations and ideas. While many of these changes are disseminated through colleges and universities, extension and vocational agriculture programs, and radio, television and newspapers; a great many of them are brought into the farm home by agricultural periodicals and industrial bulletins. The last two sources are similiar in that the preparation and publication of each is usually done by the same type of firms. Most companies have their brochures and information bulletins prepared by publishing editors and printed by the same firm.

A person needs only to drive a few miles on the roads of rural America to see the effects of this educational awareness. A mechanized feeding operation, minimum-tillage corn and multiple-farrowing units are a few of the examples.

It would be unreasonable to say that these changes were not valuable. Because of this educational adaptation, many farmers have prospered and created new goals for a happier life. However, the picture often is glorified for peripheral benefits. It may be called sales propaganda, whether directly from a company or indirectly from the publishing firm, but it certainly paves the way to misconception and harmful effects.

It is not the purpose of this paper to evaluate and enumerate the good and bad points of commercial publications, but to instill within the reader a sense of critical and objective evaluation of what he reads. The author concedes the educational potential of reading, provided the reader is alert to the art of propaganda analysis and the skill of economic reasoning.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS

New innovations in farming are not substitutes for good management, but rather are supplements to the management problem. Developments such as hybrid corn should be passed to the farmer as persuasively as possible, because the results of such developments are favorable and little capital involvement is borne by the farmer in its adaptation. However, most new developments are capital consuming and require consideration as to the projected long-run gains and expenses. The picture drawn by these articles often forgets to paint the lines of capital costs which would spoil the beauty of the picture. Often too, the editorial artist paints the wrong picture as he emphasizes the goal of maximizing production rather than income.

This misrepresentation is best illustrated by comparing articles of recent publications that reach a wide sector of the rural community.

A farmer in Wisconsis is reported to be saving six dollars per sow per gestation by using haylage in the ration.1/ By limiting grain he was able to increase the haylage intake. The feed cost budget appears factual, but does not indicate any value for the haylage. By definition haylage is partially dried forage and must be kept in an airtight structure. The initial cost of such a structure is high, relative to other storage possibilities, for the volume and value of the crop stored. Also, the operator built additional feeding mangers for the feeding process. To capitalize this investment and subtract the alternative income from the realized income, or to consider alternative uses of this capital, would have added to the real value of the article. Further more, no depreciation or upkeep cost for the capital investment was shown.

To illustrate the capital consideration above, suppose this $1,200 gained per year must represent a 16 percent return per year on the initial investment to cover the depreciation, upkeep and interest costs, and the useful life due to possible obsolescence of ten years; then the present value of such an investment can not exceed $5,796 ($1,200 X 4.83). If fifteen years is considered as the useful life, the present value of the asset would be $6,696 ($1,200 X 5.58). The cost of this setup is not known, nor is the possible return to investment from alternative enterprises. As the article stands it leaves insufficient information to correctly value whether haylage for hogs should or should not be considered on a farm.

1/ Marking, S. Haylage Saves $1,200. Minnesota Farmer, The. Volume 82, Number 21. November 7, 1964.

One further consideration is the adaptability of such a program. For what type of cropping program is this haylage program optimum? Would it work on an intensive row-crop system? What forage crop is best? What nutrients must be supplemented in the ration?

An Illinois farmer is pleased with the ultimate in a confinement setup for hogs.2/ He has realized remarkable savings in feed and labor by using individual stalls of minimum size. While the questions of the previous example may exist in this operation, further questions are labor and management requirements, and the transition cost of writing off previous assets and converting to this method. As individual attention increases, so must the labor needs. What type of management ability is needed to operate under new livestock stresses and how does the operator face the problems of sanitation? Are the previous facilities still usable and what was the conversion cost? An estimated feed saving of thirty dollars per sow per year appears excellent, but in view of the unknowns, is it?

A California farmer boosts milk production by grouping cows according to production into six groups, puts a colored ring on their tail to denote their group, and feeds accordingly.3/ While the management picture of this farm appears well planned, the editor forgot to tell the financial gains from added production. Did the added feed and labor costs fall short of the added returns? This farm uses a complete record system and organizes its milking operation very efficiently. Is this operation better off for its technique of planning? The author didn't say.

One final example, an operation for cattle feeding in Indiana, uses $40,000 investment to feed two thousand head of cattle. While the setup is supposed to save on labor, the ledger for 1963 shows four dollars per head left for labor. This is probably good considering the cattle prices of that year, but fails to say whether this labor return was a good alternative for that size of an investment. The article 4/ fails, also, in explaining the volume of cattle needed to obtain this type of advantage. Could such an operation be realized with five-hundred or even one-hundred head of cattle? Could labor have earned more elsewhere? The author chose to emphasize the unit cost of twenty dollars per steer to build this setup as the criteria for analysis. Is this the criteria for building a similiar operation.

SUMMARY

A reader could very well question if the mass media is fulfulling its intended purpose; and if subjective educational means such as periodicals and bulletins are distorting the optimums available in the real world. Probably an aggregate collection of a series of articles would encompass the entire realm of the management problem. The author questions if such procedure of collection and comparison is done by the farmer in his reading habits.

2/ Seim, D. How Closely Will We Confine Sows? Farm Journal. Vol. 88, No. 12. December, 1964.

3/ Curran, E. 5 Million Pounds of Milk from Ring-tailed Cows. Farm Quarterly, The. Volume 19, No. 4. Winter 1964-5.

4/ Russell, J. Chore-Saving Lot for $20 a Steer. Farm Journal. Volume 88, No. 9. Sept., 1964.

While these questions remain unanswered and open for further study, some questions for use in objective study of reading material can be left with the reader. Eight questions would provide some guidance in evaluating many of the new innovations:

1. Is capital return positive and the highest attainable for a given investment?

2. What level of management is necessary?

3. What is the loss of unused assets written off?

4. What supportive enterprises are needed and is the innovation adaptable?

5. What size operation is optimum or necessary to gain these advantages?

6. What is the value of the labor alternatives?

7. What goals are emphasized and are they the ideal?

8. How do added returns compare with added costs?

The problem of educational sources and education is not recent. For many years the rural community has been undernourished in objective, formal and critical education while it has been showered with informal, subjective education. It is common to hear an established farmer quote the the savings of a new machine, and then tell of the lad who had to forget book-learning before he could make money farming.

Going further into time, one great writer, Alexander Pope, had this to say, and I quote:

"A little learning is a dangerous thing,
Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring,
There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain,
And drinking largely sobers us again."

I am quite sure Pope was not apathetic toward education, but was observant of the possible dangers of failing to comprehend the whole picture and the real truth.

Many farmers are poor students of history, except their own. They must be kicked down by failure in order to learn the economics of good management. But the day of trial and error is now history, because failure is often defeat and defeat often means the end to a farm business.

Therefore, it may be concluded that these subjective publications can be and are dangerous to the agrarian community if misread, and that new efforts in critical appraisal must be directed toward filling the gaps left by the mass media.