

THE ADOPTION PROCESS¹

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One of the main functions of an extension officer is to induce his clients to adopt, at an early date, the approved new practices which are developed by research workers. In order to do this effectively, it is necessary to know more about the ways in which new practices are adopted. Because of this, a considerable amount of research on the adoption process has been done during the past twenty years, especially in the United States, India, Pakistan, Australia, the Netherlands and Columbia. Some of the findings from this research will be briefly summarized in this paper.

Most people do not adopt new practices the minute they hear about them. They first wait and see. It may take some time to satisfy themselves that the practice will do well under their particular circumstances. Research on several farm practices in the United States showed, that this process took the average farmer approximately two years, i.e. from the time he first hears of the practice until he finally adopted it.

For the sake of clarification it is useful to divide this process into five stages:

1. the *awareness* stage in which people get to know about the existence of a new practice, which they often consider strange;
2. the *interest* stage in which the farmer becomes interested and consequently requires more information about the practice;
3. the *evaluation* stage in which the farmer mentally compares the advantages and disadvantages which the new practice might have over the old or existing practice;
4. the *trial* stage, in which the practice is tried on a small scale in order to gain confidence and experience under his own conditions;
5. the *adoption* stage in which the farmer replaces the old practice by the new.

A farmer naturally does not go through all these stages in this exact order each time he adopts a new practice. In some cases a farmer may for instance encounter a plant disease or some other serious problem which forces him to find a solution rather urgently. Under such circumstances the order of stages 1 and 2 may be reversed. In other instances it may be impossible to first try out the practice, e.g. the construction of new farm buildings.

I. Sources of information

Research in various countries shows that different sources of information are used during the different stages of the adoption process. As an example the results of a study covering various parts of the Netherlands are presented in Table I.

TABLE I

The percentage of farmers who consider different sources of information as the most important: (1) to hear about the existence of a new farm practice for the first time, and (2) to decide whether or not to adopt the practice.²

Source of information	To hear (%)	To decide (%)
Farm papers, radio and other mass media	70	4
Mass media in combination with some other source of information	5	3
Demonstration, experimental plots, meetings etc.	6	12
Local extension officer	3	20
Other farmers	11	43
Other farmers in combination with some other source of information	3	8
Sales-men	3	4
Own experience	0	3
Other combination of sources of information	2	3
No answer	0	4

This table shows a striking difference between the two columns: 75% of the farmers mention the mass media as their most important source of hearing about new practices for the first time, but at the decision making stage of the adoption process this source of information is absolutely unimportant. At this stage however 75% of the farmers mention personal contacts as their major source of information. Results similar to those in the first column, have been found in several American studies on the first two stages of the adoption process, while the American figures for the evaluation and trial stages do not differ materially from the second column. During the adoption stage, experience gained at the trial stage is usually the most important determinant factor.

II. Discussion of the phenomena

The question arises why the mass media merely arouses interest, and fails to convince people that they should adopt these practices. There are usually four selective processes at work which make it difficult to change human behaviour with mass media only. Firstly nobody reads

everything which is published, and as a rule people select those articles which offer solutions for the problems which they believe to have. Secondly people often interpret articles in such a way that the solutions which are presented seem to agree to a large extent with the opinions they already have. They may even go so far as to refuse to accept the solution offered in the article, even if they understand perfectly the advice given to them. Finally nobody remembers all he reads and usually forgets that most quickly which does not satisfactorily fit into the total complex of opinions he holds.

Similar selective processes diminish the effectiveness of most other extension methods, such as meetings, demonstrations and even farm visits to some extent. It are especially those who are most in need of information offered by the extension service who will not be reached by these methods or will not accept the information. It is possible to circumvent these difficulties in the process of communication of new ideas to a certain extent, by stimulating informal discussions between friends and others in whom they have confidence. Just because they have confidence in these people they also will be inclined to have confidence in their ideas. These personal contacts have only a limited potential however, because informal discussions usually take place between people whose opinions do not differ greatly.

III. Implications of the adoption process

Analysis of the adoption process has important implications for extension program planning. The effect of a teaching program may be very limited under certain conditions. This is liable to happen if the extension officer's program is focussed on problems which *he* considers important but which the farmers do not recognize as problems, as a result of which they do not desire new information. It may also occur if his educational program is in disagreement with the value orientation of farmers e.g. if his teaching is focussed on increasing labour efficiency in traditional farming areas, where a high value is placed on manual labour and managerial work is less valued.

The extension officer will however achieve more satisfactory results with an educational program if he starts on problems which the farmers consider important and which do not deviate too much from their value orientations. In this way he will gain the confidence of his clients, which will place him in a position to arouse the farmers' interest on matters which they themselves consider important for their well-being, such as an improvement of the labour efficiency, for instance.

A program started at the farmers' level, i.e. within the sphere of their conscious needs and understanding, will be much more effective than a program projected around problems defined by technical or economic research. Listening to farmers is often more important to extension officers, than talking to them.

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² A. W. VAN DEN BAN - Boer en landbouwvoorlichting; De communicatie van nieuwe landbouwmethoden. Van Gorcum, Assen, 1963, pag. 98.

³ Coded as other combination.

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