Developing a Farm Newsletter for Better Communications between Tenant and Landowner

Joe Parcell, Assistant Professor & Extension Economist, University of Missouri

The 1997 U.S. Census of Agriculture indicated that over 40.58% of all U.S. agricultural land is rented. Furthermore, farm management associations in various states have found that tenants typically rent from 3 to as many as 20 landowners. Sometimes these landowners are neighbors, persons who have moved to town following retirement from farming, persons who inherited the land through the estate, or someone who has purchased the land as a speculative investment. Thus, it is not uncommon for a tenant to seldom have contact with the landowner outside of the customary rental settlement. Agriculture is an evolving industry that has had to deal with technological adoption and the realization of the term "economies of size" during the past 10 years. A combination of increased competition for land to benefit from economies of size and more landowners not understanding production agriculture technology adoption has caused communications between tenants and landowners to become crucial. One method to better communications between tenants and landowners is for the tenant to develop a farm newsletter.

A farm newsletter can take several forms. It can be very colorful and technical or the farm newsletter can be a single typed page. The goal of the newsletter is to establish a regular communication link between the tenant and the landowner. This goal can be accomplished by making the landowner feel like part of the farming operation. The level of either production or management information contained in the newsletter depends on the most common rental arrangement between the tenant and landowners. A cash rental agreement may require little technical information. A crop-share rental agreement requires more information because the tenant’s management decisions have an impact on landowner profitability. Because the tenant rents from multiple landowners, and the landowners have multiple interests, providing general summary information is a safe component. Discuss topics such as the importance of biotechnology in farming, e.g., may have a positive environmental impact, how precision agriculture works and the information you have compiled for the landowners farm, e.g., yield maps. Note, make sure to help the landowner understand the costs of precision agriculture, so that the landowner understands you just can’t give away yield maps, i.e., the landowner could pass these maps onto a new tenant if the current rental agreement is discontinued. These issues will allow landowners to better understand the economic and environmental impacts of using new technologies. Remember, more and more landowners do not have an agriculture background so it is up to you to help educate these persons about production agriculture.

Computer technology is being adopted by urban and rural populations. A 1999 USDA survey found that 40% of U.S. farmers owned or leased a computer, 24% of U.S. farmers used a computer for record keeping, and 29% of U.S. farmers had access to the Internet. The computer has opened many opportunities for us. If your home is like my home, you find that around the Christmas holidays "Christmas Newsletters" are received that allows friends and family to catch up with what has been going in on other's lives. Granted you don't need a computer to accomplish this, but the computer has effected how we communicate and the efficiency at which we work. Much like a Christmas Newsletter, a farm newsletter can act as a way for the tenant to let the landowner know what is going on. This is particularly true when the landowner lives in
San Francisco and the tenant is farming his/her land in the Mid West. It may be that the tenant has never met the landowner. Thus, a quarterly or semi-annual synopsis of what you, the tenant, have and plan to do can be beneficial, and at times crucial, for the long-term relationship between tenant and landowner.

There are a few crucial elements of a farm newsletter. An example farm newsletter with key requirements is discussed in more detail below. Considerations with the farm newsletter include a readable font, clear and concise wording, and a somewhat friendly tone to keep the reader interested.

**So What Would a Farm Newsletter Look Like?**

An example farm newsletter is provided at the end of this paper. At the minimum a farm newsletter should include:

1. **Title**
   The title should be catchy; yet, not wordy. The title of the newsletter should be used for several years, so the landowner does not develop the impression that you are indecisive in your decisions. Also, because the title will be used for several years, be sure to like the title you choose in the beginning.

2. **How to contact the tenant**
   As with any communication between tenant and landowner, information pertaining to how to contact the tenant is important. Including contact information in the newsletter allows the landowner to feel as though you (the tenant) are always willing to visit with the landowner.

3. **Informational content**
   The informational content section describes the “what is going on” on the farm. This is the section of the newsletter where the tenant helps the landowner become more familiar with the tenant’s farming operation and the struggles and successes from involvement in production agriculture.
   a. **Overview of happenings since last newsletter**
      This section should be a short synopsis of what has happened since you sent the last newsletter. General statements should be used in this section. For example, “We wrapped up harvest on the second week of November. The much needed rain in mid July must have helped out as there was about average production.”
      Such statements help the landowner understand what you have been doing. You may also want to report in this section on information pertaining to land improvements/habitat enhancement you have undertaken since the last newsletter.

   b. **Crop progress/pasture condition/livestock development**
      Particularly if the rental arrangement is a commodity-share (or flexible cash) agreement, then the landowner will have interest in knowing crop progress or livestock development. And, even if the rental arrangement is cash rental arrangement, the landowner will feel more a part of the farming operation. Let’s
face it, what landowner doesn’t like to discuss, or even brag, about the land they own? Land ownership to some is a social activity that can be used as a conversation piece. As a tenant, give the landowner information to talk about.

c. **Weather update**
Farmers and non-farmers always have one area of interest in common, weather. Everyone understands the impact of not enough, average, and above average rainfall. Also, if the landowner is not aware of the effects of severe weather, e.g., high winds and hail, then she/he needs to be made aware of the impact of severe weather. Landowners living a considerable distance from rented land may have particular interest in weather information because they will typically have some tie to that area of the country. I know that when I call home to Iowa and visit with my parents, and they inform me of recent the 10-inch snow, it takes me back to my days as a youth on the farm and the large piles of snow – it makes me smile. Such information may well provide the landowner with a similar feeling.

d. **Commodity Prices**
Provide the landowner a brief synopsis of relevant commodity prices, and the price trends. Help the landowner understand that commodity prices are variable. Discuss what futures markets are suggesting for prices in the future. Relate current prices to historical prices, and remind the landowner of the historical variability in prices.

e. **Technology**
This section can be used as an educational section to help the landowner better understand technology change in the farming operation. Be honest and provide your opinion when necessary. You may want to discuss why you have adopted RR® soybeans. Let the landowner know that you have adopted no-till planting. Follow this up with the advantages and disadvantages. An example of the use of the no-till adoption can be found in the sample newsletter below.

f. **Upcoming events**
In this section let the landowner know what you have planned for the upcoming months. For instance, a winter newsletter may discuss planting intentions and the crop acreage mix you are considering. Also, if there are important forthcoming community events, then mention these. If the land you rent is needed to help you (the tenant) stay in farming, then you may want to invite the landowner to stay with your family should the landowner decide to travel to see the farm or community.

The information outlined above provides only ideas to put in a farm newsletter. Either more or less information may be used. Try to keep the newsletter to two pages (preferably front and back of one page). Again, the goal of the newsletter is to build, or continue, a working relationship with the landowner.
Farmer's Friendly Words  
An Informative Newsletter for our Landowner's  

June, 2000  

Joe Farmer & Sons  
100 Top Farmer Lane  
Columbia, MO 65211  

Phone: (555) 622-9999  
Fax: (555) 622-9988  

E-mail: jfarmer@aol.com  
(Joe, Dan, and Bob Farmer)

Happenings Down on the Farm
Since the last time we wrote we have wrapped up planting. We are now waiting for the much needed rain to help out the plant growth. After three years of extremely wet springs, this year’s dry spring allowed us to get the river bottom’s planted. Let us all hope we don’t get washed away when it finally rains.

Crop Progress
We finished planting May 13. Luckily, a small rain shower moved through on May 15. The rain helped the corn and soybeans emerge. The corn and soybeans look good for now, but more rain is needed. As we reported in the last newsletter, the winter snows brought relief to the wheat crop. The wheat looks good.

Weather Update
The rain during mid-May really helped out. Unfortunately, the information we get from the University of Missouri Extension service indicates the 90 day precipitation forecast is below average. We have been in this situation before. And we realize that it is not the quantity of rain, but the timing of the rain. Hopefully, luck will be on our side this year.

Price Wrap-up
Even with the dry forecast, prices have only increased slightly from our last newsletter. Cash soybean is $4.75/bushel, cash corn is $2.24/bushel, and cash wheat is $2.67/bushel. We have sold most of last year’s crop, so we are looking to the future. We have been following the futures markets to help us determine what to expect this fall. That fall corn price looks better than the fall soybean price. We actually increased corn acres because of the price difference. The wheat price continues to be dismal, but with decent production, we should about break even.

Technology Tour
We have completed our first time of planting all soybean acres using no-till. We have adopted no-till planting because we think it is better for the land due to reduced erosion. Also, no-till planting reduces some of our labor costs because we don’t need to spend time tilling the land. However, the acres we have planted using no-till the past two years have had less production than conventional planted land.

Upcoming Events
The big July 4th celebration is less than a month away. As usual, the town is expecting lots of returning persons who use to live in Columbia. A big parade and firework display is planned for July 4th. If you are looking for something to do, then feel free to join in the celebration. We would be more than happy to give you a tour of the farm. We’ll write again in September.