Virtual Field Day Series Shares Research During Pandemic

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Introduction

Due to COVID-19, ISU decided not to host field days at the ISU Research Farms. These field days are usually held twice/year, late spring and early fall, at the outlying research farms. Due to the popularity of the field days and yearly attendance at these events, this cancellation prevented farmers and agribusiness personnel from learning about the latest research results in crop production and protection. The lack of face-to-face field days also hindered the ability of crop production professionals to get Certified Crop Adviser (CCA) credits, which they need to maintain their professional certifications.

Materials and Methods

In order to reach farmers and others in agribusinesses in a "socially distant" manner when traditional programming efforts were not available, extension specialists and research farm staff coordinated a 5-day series of short, topic-specific "field day stops" via Zoom webinars during the week of August 31, 2020. The series was marketed as each day being a "field day tour stop" much like riding the wagon at a traditional field day. Figure 1 provides an example of a marketing graphic used on Twitter, farm newsletters and news releases used to communicate the series. The topics were chosen by ISU Extension and Outreach field agronomists, and each day featured a research project being conducted at all outlying research farms across the state, as well as highlighting individual farms.

Participants were asked to pre-register so attendance and reporting for CCA credits could be completed. Each registered participant was sent a reminder email each morning of the field day series, and all participants were asked to complete an evaluation via Qualtrics on completion of the series. The webinars were 20-25 minutes of presentation followed by 10-15 minutes of questions and answers. Additional reference material was posted to the chat box feature in Zoom so participants could access research and extension reports. All sessions were recorded and later posted to the ISU Crops Team YouTube channel to be accessed for on-demand viewing.

Results and Discussion

Topics for this virtual field day series included a welcome from the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, an overview of the ISU research farm system, corn fungicide trial results, long-term tillage trials, long-term phosphorus and potassium placement trials, and water quality research conducted on ISU research farms.

Following the series, a Qualtrics survey was emailed to all 446 registered participants. There were 106 responses received. Attendance for the 5-day series was 1,058 people (note: people participated more than one day). Over 37 percent of attendees received CCA credits to help maintain their certification status. Participants joined from nine states, including Iowa and one person joined from outside the United States, expanding the reach of ISU's research program.

Of the 106 survey results returned, 40 people or 37.7 percent reported this is the first ISU Extension and Outreach field day in which they have participated. Nearly 90 percent reported the 8 a.m. time slot worked well for them, 98 percent said the 30-minute length was the best for them, 38.4 percent reported the field day was highly valuable to them—as valuable as when meeting in person; and 46.5 percent reported this field day series was highly valuable, but not as valuable as meeting in person. Eight-five percent of survey respondents rated this series as excellent to very good. Additional results of the survey are shown in Table 1.

The series was recorded and archived so people could watch any session they wanted on demand if they could not attend the "live" tour. The number of views of each "field day stop" is shown in Table 2. These recordings are available at https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCpBCq1iQV6r9R-XQutOH4ig.

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Table 1. Survey responses to the question "would you use any of the information presented in the virtual field day 'stops' in making management decisions in the future?"

Topic	Yes	No	Uncertain	Did not participate	Total of survey responses
Water quality	55 (57.3%)	4 (4.2%)	23 (23.9%)	14 (14.5%)	96
Fungicide trials	66 (68.0%)	1 (1.0%)	16 (16.5%)	14 (14.4%)	97
Long-term tillage	65 (67.7%)	4 (4.2%)	16 (16.7%)	11 (11.5%)	96
P and K placement	72 (74.2%)	1 (1.0%)	13 (13.4%)	11 (11.3%)	97

Table 2. Number of people who watched the archived videos of each field day stop.

Topic	Views
Welcome and farm review	131
Water quality research	107
Fungicide trials	105
Long-term tillage trials	71
P and K placement trials	157

Figure 1. Example graphic used in marketing the virtual field day series.