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[Return to Current Issue](#)

Extending Expertise Through Conference Calls and Blogging

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Abstract: Due to the limited number of apple IPM consultants in Wisconsin and the high cost of hiring consultants, few Wisconsin apple growers have been able to take advantage of professional consultant expertise in implementing IPM on their orchards. To address this need, the Eco-Apple Project launched a blog in 2006 and free weekly conference calls with an apple IPM consultant in 2007. We found that the combined package of Web and telephone communications had a low cost relative to one-on-one service, gave growers a chance to learn from each other, saved the IPM consultant time, and was useful to growers.

The Eco-Apple Project

Since 2000, the Wisconsin Eco-Apple Project has helped apple growers interested in reducing pesticide risk apply Integrated Pest Management. Learning IPM is no small task; the project gives growers the support they need over multiple growing seasons to learn the scouting, monitoring, and sampling techniques necessary for a successful IPM regimen. In 2008, 40+ growers in four regional networks participated in the project. See <http://www.thinkipm.org/> for more information about the project.

Extending Expertise

With few apple IPM experts in Wisconsin, the Eco-Apple Project relies on one private consultant to advise most network growers. This consultant's availability during the pest management season is a limiting factor for growers who want to reduce pesticide risk. To extend our consultant's expertise to the ever-growing number of orchardists interested in applying IPM, and to serve more growers per hour of charged consulting time, we created a blog in 2006 and began offering free weekly conference calls in 2007. We chose to use a blog rather than a simple email listserv because blogs archive posts, offer a space to post files that are too large to attach to an email, and allow us to monitor site use to gauge effectiveness. Weekly conference calls with our consultant offer a low-tech, low-cost way to deliver time-sensitive information on pest management.

Call Structure

Project staff facilitated hour-long calls with the private consultant and growers every Tuesday morning from mid-April through mid-August during the 2007 and 2008 pest management seasons. The calls were open to any interested party. Occasionally Extension specialists joined the call, and the growers themselves offered advice based on their own field experience.

The calls were broken into two parts:

- First, the consultant reported on what he had seen in the field in the past week and discussed the implications of his observations.
- Second, the consultant answered participants' questions. Typical questions included: "How can I tell if predator mites are sufficiently controlling pest mites?" and "If I have ten codling moths in two of my five pheromone traps this week, should I spray?" The consultant gave preference to questions submitted to him prior to the call.

Archiving and Distributing Call Information

In 2007, the coordinator took notes during the calls and made short summaries available to all network growers by posting them to the project blog. Growers were also able to listen to a telephone recording of each call for up to 1 week.

In 2008, we expanded the ways growers could access the call recording. Along with the summaries, the coordinator posted to the blog audio recordings of each call. Grower use of the blog increased dramatically when we added these recordings. We also started using a free service offered by our conference call provider that allows us to upload call recordings into an archive accessible to growers via their telephone. This way, we better serve growers with slow or no Internet access.

Call Expenses

Costs for the calls included the consultant's time to plan for and participate on the call and the coordinator's time to organize, facilitate, and summarize the calls. We chose FreeConferenceCall.com as our conference call provider. There is no fee for using the service, but participants must pay their normally incurred long-distance charge. Funds to support the conference calls came from USDA and EPA grants.

Grower Feedback

Participating growers provided positive feedback regarding the conference calls. At the conclusion of the 2008 pest management season, we conducted a survey of conference call participants. Of the 14 who responded, we found the following.

- Respondents felt that the conference calls increased their knowledge of IPM. We asked: "On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did these calls improve your knowledge of Integrated Pest Management?" The average rating was 4.1.

- More than half of respondents tried new practices as a result of participating on the calls. We asked: "Did the calls inspire you to try any new practices this season?" 57% of our respondents said yes, and some provided feedback about the new practices they tried. For instance, one grower was inspired to try spraying every other row for apple maggots.
- 64% said that if this service were no longer free, they would be willing to pay for it. Of those who would be willing to pay, most said they could spend about \$10 per call.

In 2007, an average of 11.5 growers listened to each call. In 2008, the number jumped to 22.5. Much of this increase is due to growers using the convenient new blog-accessible audio download. In 2008, an average of 9.4 growers participated on each live call, 3.2 listened to each call recording through their telephone, and 9.8 downloaded each call recording.

Project Response

In response to the apple IPM call's popularity in 2007, we expanded our use of conference calls to include more crops and pest management strategies. In 2008, the project offered three distinct sets of calls focusing on apple IPM, organic apple management, and strawberry IPM.

The organic apple call was linked to the project blog and the Midwest Organic Tree Fruit Growers Network listserv. An average of 25 growers listened to each call. The most popular way to listen, at an average of 11 growers per call, was via download from our project blog.

The success of the strawberry IPM calls suffered from the lack of an established strawberry-focused blog to transmit and archive information. Only a few growers participated.

In 2009, we will again offer the apple IPM calls. Pending funding, we will also offer the organic apple calls. We will again offer the strawberry IPM calls, this time with an associated blog.

Implications for Extension

Together, conferencing and blogging provide a way to organize educational opportunities that allow farmers to take advantage of consultant expertise. This is true especially in the context of a larger initiative that allows for easy communication among growers, project staff, and consultants. The package is low cost relative to one-on-one service and gives growers a chance to learn from each other.

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