



Impact

An Evaluation of Agricultural Extension Service Programs

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**Dial U
Insect and
Plant
Information
Service**

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The key to successful programming is evaluation. What are the costs? What are the benefits? Should programs be supported, changed, or terminated? To find answers to these questions, the University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service regularly evaluates existing programs. This paper is the first in a series reporting the results of such evaluations.

Summary

Dial U Insect and Plant Information Service, a fee-based phone information line, replaced the University of Minnesota's free plant and insect clinic services in 1983. A year later, users were surveyed to identify whether—and how—they benefited from the service. Virtually all of the respondents reported that they had increased their knowledge by contacting Dial U, and most said they also saved time and money. Those who used Dial U saved an estimated \$960,000 in 1983. The cost of the program was \$277,000—\$27,000 paid by the users and \$250,000 paid by the university.

In the first year after the fee was instated, use of the service dropped 90 percent. Further studies should focus on identifying and meeting the needs of those who formerly used the free service but have since "dropped out."

What happens when people have to pay for a previously free service? Do users feel that they're getting their "money's worth?" When the Dial U Insect and Plant Information Clinic began operating in 1983, it was seen as one pilot solution to the budget crunch facing the University of Minnesota Agricultural Extension Service. Rather than close down the phone-in university clinics providing information on home, yard, and garden care, extension opted to continue providing the service, but at a \$2.00-per-call fee.

Use of the system dropped dramatically—90 percent—during the first year. Nevertheless, 13,500 callers *did* pay the service fee to receive advice. Did these callers find Dial U helpful and worth the expense? These were among the questions researchers asked in early 1984 as they sought to evaluate Dial U's first year.

"It's real nice to know you can pick up your phone and feel confident you're getting expert advice."

Asking the Questions

The researchers, Emely Lincowski and Jane McKinnon, began by selecting a random sample of 100 Dial U users for whom they had names and addresses (generally ones to whom they'd sent information, or those who sent requests by mail initially). The users were sent questionnaires that asked how they would have solved the problem before contacting Dial U; whether they changed their approach after the contact; and how they felt they benefited from the service.

Two-thirds of those sent questionnaires responded immediately, and another 13 percent responded to a second mailing. The respondents to a pretest (given to test the appropriateness of the questions) were included, making the overall response rate an impressive 76 percent (84 of 110 surveyed).

Results: Dial U Saves Time, Money

Carpenter ants, Dutch elm disease, proper soil for planting raspberries, and time of year for planting hedges were among the topics addressed by Dial U for those surveyed.

Virtually all of the respondents indicated that their experience with Dial U had been positive. Ninety-four percent said their knowledge increased, and 89 percent reported changing their approach to solving their problems after the contact. Most also said they saved time and money.

For example, one woman reported calling Dial U with a carpenter ant problem that she previously had hired an exterminator to solve at a cost of \$60—unsuccessfully.

"Dial U told me what to buy and how to apply the spray," she reported. "We have been able to control the problem ourselves—the cost to us being only \$10."

Lincowski and McKinnon estimated that Dial U callers made substantial savings from using the service. They calculated things like the value of trees and shrubs that might have died without the Dial U advice; cost of unnecessary treatment that might have been applied; and fees of service people such as exterminators and tree surgeons that were not needed as a result of the phone call.

"We only calculated costs for those who indicated themselves that they had saved

How Dial U Helps People

- A woman finds a small, dark bug curled up in her house. She calls an exterminator, who recommends fumigating at a cost of \$400. Should she follow through—or was the bug just a harmless stray?
- A Twin Cities mother is in panic: her child has eaten berries from a bush in the back yard. Will the child be okay? Or should she be rushed to the hospital?
- A local hobby farmer plants fruit trees along a stream near his home. They soon die, and he plans to replace them with new trees, hoping to have better luck the second time around. Will he?

These actual situations have two things in common: in each case, the answer to the question had substantial health or economic consequences. And in each case, the questioner opted to call the Dial U Insect and Plant Information Service for the answer.

As a result, the woman was saved the expense of fumigating her home unnecessarily; the mother was relieved to discover that the berries were harmless; and the would-be fruit producer found out that he'd be more likely to be successful if he planted the fruit trees on higher ground and used water-tolerant plants along the often-flooded stream bank. Each was spared substantial economic expense or worry by seeking reliable advice from a prompt, impartial source.

money," McKinnon said. "But if this group is representative, it appears that the 13,500 callers saved over \$960,000 in 1983 alone, thanks to Dial U."

Other benefits were mentioned by the respondents, too: increased confidence in Dial U; the quality of the answer; health and safety; peace of mind; and impartial advice.

"My knowledge increased, (as did) my appreciation for the service provided by the Agricultural Extension Service," wrote one respondent.

"I have used Dial U on two occasions," reported another. "Both times my problems were pinpointed exactly right. It's real nice to know you can pick up your phone and feel confident you're getting expert advice."

Room for Improvement

The overwhelming majority of the feedback from the study was positive. But a few respondents expressed negative comments.

One said that the advice came too late to save the tree in question. Another complained about the inaccessibility and lack of knowledgeable help (but referred only to the defunct free clinics, not to Dial U specifically). A third simply wrote that the service had been more helpful on previous occasions.

"Three out of 110 surveyed is not a bad rate of negative feedback," McKinnon said. But she pointed out that that figure should not be taken as absolute, since the really dissatisfied persons could be the ones that didn't answer the survey. "It's possible that there are disgruntled customers out there who didn't even bother to reply. But overall, it does appear that Dial U is seen as a valuable service by most of the users."

What About the Other 90%?

A big question for Dial U now is what's happened to the thousands of people who used the free clinics but dropped off once the fee was instated. Where are they turning for advice? Is there some way that Dial U can be made more attractive to them?

A clue to the answers lies in comments made in the surveys. When asked how they would have solved their problems before they called Dial U, users said they would have turned to books and magazines, libraries, nurseries, garden centers, commercial firms, or their county agent. One in six said they just would have acted on their own.

It's likely that some of these information sources are being used by persons who

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“The critical step is to let people know Dial U exists.”

formerly had contacted the free clinic. But fully a quarter of the respondents said they didn't know what they would have done. Are some of the 90 percent who “dropped out” in this dilemma? Also, respondents noted that a search through books and magazines may be futile or inappropriate, since it's often hard to find advice tailored to the special demands of Minnesota's climate. Considering these views and the apparent large dollar savings, it appears that Dial U may still be the best bet even for those who have chosen not to use it. But how to let them know that?

The Next Step

“It's become obvious from our survey that a critical step is to let more people know that Dial U exists and that it is not only helpful, but also cost effective,” McKinnon said. “Many of our respondents noted a lack of visibility and general awareness of the service. And, from the comments we've received through this evaluation, it is apparent that the service could be a big help to a lot of people, if only they knew about it.”

The next step, McKinnon says, is to find out what other information sources are being sought by former clinic users, and to let these people—and potential new customers—know about the ways that Dial U can help that other sources can't. Increased marketing efforts are now being planned, largely as a result of the evaluation.

“Dial U has been shown by its users to be a worthwhile program,” McKinnon summarizes. “By spreading the word, we can help the service reach and teach more and more Minnesotans in search of plant and insect information.”

About the Research Team

Jane P. McKinnon's interest in both horticulture and extension can be traced back to her childhood in Mississippi. Her father was one of the first extension agents in Mississippi and, she recalls, “people called him morning, noon, and night with questions.” An avid gardener, she says she “couldn't get anything to grow” when she first moved to Minnesota during World War II. Her solution was to return to school and learn all she could about horticulture. She received her B.S. and M.S. degrees from the University of Minnesota and, since 1970, has been extension horticulturist at the university's Agricultural Extension Service.

Emely Lincowski was born in Cuba, grew up in Maryland, worked as a research scientist at the U.S. Department of Agriculture for four years, and moved to Minnesota in 1982. Her excellence as a graduate student in horticulture at the University of Minnesota resulted in her participation in the Dial U evaluation study reported here. She received her M.S. degree in March, 1984, and is now a horticulture assistant with the Washington County Agricultural Extension Service.

Additional information on the details of the evaluation research methods and results are available in an unpublished study by Emely Lincowski and Jane P. McKinnon, “Impact Study: Benefits Perceived by Consumers Using Dial U Insect and Plant Information Service.” Contact Jane P. McKinnon, 164 Alderman Hall, University of Minnesota, St. Paul, MN 55108, for more information.

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