



INTRODUCTION

- Texas has the highest number of ranches and farms in the US with 248,416 farms and ranches covering 127 million acres. Ranch owners have an average age of 59 years and cattle operations are the largest sector in term of market value (Figure 1).
- Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, farm businesses experienced production disruptions from lower availability of labor and inputs (USDA, 2021). The resilience of US farmers is directly related to informed financial decisions.
- The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Texas A&M University-Commerce began a 2-year education and outreach project, entitled "Texas Farm Business Management and Benchmarking Education and Outreach Alliance."
- The most crucial and difficult part of this project is outreaching and recruiting agricultural producers. Financial management is a sensitive topic and most farmers do not actively seek to acquire financial advice (Hilkens, 2018).
- The project makes use of existing clientele (contact information) from previous outreach programs, but also uses Facebook to identify prospect participants.

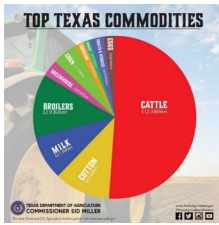


Figure 1. Top Ten Texas Commodities. Source: Texas Department of Agriculture, 2021.

OBJECTIVE

- Contribute to the well-being of agricultural producers by providing them with the knowledge, skills, and tools to conduct financial benchmarking and increase their profitability and competitiveness.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

- Each project member had at their disposal an office and a laptop with the financial software, Finpack, installed on it. Members also took virtual trainings and tutorials to learn about Finpack. In order to recruit farmers, the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR) at Texas A&M University-Commerce provided a contact list of participants in similar outreach projects, developed a form in Microsoft Teams for interested agricultural producers to submit their basic contact information, and created a Facebook page to promote and communicate the project.

Recruiting methods

Contact list

- The first step in the recruiting process was to contact potential participants via email. The email contained information about the project and invited them to be part of the project. If the participant showed interest a requirement list was sent to them and a phone call was scheduled to discuss his or her availability to participate on a face to face meeting for data collection. If the farmer was not available for a face-to-face meeting, a Zoom meeting was offered. Last, if the email of the farmer or ranch owner was not active or the participant did not respond in a 15-day period, a phone-call was made.

Facebook

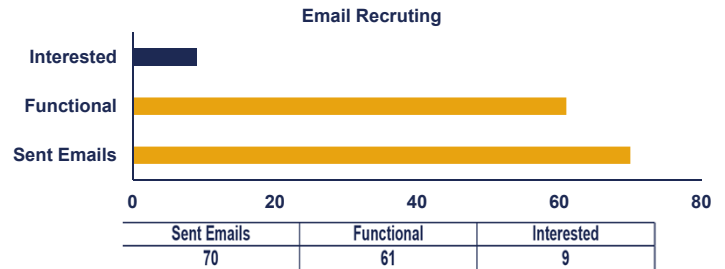
- Contacting people through social media is difficult because financial information is confidential. When contacting people, gaining their trust was fundamental, from the first message to the end of the conversation.
- The first step on Facebook recruiting consisted of searching and adding to the Facebook project page groups where Texas farmers and ranchers were active and involved. The second step was going through all the group members and identifying potential candidates for the project. The last step was writing a message to those potential candidates introducing the benchmarking team at Texas A&M Commerce, followed by sharing with them information about the project. All farmers recruited through Facebook were asked to submit their contact information in the Microsoft Teams form so a phone call, a face-to-face meeting, or a Zoom meeting could be scheduled.
- Facebook posts in each group were made monthly with information related to the project and invitations to farmers to assist to events where the Benchmarking Team was attending.

- After the face-to-face meeting (Zoom as second option) financial information was collected and typed in Finpack. The benchmarking team gave financial advice based on the data collected and highlighted to participants the importance of benchmarking their operations.

RESULTS TO DATE

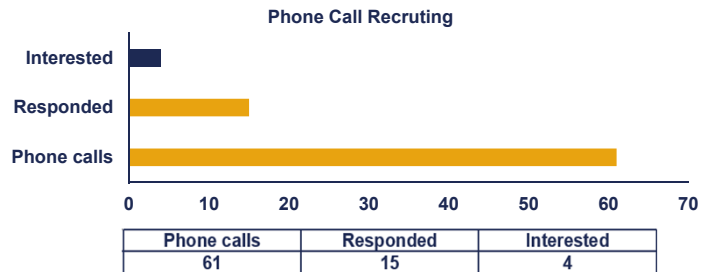
Recruiting using emails from contact lists

- A total of 86 farmers were selected from the contact lists, of those only 70 ranch owners had provided their email addresses. From those 70 email addresses available, 9 were either misspelled or not active. In short, from the 86 ranch owners, 61 were contacted using emails, 81.40%. To the date only 9 ranch owners answered the email that was sent out and showed interest in the project, which means 12.86% of the emails that were sent out were effective to outreach ranch owners.



Recruiting using phone numbers from contact lists

- A total of 64 farmers were selected from the contact lists; from those 59 ranch owners reported their phone numbers. Not all 59 phone numbers were functional, 3 of those belonged to a different person, and 6 numbers were not active. A total of 50 phone calls were completed and only 4 farmers showed interest, 8%.



- From the total 86 farmers and ranch owners available on the database, only 2 participated in the project and their data was collected in Finpack. The recruitment percentage using phone calls and emails in 2021 was 2%.

Recruiting using Facebook

- To date, low participation from farmers and ranchers has been obtained using Facebook. After following 8 Facebook groups that have high participation of ranchers and farmers, 15 users that might be interested on the project were messaged. Among the 15 users, only 3 sent back the message read notification.
- No farmers responded to the Facebook posts about events where the Benchmarking Team was attending. On the other hand, informational posts about the project received reactions by some farmers, but no comments. Some posts were reported by group users as scams and were eliminated from those group pages.

FUTURE PLANS

After two years, the project hopes to extend its partnership to include more institutions from South Texas. The Weslaco Research and Extension Center, which oversees several livestock operations, crop operations, and a large citrus industry, including grapefruit, orange, lemon, tangelo, tangerine, and so on, would be a great collaborator. The project also plans to reach out to other southern states that have not been grant recipients yet.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

- Due to the growing scam industry in the US, the level of response of farmers online and by phone-calls is low.
- Farmers who participated in the financial benchmark project can make more informed decisions.
- This project is a contribution of USDA and CASNR to agriculture development in Texas.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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