

Final report

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Sweetpotato Industry Communication Program (PW21000)

Project leader:

Peter Long / Bree Watson

Delivery partner:

Australian Sweetpotato Growers Incorporated

Report author/s:

Bree Watson

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Telephone: (02) 8295 2300

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Contents

Contents..... 3

Public summary..... 4

Keywords..... 4

Introduction 5

Methodology 6

Results and discussion 6

Outputs 7

Outcomes 8

Monitoring and evaluation..... 10

Recommendations..... 11

Intellectual property 11

Acknowledgements..... 11

Public summary

The Sweetpotato Industry Communications Program was established to address a critical gap in grower awareness and adoption of levy-funded research, development, and marketing initiatives. Historically, fragmented and inconsistent communication limited access to timely information about emerging technologies, best practices, and market trends which reduced growers' ability to make informed decisions and maximise industry benefits.

To address this, the program implemented a multi-channel communication approach that included six editions of *The Vine* e-newsletter, direct grower engagement through interviews and visits, the development of three detailed case studies and consistent updates to the ASPG website. Additionally, SMS messages advised contacts of new and relevant information and where to access it. These efforts ensured that R&D outcomes, market intelligence, and industry developments were delivered in a timely, practical, and accessible way.

As a result, the program significantly increased industry engagement, improved understanding of research outputs, and supported the adoption of innovative on-farm practices. This has helped drive productivity, enhance farm profitability, and strengthen the long-term sustainability of the Australian sweetpotato industry. Feedback from growers confirmed the relevance and usefulness of the communications, with many able to cite articles from across the newsletters.

New resources generated through the program included e-newsletters, case studies, and R&D summaries are now available via the ASPG website. These resources provide ongoing access to vital information for growers, service providers, and stakeholders across the supply chain.

Keywords

Sweetpotato; sweetpotato industry; extension; communication; research; case study; sustainability; adoption; awareness

Introduction

The development and delivery of this program was necessary to provide more regular communication to sweetpotato industry members (growers and service providers). In increasing the timeliness, integrity and breadth of information shared with the industry audience, it was anticipated there will be a higher likelihood of growers changing production practices as well as exploring new supply chain strategies. Follow-up support was also provided to enhance knowledge of service providers. There remains a gap in the industry with no current overarching extension effort to follow-up and support growers so this program that increased communication within and among growers was a very important first step.

The sweetpotato industry has seen rapid growth in the past 15 years on the back of consumer demand, production area expansion, improved agronomic practices and the supply of new varieties. Throughout this period the industry survived on very little coordination of communications. Individually funded projects communicated their results to a variable extent however there was no dedicated program that collated R&D to communicate outcomes.

This investment in enhanced communication for the sweetpotato industry resulted in increased awareness of the latest research and development and marketing projects, knowledge transfer to the sweetpotato industry value chain on research findings, best practice, emerging risks and opportunities; improved understanding leading to increase on-farm adoption of R&D program outcomes and best management practice in order to build a stronger, more resilient Australian sweetpotato industry; Enhanced communication and sharing of knowledge and information on technical developments in the sweetpotato industry; and Increased understanding of the levy system and the role of Hort Innovation within industry.

These outcomes contribute directly to several aspects of the Strategic Investment Plan for sweetpotatoes including Outcome 2 Industry supply, productivity and sustainability, Outcome 3 Extension and capability, and Outcome 4 Business insights.

Methodology

This communications program adopted a structured, multi-channel approach to deliver timely, relevant, and practical information to Australian sweetpotato growers and industry stakeholders. The methodology focused on four core pillars: planning, production, distribution, and feedback.

The planning phase included engaging a dedicated communication design contractor to design the e-newsletter template that was to be used. During this phase the program also investigated and assembled a list of service providers to ensure extensive reach of the program's outputs. Guest speakers were sought out in advance to present topics of interest to growers and provide questions and answer opportunities.

In the production phase six-monthly newsletters were prepared and topics included: ASPG President and Executive officer updates, proposed market projects, Quality Project updates including the Quality Guide for distribution centres and retail store team members, Department of Agriculture and Fisheries research news covering - integrated pest management of nematodes, new pest management project PW 22000, causes and management strategies for skin loss in sweetpotato, Improving root crop resilience and biosecurity in Pacific Island countries and Australia, GRNK biosecurity updates, USA sweetpotato researcher workshops in Australia, Australian Horticulture Production reports, Hort Innovation Sweetpotato Fund snapshots, Australian Horticulture Statistics Handbook and minor use permit updates. The newsletters also provided practical examples on how to calculate the amount of Potassium to apply after a soil test, individual researcher spotlights and Louisiana State University AgCenter summary reports.

Additionally, case studies were planned and delivered to showcase growers, their farm practices, and successful implementation of industry-leading techniques. These case studies aimed to provide relatable, practical examples that would encourage peer-to-peer learning among sweetpotato growers.

The Distribution phase included sending out the newsletters, industry updates, SMS messages to direct growers to new newsletter and ensuring the website was maintained and promoted.

Finally, the feedback stage involved conducting targeted grower interviews to gather direct insights on the relevance and effectiveness of the program outputs, including priority topics and preferred communication formats. These interviews allowed growers to share their experiences, challenges, and suggestions for improvement, ensuring future communications would remain relevant and impactful. Additionally, discussions with the contractor provided detailed analytics from newsletters and website interactions, offering quantitative data to evaluate reach, engagement, and overall effectiveness of the program. This comprehensive feedback approach facilitated informed decision-making and suggestions for continuous improvement for subsequent industry communications.

Results and discussion

The sweetpotato industry communications program delivered a comprehensive range of outputs that led to outcomes in awareness, engagement, and adoption of R&D across the sector. Key activities included six editions of *The Vine* e-newsletter, regular SMS updates and three detailed case studies. These outputs were supported by the upgrade and reorganisation of the ASPG website, improving access to R&D information and industry resources.

The newsletters played a central role in delivering timely, targeted content to industry stakeholders. From the first to the sixth edition, the subscriber base increased by 9%, indicating a growing interest and trust in the publication. Open rates ranged from 53% to 67%, well above typical industry benchmarks, with clicks per unique open varying between 33% and 53%—demonstrating strong reader engagement. Bounce rates remained consistent at just 3, and unsubscribes were minimal, ranging from 0 to 1 per edition, suggesting the content was both valued and relevant.

Evaluation data confirmed the impact of the newsletter: in one survey, 63% of respondents rated the newsletter 5 or 6 on a 7-point scale in terms of usefulness to their business. Interviewees also cited specific articles as particularly helpful, further highlighting the practical relevance of the content. A less quantifiable but equally important outcome was the newsletter's role in facilitating information exchange, not only between researchers and growers, but also between growers and service providers. The inclusion of researcher profiles was well received and offers opportunities to build stronger researcher-industry connections in future editions.

The three case studies were multi page studies published across editions three, four, and six. These documents showcased diversity in scale, geography, and production methods. Case Study 1 featured a 350-acre grower from the

Rockhampton area; Case Study 2 profiled a smaller Bundaberg-based grower specialising in the Northern Star variety; and Case Study 3 highlighted a grower from the Emerging Leaders Program. These case studies strengthened the connection between research and practical application and were positively received by the industry.

Overall, the program delivered clear outcomes aligned with Hort Innovation's strategic goals including enhancing capability, supporting sustainable production, and improving business insight. The results strongly support a continued investment in a 5-year communications and extension model, including expanded use of social media, additional grower case studies, and more frequent newsletters to build on the trust and engagement already established.

Outputs

Throughout the project, extensive industry communications were delivered, including six editions of the industry e-newsletter titled '*The Vine*', distributed biannually to sweetpotato growers and industry stakeholders. These newsletters, ranging from 10 to 27 pages in length which increasing with each edition highlighting the impact of information being shared. These newsletters featured updates on R&D outcomes, best management practices, researcher profiles, and relevant industry news. Three detailed grower case studies showcased real-world examples of successful adoption of innovative practices, profiling growers from Rockhampton, Bundaberg, and an Emerging Leaders Program participant.

These were published digitally and included in select editions of the newsletters. Grower interviews conducted through one-on-one and small group formats revealed that 63% of surveyed growers rated the newsletters as highly useful (scores of 5 or 6 out of 7). SMS communications were utilised effectively for timely updates and alerts, ensuring immediate dissemination of key announcements directly to growers' mobile phones. The industry website was comprehensively updated to improve navigation and include recent case studies, newsletters, and other extension resources. Additionally, a professionally designed, reusable e-newsletter template was developed, standardising and enhancing the presentation of future industry communications.

Table 1. Output summary

Output	Description	Detail
6 x E-newsletters	Regular industry communication highlighting latest R&D outcomes, best management practices, researcher spotlights and industry updates.	<p>Titled '<i>The Vine</i>', these e-newsletters were distributed to sweetpotato growers and industry stakeholders six monthly.</p> <p>1st Newsletter: 10 pages May 2022</p> <p>2nd Newsletter: 10 pages Nov 2022</p> <p>3rd Newsletter: 17 pages May 2023</p> <p>4th Newsletter: 22 pages Nov 2023</p> <p>5th Newsletter: 21 pages Apr 2024</p> <p>6th Newsletter: 27 pages Jan 2025</p> <p>From edition 1-6, the number of subscribers increased by 9%, and the open rate varied from 53% to 67%. The clicks per unique open ranged from 33% to 53%. The number of bounces remained consistent at 3 and unsubscribe number ranged from 0 to 1 per edition.</p>
3 x Grower Case Studies	Detailed examples showcasing growers and adoption of innovative farm practices.	<p>Published digitally on the industry website, shared via newsletters and SMS.</p> <p>Case Study 1: featured a grower from the Rockhampton area covering 350 acres. Case Study published in third edition of <i>The Vine</i>.</p> <p>Case Study 2: featured one of the smaller growers in the Bundaberg district growing only the Northern Star variety (Red) in sandy soil. The case study was published in the fourth edition of <i>The Vine</i>.</p>

		Case Study 3: featured one of the Sweetpotato growers involved in the Emerging Leaders Program. The case study was published in the sixth edition of <i>The Vine</i> .
Grower interviews	The program used a combination of one on one and small group interviews with growers to determine the effectiveness of the program and guide future developments.	One evaluation survey identified that 63% of the surveyed growers scored the newsletter as a 5 or 6 (1 to 7 scale) as being useful to their business. Furthermore, a number of the interviewees nominated article topics that were useful to them. A non-quantifiable outcome of the newsletters was information exchange across current R&D projects with growers and then in turn with services providers. The profiling of researchers was welcomed by most survey interviewees, and this provides future opportunities for additional newsletters.
SMS Communications	Short, timely updates on important announcements, events, or alerts.	Sent directly to growers' mobile phones to maximise reach and immediacy.
Website Update	Comprehensive refresh of content to ensure ease of access to resources, improved navigation, and inclusion of recent industry materials.	Updated to include latest R&D publications, grower case studies, newsletters, and extension materials.
Communications E-newsletter Template	Professionally designed, reusable digital template to streamline ongoing communications.	Developed to enhance readability and engagement, standardising the look and feel of all future newsletters. The newsletter was scheduled to be delivered at 1am on a set date. Peak engagement for each newsletter was at 5am, 8am, 3pm and 8pm.

Outcomes

The sweetpotato industry communications program improved grower awareness, engagement, and access to R&D through newsletters, SMS, case studies, and a refreshed website with member-only access removed ensuring greater accessibility. On-ground visits supported trust and practice change, while market and production updates enabled informed decision-making.

Table 2. Outcome summary

Outcome	Alignment to fund outcome, strategy and KPI	Description	Evidence
Promoted sustainable and profitable practices	Outcome 2: Industry supply, productivity and sustainability Supply and productivity will be supported through improvements to production efficiencies that will drive profitability outcomes, while ensuring long-term sustainability outcomes.	Shared knowledge on soil health, biosecurity, and pest management through newsletters & case studies.	6 e-newsletters publication feedback
Enabled continuous improvement and practice change		Case studies of innovation on-farm, encouraging broader uptake of changed practices of business development methods.	3 case studies. Observational evidence, and case study engagement data.
Improved awareness, engagement, and access to R&D	Outcome 3: Extension and capability	Delivery of 6 e-newsletters and SMS alerts. Website upgrades provided central	6 e-newsletters

	Building capability and an innovative culture will support industry to make use of investment outputs	access to the newsletter which included research and updates.	website traffic analytics, SMS delivery metrics and grower feedback.
Strengthened grower interaction and trust in RD&E	across the supply and demand initiatives to better manage risk and create positive change.	direct feedback, researcher spotlights in the newsletters and production of three grower case studies increased the relevance and trust in shared content.	3 case studies. Case study views, grower feedback, and survey responses.
Improved digital communication infrastructure		Reorganisation and upgrade of the ASPG website enhanced user experience, content accessibility with the removal of the members only section creating open access for broader stakeholder engagement.	web navigation analytics, and repeat visits.
Enhanced industry storytelling and adoption		Grower engagement with case studies and willingness to be involved.	Discussions on case studies, open rates.
Enhanced industry decision-making via insights	Outcome 4: Business insights Business insights will support the industry to remain aware of market and industry trends to drive informed decision making.	Regular updates on market and production trends were shared through newsletters, helping growers to make better informed operational and business decisions.	Content statistics, grower survey input, and informal feedback via extension channels.
Improved data availability and usage by growers		Publications were spaced out and consistent to include relevant reports and summaries, previously there was no consistent data output.	page views on reports section, and qualitative grower feedback.

Monitoring and evaluation

The sweetpotato communications project has effectively achieved its intended outcomes, with feedback from grower surveys and discussions indicating increased awareness and adoption of best practices. The project was highly relevant to industry needs, addressing key topics such as pest and disease management and soil health, and maintained strong engagement through a multi-channel approach including newsletters, SMS and case studies. Efficiency was enhanced by leveraging existing digital platforms and connecting with other industry publications.

Table 3. Key Evaluation Questions

Key Evaluation Question	Project performance	Continuous improvement opportunities
To what extent has the project achieved its expected outcomes?	Grower surveys and one-on-one discussions have indicated increased awareness of R&D outputs, and uptake of best management practices shared via newsletters and case studies.	Strengthen data collection through pre- and post-engagement benchmarking to track changes in knowledge and practices over time.
How relevant was the project to the needs of intended beneficiaries?	Project content was shaped through ongoing feedback from growers during visits and events; strong interest in pest and disease management, soil health, and R&D project outcomes.	Conduct annual stakeholder needs assessments to adapt communications priorities and ensure continued relevance. Create committee of R&D programs of relevance to guide content and timing.
How well have intended beneficiaries been engaged in the project?	Multiple touchpoints including e-newsletters, SMS alerts, grower case studies and visits provided diverse ways for growers to engage. Digital engagement analytics indicate positive uptake.	Expand use of interactive tools (e.g. quick polls, SMS interactivity, feedback forms etc) to measure engagement depth and preferences.
To what extent were engagement processes appropriate to the target audience/s of the project?	Despite the newsletters being lengthy documents, growers indicated they valued the depth of information specific to sweetpotatoes that was provided.	Could consider short snapshot updates between the longer newsletters.
What efforts did the project make to improve efficiency?	Leveraged existing platforms (e.g. website, contact database), and replicated content across other platforms late in the project such as the BFGV newsletter.	Automate elements of the newsletter into social media / website spotlights. Use SMS system to draw attention to these. Maintain consistent connection with other industry platforms to share joint messaging.

Recommendations

Based on the outcomes of the sweetpotato industry communications program, several key recommendations can be made to maximise the long-term value and application of the project findings. Firstly, the program has demonstrated that regular, tailored communication and extension activities significantly improve awareness, engagement, and adoption of R&D outputs. To build on this momentum, it is recommended that the program be extended and funded over a five-year period, rather than three, to allow for deeper industry impact and ongoing refinement of delivery channels. Additionally, embedding a basic but structured extension program that includes regular grower visits across all growing regions will support the practical application of research findings on-farm and ensure regional relevance for all is included in the newsletters.

This program relied on traditional delivery methods of e-newsletters, face-to-face connections, and SMS, which proved effective in reaching a broad base of sweetpotato growers and stakeholders. The ability to subscribe to the e-newsletter could be strengthened and to further enhance reach and engagement, particularly with younger growers and emerging industry leaders, it is recommended that a dedicated social media platform be developed and maintained. This would create a space for grower-to-grower interaction and support the sharing of visual content such as grower videos, event highlights, and quick tips from research findings.

To ensure full value is realised from the program, there should be continued development and distribution of branding collateral that promotes industry pride and identity, while also supporting clearer recognition of levy-funded research. Additionally, more formalised and ongoing collaboration with significant R&D programs particularly those focusing on pest and disease management, biosecurity, soil health and market development will help ensure messaging is consistent, timely, and relevant.

Intellectual property

No project IP or commercialisation to report.

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