Agritech Unleashed Waikato

WORKSHOP: Sacred Cows

Overarching Theme

The workshop attendees identified several critical barriers to agricultural technology adoption, with a strong focus on the human elements of trust, communication, and support, rather than just the technology itself.

1. The Critical Role of Early Adopters

- Early adopters lead the way to successful tech uptake, but they need to be carefully chosen and supported.
- Selection is Key: Choose early adopters who are inclined to work well with new technology.
- Support is Essential: They must be supported by the company with well-worked solutions to avoid negative experiences that spread quickly.
- Involve Farmers: Get farmers involved early in the process (e.g., proof of concept) to ensure the technology works well in real-world conditions.
- Address Compatibility: A major hurdle is compatibility problems between different platforms, which require more development to solve.

2. Major Barriers to Farmer Adoption

- Communication Gap: There is a significant barrier labelled "Farmers don't understand tech," but this is often a communication issue, not a capability issue. Tech jargon is confusing, especially for an average farmer age of 60+.
- Resistance and Bad Experiences: Resistance is fuelled by past negative experiences with technology (e.g., John Deere, Halter). "Bad news travels quickly offline," damaging trust.
- Lack of Support: A major barrier is the lack of support and service for technology after purchase.

- Poor Product-Market Fit: Technology often fails because it is a poor match for farmers' specific goals, skills, and farm types. The process of identifying farmer goals needs improvement.

3. Rethinking Innovation and Communication

- Reframing Innovation: The idea that "innovation must disrupt" was challenged. A better approach is to frame innovation as an "enhancement" or a "game-changer," as the word "disrupt" can have negative connotations.
- Communication is a Two-Way Street: Dismissing adoption problems as "a communication issue" is a cop-out. Effective communication requires:
    - Knowing Your Audience: Communicate through the right avenues and ask customers, "What works best for you?"
    - Varied Formats: Use videos, paper-based manuals, and voice-overs without acronyms or jargon.
    - A Continuous Cycle: Follow a plan → do → act → check cycle for communication.

4. The Reality of Data and Technology Design

- Data Needs Interpretation: The statement "data speaks for itself" is false. Data must be interpreted well to drive decisions.
- Trust and Actionability: Trust is built when data is validated on-farm. The key is ease of actioning the data and understanding its impact on the business today and in the future.
- Customization is Crucial: Farmers need farm-specific, customized dashboards that present insights in a way that is personal and directly applicable to their operation.

5. The Evolving Role of Advisors

- Advisors Have Limitations: The assumption that "advisors will promote the best tools" is false. Advisors may be incentivized by certain products, cannot know all technology options, and may not understand the tech controls.
- The Power of Networks: A trusted network of peers is more important than any single advisor. Adoption often happens in regional clusters.
- Need for Independent Support: There is an opportunity for an independent service to help farmers evaluate technology.
- Value of Shared Learning: Using tech to share farmer learnings on how to extract value is "gold." Research farms and levy bodies should play a role in validating technology.

6. Key Questions for Technology Developers

The workshop posed critical questions that innovators must answer:

- Is the technology easy to use and simple?
- Does it solve a specific, big enough problem?
- Does it integrate with other systems to create a real ecosystem?
- Who is the actual customer? (Be focused on the problem, not the technology itself).
- Is there long-term support? Products rarely succeed in isolation.