

SEARCH CRITERIA

Model	Model A: Empowerment Model
Industry	Stonefruit
Focus/Level	Industry
Outcomes	Building management skills
Special Interest Groups	Other

1. PROJECT TITLE:

Collaborative Marketing Program

2.FUNDERS:

Grower Direct Pty Ltd

3.PROVIDERS:

Creative Edge Facilitators

4.KEY CONTACTS:

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5.INDUSTRY/ISSUE/GEOGRAPHY:

Stonefruit – Northern NSW

6.PROJECT CONTEXT:

Given an oversupplied domestic market and increased pricing pressure, Australian horticulturalists face an urgent need to improve their position in the domestic market and explore new and export markets. However market position and strength is typically limited by an inability to achieve necessary volumes of consistent, quality product.

Australian growers accustomed to competing on the domestic market, typically struggle to form collaborative marketing groups for the purposes of product consolidation. Lower domestic profit margins and loss of significant export markets result.

7.PROJECT NICHE (SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES):

This project addresses barriers to high-return domestic markets and export participation by Australian horticulturalists. It does so by:

1. Educating growers about emerging global trends in the marketing of horticultural produce, in particular the important role of value chains.
2. Assisting growers to explore the potential for and form collaborative marketing groups for the purpose of collaborative marketing.
3. Developing the group and 'soft' skills essential for long term collaboration.
4. Introducing the role of technology as a tool for information transfer in the value chain.
5. Developing action learning skills.

8. PHILOSOPHY/APPROACH:

An integrated learning and change management strategy, this program pays particular attention to working with resistance to change. Fears and reservations about altering current business strategies or practices are regarded as a natural part of any transition.

The program explores the potential for collaborative marketing in light of *real* market and business opportunities, rather than theoretically. In doing so it relates learning to the real demands of business; specifically linking business development and learning as integrated activities.

Process facilitation and action learning methodology are the core methodologies adopted. Specific content and workshop processes are largely demand driven, with a pool of recommended processes and resources provided for program roll-out.

Flexibility is an important characteristic of the program, which emphasises the collaborative design of business solutions that fit the strengths, interests and resources of participating groups. Participants are empowered to find the solutions right for them rather than adopt prescriptive practices.

The belief that knowledge lies outside ourselves is a barrier to change and taking action. Participants are encouraged to mobilise their own learning and access resources available at industry and community levels, rather than become dependant on experts.

9. RESOURCES, MANAGEMENT AND STAFFING STRUCTURES:

The program prototype was initially sponsored and piloted by Grower Direct.

Creative Edge Facilitators were the independent consultants contracted to design and deliver the program. Two members of the CEF group co-facilitated the program during its initial development. It is envisaged that future delivery will involve one person with process facilitation expertise and another with content expertise.

Funding has been obtained from AFFA (\$54,700) to fully develop the program – to consist of four workshops, 25-hrs business development groups and resource materials, piloting them with two grower groups. Subsequent roll-out will take place under Farmbis.

An associated Rural Change Agents program is under development to equip industry representatives and facilitators across Australia in the delivery of this and other change facilitation programs.

10. PROCESS/METHODS USED:

The processes and methods used are drawn from areas as diverse as action learning, dynamic group facilitation and motivational counselling.

Large and small group discussion and exercises – a mix of large and small group processes were used to ensure engagement and participation e.g. determining quality standards, addressing logistics.

Strategic questioning – developed by Fran Peavey this technique distinguishes between questions describing the current state of events and those developing momentum to support change.

Backcasting – was used as a technique for exploring the likely outcomes of making no change vs exploring new marketing initiatives. It also provided a map of likely milestones for the group to achieve its goals.

Games and simulations – were used to simulate market conditions and explore the impact of operating as an individual or group.

Facilitated Problem Solving & Decision making – was undertaken in the large group to achieve many decisions regarding goals, targets and logistic issues.

Reality testing – was used to test the robustness of decisions reached, probing for the likely future challenges. This was considered important as many agreements made in the early or 'honeymoon' stage of a groups development do not stand up over time. For example, there was a high likelihood that collaborative marketing efforts would be sabotaged by agents offering unsustainably high returns for those willing to 'desert the fold'. By putting growers in the hot seat with direct questions about how they would respond, the group had a clear sense of who would be tempted by and likely to accept spot prices. Therefore they were prepared and clear about the group's response to such events, avoiding much later acrimony and destabilisation. (See roleplay and rehearsal)

Role play rehearsal and modelling – "What would you say if....?" was a way of allowing growers to rehearse their responses to sabotage and other challenging interactions which might involve a divided sense of loyalty in liaising with former agents. This became a form of 'role play without leaving the chair'.

Anticipating the journey – a brief and low key introduction on the stages of group development and the likely challenges along the way.

Normalising Conflict – the likelihood of conflict in undertaking complex change processes was flagged. A next step would be to agree on a process or for addressing conflict.

Surfacing and naming group processes – was an invaluable tool for developing the group's awareness of what goes on in groups. Awareness of group process and adoption of a meta-perspective on the group experience was introduced as an integral part of working together. Participants who showed a good understanding of these processes developed confidence in stepping more consciously into a future co-facilitation role (although they may not have been regarded as task-oriented leaders). The beginnings of a shared vocabulary for discussing the experiences was evident.

One-one tutoring – proved the most effective strategy for supporting the uptake of I.T. to support business administration.

11. IMPACTS TO DATE (AND EVALUATION APPROACHES USED):

Participants reported a 15 – 30% increase in profit margins in the first season post-program. They maintained income in the second season post-program, which was recognised as an extremely poor season with drought and extensive hail damage.

Current results are recognised by growers as the early rewards in a longer term strategy aimed at premium market placement.

Other benefits of collaborative marketing reported by growers included improved market intelligence, access to comparative data and statistical analysis.

They also reported the benefits of informally benchmarking production and business management practices.

The group has continued to develop its business model and strategic alliances, exploring the functions involved in collaborative marketing and different models for the execution of these functions. As such it has remained extremely dynamic in developing and pursuing strategic goals. Despite initial reservations product placement in the markets is now managed internally. The group has developed a shared leadership model reflecting the strengths and expertise of members.

At the conclusion of the first season market-based agents were invited to meet with growers to provide feedback on produce and the trading experience. This appeared to mark a point of acceptance that the group was 'here to stay' and commitment to building a new and ongoing working relationship.

Group members undertook a workshop-based evaluation of their first season business performance. This was understandably their main focus rather than an evaluation of the facilitation processes that got them there, which in some ways was 'taken for granted'.

Evaluation of workshop processes consisted of questionnaire-based feedback using Likert-scales and open-ended questions. The opportunity to get together for discussion was identified as particularly valuable as were activities examining future possibilities, sabotage and logistics.

12.EFFECTIVENESS:

For the growers concerned the business results achieved have been pleasing. Having contemplated the problems of diminishing returns and increasing market pressure for years it is generally agreed that an impetus was needed to shift from a problem to a solution-orientation. There is no doubt that the presence of a real business opportunity presented a valuable catalyst for the group's exploration of collaborative marketing opportunities.

It seems that a key aspect of the programs effectiveness was the flexible change management approach that surfaced and explored rather than trying to gloss over doubt and resistance. This was a courageous approach within a commercial context but realistic and necessary for real progress and partnership to be achieved.

The group's dynamic ongoing approach to revising and meeting strategic goals is noteworthy. They are not bound to an initial vision or set of agreements but able to independently revise them as appropriate. While the exact relationship between achieving high levels of trust and proficiency in 'soft-skills' is not clear, these factors certainly seem to have expedited the group's ability to be 'light on its feet' and function independently post-program.

13.PROJECT DOCUMENTATION AVAILABLE:

Program Overview
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14.ISSUES:

1. The group had loosely existed prior to the collaborative marketing program sharing an interest in R&D. The existence of pre-existing relationships was advantageous. The presence of trusted internal champions within the group was also significant.
2. The decision to take on collaborative marketing had to be a whole of family decision, with all business partners participating 'wanting to see and hear it for themselves'.
3. The fear of losing relationship and hard earned position with former agents was high.
4. Initially full membership participation in most logistic decisions was necessary as growers were 'giving away' aspects of their individual business practice (something that brought with it fears of losing independence, a highly valuable dimension of most growers' lifestyle). Direct ownership of decisions was vital at the early stages until the sense of trust and belonging in the new collaborative identity grew over time.

5. The group faced considerable external sabotage. Disinformation and buy-outs placed members under high pressure peak-season. Rehearsal and reality testing was invaluable in preparing them for what lay ahead, but impromptu damage control and one-one support from within the peer group played an important role in maintaining cohesion.
6. The group demonstrated impressive flexibility understanding that potential members had different needs and styles. A core group took the risks of initiating the venture, only to be joined by others mid- and post-season as they saw results. Some latitude was shown growers who succumbed to higher spot prices in the first season. This characteristic also reflected a maturity in the groups capacity to deal with uncertainty.
7. Building on the groups progress through a series of business development groups was desirable, but not provided for in initial program.

15.COMMENTS/CONCLUSIONS:

1. Change management approach proved effective
2. Use of techniques derived from counselling and other non-traditional contexts proved effective in supporting growers to deal with change in a business context.
3. A flexible and participant-driven process was effective in meeting real business needs and providing relevant and timely learning.

16.REVIEW METHODS:

The project team engaged in ongoing reflection processes, interviews with key grower group and sponsoring company members, questionnaire-based surveys of participating growers and workshop-based reflection with growers in evaluating the program.