



VEGE *notes*

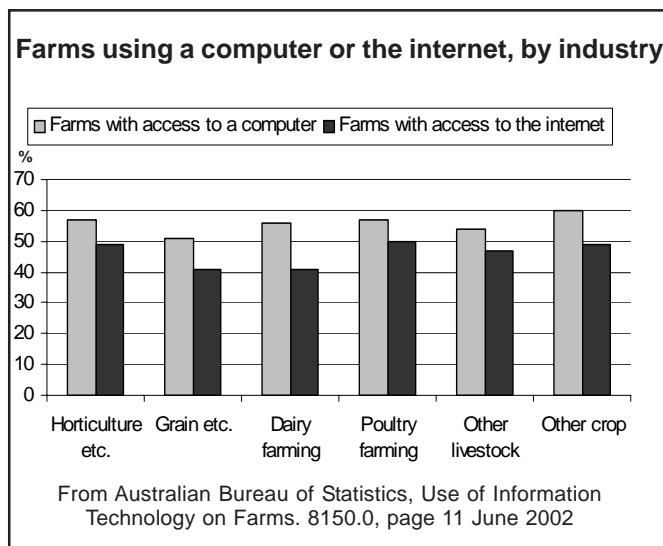
Your levy @ work

Utilising Computers to Enhance Farm Business

The use of computers on farms for business such as E-commerce (buying and selling goods), banking, emailing, information recording (paddock records, bookkeeping) and research (using the internet) is increasing at a record rate.

Used in conjunction with specialist programs to help with forward planning, finances and production issues, a computer can greatly improve farm profitability. Initially, computing (particularly the internet) can seem daunting, but it can be a very rewarding experience.

Internet usage by primary producers has increased from about 10% in 1998 to more than 50% in 2002 (Australian Bureau of Statistics). Horticulture is similar to other production industries for farm computer and internet usage.



Choosing a computer

If you have limited computer or program knowledge it is important to ask for advice. You don't always need the latest technology, but new computers are entering the market constantly and the range can be very confusing.

Connecting to the internet

To send and receive email, and search for information on the internet, your computer will need to be connected to the telephone system (as with a fax) and you will need an account with an Internet Service Provider (ISP) such as Telstra Bigpond.

If using a normal telephone line, you will need a modem to connect the computer and the telephone socket. This may be a separate unit or built into the computer. If you do not have a separate line for your computer, then you will have to share with a fax or telephone. Sharing with the fax line is preferable if you have a dedicated line as you will still be able to make and receive calls on your other line while connected to the internet.

When choosing an ISP, ensure you can connect for the cost of a local call, otherwise you will be charged STD rates. You will usually pay by the hour, although there are many deals available. Choosing an ISP is similar to choosing a mobile phone provider – lots of confusing deals, so make sure you seek advice if unsure.

If connecting using ADSL or ISDN, which provide a faster and better service, seek advice as to what you require, as modems are not used.

For people in very remote areas, satellite connections are possible where normal landlines

The Bottom line

- Computers, like any other farm tool, are invaluable if used to benefit the business.
- Establishing a computer system takes time and effort, but is worth it in the long run.
- You must remember to gain the skills required to use your computer.
- Always ask for advice if unsure. Your state IDO can help you get started.

are not available or are of such poor quality that they are unable to be used.

It is also possible to access the internet via a wireless connection, which utilises mobile phones equipped with GPRS or an equivalent service. However, these are sometimes slower and more expensive than landline options. They tend to be used by people who work in the field.

The internet

Searching the internet can be as daunting as buying your computer, but with a little experimentation with search engines such as Google (www.google.com), you will find information with ease. Remember, particularly with respect to overseas information, that information may not always be relevant to your farming practices. Are the chemicals mentioned registered in your state? Are the pests the same ones? Are the soil types, rainfall and temperatures in the regions mentioned similar?

Farm programs

There are a few programs to aid the business of farming, including property management planning, Integrated Pest Management and financial planning. Talk to someone who is using the program to see if it fits your needs and has the support needed. There are also websites, such as farmcentre.com, which have linked much of the farm software available. The Rural Industries Research & Development Corporation (RIRDC) have published two books, 'The Farmers Guide to the Internet' and 'The Rural and Regional Guide to E-commerce'.

Email

Email is fast becoming a major method of communication for businesses and information exchange. There are, however, some simple rules to follow:

- etiquette - get to the point and keep it simple
- email - avoid sensitive information in email
- do not type in UPPER CASE (this is the same as yelling), send junk mail (Spam - which is simply unsolicited information) or send large file attachments.

Protecting your computer

Computer viruses are the "common cold" of modern technology and are designed to interfere with your computer and frustrate users. They are normally sent by email, usually in attachments, so it is important that you install a virus protection program



"I don't know how people survive without a computer these days. We have three different businesses that we can easily keep track of through MYOB, and this software can also be used to pay creditors. We have several customers who pay us electronically so our bank software helps keep track of this. We also use Excel for our production and quality assurance records. The internet has been great for researching new equipment and email has been invaluable. Customers can now contact us via email and send us pictures of their problems. This allows us to better assess their needs and offer a better service. I'm also able to email my brother who lives 40kms away so we can liaise with planting and harvesting."

John Cranwell - brassica grower

and personal firewall. A firewall stops people trying to gain access to your computer.

Remember to keep your antivirus software up to date. Also use a personal firewall – (hardware such as a router or software such as ZoneLabs free program Zone Alarm. See www.zonelabs.com/store/content/home.jsp); keep regular backups of important data (assume that your computer may be stolen, destroyed and you will lose all data – keep backed up data in a safe place) and fit a surge protector to minimise electrical surges.

What computer is right for you?

For more information on computers, virus protection, firewall and other necessary programs, talk to your state Vegetable Industry Development Officer or visit the South Australian Vegetable Industry Development website www.arris.com.au/vidp/index.html and follow the links to Farm Computers.

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