Promotion of the use of ICT by the agro-food sector

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Abstract

French farmers are well equipped with PCs and Internet connections but the promotion of the use of ICT for professional purposes remains a necessity and a challenge. Experiences recently gained by ACTA Informatique are presented:
- Web conferencing for training and advisory activities;
- Intensive use of newsletters;
- Regular organisation of seminars to promote ICT for Agriculture;
- Development of acta-informatique.fr and efita.net web sites, as information resources on the development of ICT for Agriculture.
Eventually the need for co-operation at European level is emphasised to develop the use of ICT by farmers within the framework of their professional activities.

Key words: ICT promotion and adoption by farmers

1 Introduction

In France, the number of farmers equipped with a PC and connected to the Internet is now very important. In 2004, 62.6% of French farmers have a PC at home when 14.5% had a PC in 1996. In 2004, 50.1% of French farmers had an Internet access when only 5.3% were connected in 1999. The audience of a weekly newsletter such as e.g. this othatne of terre-net.fr, named "Le Mél Agricole", with its 26000 receivers could not be so important without the high equipment adoption rate described above.

These statistics are quite impressive, but, for example farmers' advisers find them too optimistic: the ownership of a PC does not guarantee further professional use, and they hope for better and more intensive use of this equipment e.g. to disseminate technical advices, data, or decision support tools.

This is the reason why actions initiated by ACTA Informatique in the early eighties remain useful today. Four actions are described: web conferencing for training and advisory activities; intensive use of newsletters; regular organisation of seminars to promote ICT for Agriculture; development of acta-informatique.fr and efita.net web sites, as information resources on the development of ICT for Agriculture.

2 Web conferencing for training and advisory activities with the NetVocalis system

Web conferencing consists of using a phone conference (we could use a VoIP - voice on the Internet - solution such as Skype too) plus pushing screens via the Internet up to the PCs of the phone conference participants.

The participants join a virtual conference / training session via the Internet when accessing the conference web site (they have to input individual and secured access codes) and via the phone when dialling a phone.
conference number. Then the meeting animator, e.g. the trainer, pushes screens to the participants' PCs thanks to a tool that he (she) is accessing through the web too. When required by the animator, thanks to NetVocalis (system used and marketed by ACTA Informatique), participants are asked to answer questions: they can click on a small "virtual numerical keyboard" to e.g. "vote" for an option selected amongst a few others.

Web conferencing is a user-friendly, simple and cheap communication solution that enables enterprises to train employees, to develop collaborations, to communicate about products and services through a standard navigator. But the strong advantage of the NetVocalis solution is its voting system.

We can imagine that this kind of tool will be more and more used for:
- Training: collective and individual training sessions; test of trainees; supporting trainees;
- Sales and marketing: looking for or targeting prospects; supporting a commercial network;
- Enterprise communications: press conference; dedicated enterprise presentations; presentation of products and services (e.g. software programmes);
- Fast and efficient internal communication and information dissemination.

ACTA Informatique has already used the web conferencing system for training sessions (on the development of mailing lists), for promoting its software solutions (PhytActa database of crop protection chemicals; solutions to develop web sites) and to reinforce the impact of phone conferences.

The advantages of this solution are quite obvious:
- Cost reductions: meeting without travelling; training sessions easy to organise.
- Less formal: quick and friendly information exchanges.
- Easy to use: no software implementation required.
- Easy access to any web site: the required pages of which are pushed to the participants' PCs like other screens.
- Quizzes and questionnaires enable the evaluation of, for example, progresses or products, etc.
- Screens may be customised e.g. to take into account a graphical chart
- Added value for existing ppt presentations: we have many ppt presentations that are used once e.g. for a given event. NetVocalis makes it possible to reuse them with very low extra costs.

The technical prerequisites are easy to achieve (IE 5.5.; Microsoft Windows 2000 or XP; Java V1.2 minimum Virtual machine). With this solution, we never meet communication difficulties with people having only low speed Internet access. The cost being around 15 € per participant, we believe that web conferencing should give a new impulse to e-Learning.

3 Intensive use of electronic newsletters

In July 2005, we celebrated the 8th anniversary of our main newsletter called "Du côté du web et de l'informatique agricole". This newsletter is distributed weekly to more than 22000 subscribers. It contains around 15 pages of information about ICT in Agriculture and rural areas, events, news from the main web sites, new ICT solutions (including e.g. RFID, satellite communication, GIS, GPS, etc.), discussions about a range of subjects (from ICT to GMO, pesticides, organic farming, etc.). The last part is devoted to international news, extracted from the efita newsletter (see hereafter).

The readers of our newsletter (who are working in all possible agri-food enterprises and organisations) are today the main contributors to the content of "Du côté du web...". Without their contributions, it would be impossible to gather so many useful and interesting pieces of information and data. A few farmers also provide us with points of view, questions or information. ICT solution’s providers and editors of web sites are pleased to announce new versions, new tools, and commercial successes.

No subscription is charged and revenues from advertising are very low. ACTA Informatique is editing its newsletter mainly to promote its own software and hardware products, training sessions, seminars, and services. "Du côté du web..." is a marketing tool that gives a good example of what is quite often happening on the web where commercial enterprises offer information to sell services and products.
The efita newsletter with its around 2500 subscribers is very similar to "Du côté du web…” but in English and much shorter because we have a few contributors only.

Not being journalists or a press agency, the main difficulty for us always is to find regular contributors to our newsletters: with the "Linux agricole and logiciels libres" newsletter ("Farm Linux and free software") we have met a reasonable success thanks to a few very good contributors. But it has not been the case with other newsletters such as these ones that we tried to develop on agro-meteorology, the SAS statistical package, the IBM Lotus solutions. The Delphi newsletter, with its limited audience, is a very particular case since it is the link between members of a working group that gathers one to three times per year.

The strength of the approach adopted by ACTA Informatique is the large audience of its newsletters. But the weaknesses appear clearly: poor knowledge of the populations of subscribers (except personal contacts, and the names of Internet Access Providers of subscribers), no quantitative feed-back about their real information needs, no data about the number of issues really opened by the receivers, or about the number clicks opening links mentioned in our newsletters. A more qualitative approach could be adopted with e.g. Constant Contact® which is a web based email marketing service used by over 30,000 small businesses and associations. With Constant Contact, you can create email newsletters and announcements that get immediate and measurable results (http://www.constantcontact.com/). For ACTA Informatique, the difficulty today is to achieve a compromise between a highly qualitative approach such as this on the use of Constant Contact and the quantitative only approach adopted till now.

4 Regular organisation of seminars to promote ICT for Agriculture

ACTA Informatique organised 36 main seminars since 1997, the first of them being organised within the framework of a European Esprit project named AgriMMedia. In 2004 and 2005, the following domains were addressed:
- Farm management: computerising to make it easier and faster (March 2004)
- A "best of" of agricultural web services (June 2004)
- Towards the geographical traceability certification of agri-food products (October 2004)
- GPS for Agriculture (November 2004)
- ICT in Agriculture in USA and Canada (December 2004)
- GIS in French Agriculture (March 2005)
- Traceability and hygiene: how to meet your obligations? (March 2005)
- Good practice, cross compliance and ICT (May 2005)

These seminars gather 40 to 180 people. Their duration generally is half a day.

The recruitments of contributors are the results of personal contacts and of "calls for contributions" in our newsletters that are used to announce these seminars. As well as the archives of our newsletters, all documents presented free of charge at our seminars are available on the ACTA Informatique web site. But small registration fees are requested from participants (60 € per session).

5 Development of acta-informatique.fr and efita.net web sites

The archives of our seminars and of our newsletters are the "heart" of both acta-informatique.fr and efita.net.fr web sites. These archives of our newsletters are available in two formats: html for fast display of individual issue, and ".doc" for newsletter compilations per trimester or semester.

We believe that these documents are a very useful information resources on the development of ICT for Agriculture.

On the acta-informatique.fr web site, we present papers published in French or English, advertisements for our commercial products, training sessions, PowerPoint presentations on a diversity of subjects, etc.
6 Conclusion

Up to now all these efforts to promote the use of ICT by the agro-food sector have proved to be sustainable. But it will be difficult to continue without a European collaboration. At the level of each of the Member States, it will be more and more difficult to maintain this kind of approach.

There is always a strong need for exchange of information about real uses of ICT.

The development of information about end users and related training activities should take place among our high priority activities, together with:
- new telecommunication solutions (satellite, WiMax),
- decision support systems,
- common data dictionaries enabling information exchanges toward food supply chains as well as between farms and advisory organisations and CAP control bodies,
- geographical information systems.

6 References


