

Getting the Most from Your Agricultural Consultant

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There are times when agricultural producers want a professional consultant to assist them through the process of achieving profitable crop and livestock production, developing Comprehensive Nutrient Management Plans, applying for and maintaining CAFO permits, or the planning and siting of livestock facilities. Examples of agricultural consultants include crop consultants, soil & water conservationists, engineers, livestock nutritionists, veterinarians, financial advisors, university extension specialists, and others.

Public sector agricultural and conservation specialists can provide producers with valuable expertise to immediate questions, yet typically have diverse enough jobs that detailed consulting is limited.

Private sector consultants provide on-going services for a fee to their clients. They are able to concentrate more time to understand and analyze unique details that result in farm specific technical assistance, recommendations and guidance.

A good consultant learns about their client's agricultural operation by listening, talking and observing. Professional consultants are paid to develop creative and technically sound ideas for farm business improvement and problem solving. Consultants develop specific recommendations with the goal of improving their client's business decisions through effective strategies and action plans for farm business advancement.

How do you pick a consultant? This is a question that revolves around a consultant's technical ability and understanding of your unique business and management style. It also has a very human element including communication and people skills. You need to consider the following when screening a consultant: How qualified are they? What is their experience? Are they professionally certified? Do they have a positive standing within their industry and peers? Do they have a positive standing within your industry and peers? Along with technical abilities, are they also familiar with economic, legal, regulatory, and social issues impacting your business? Can your business justify the consulting fee? Are there expectations for you to buy anything other than unbiased expert advice and service from the consultant? Is this a person you can work with and trust?

Ultimately, your consultant's technical assistance, recommendations, and guidance must be uniquely tailored for your operation, yet be objective enough to challenge your management and decisions forward.

Working with a consultant is not a substitute for farmer responsibility. Consultants only know your farm and business needs as you spend time with them. Crop and livestock producers are on the go, and seasonally very busy, yet they must commit to provide information and time for their consultants. Producers need to trust their consultant, contemplate their advice, and be willing to consider the course of action(s) recommended by the consultant.

The best consultant / farmer relationship is one where both know and trust each other very well. The farmer must be able to trust that the consultant's advice is accurate and farm specific to the point that very little about the recommendation needs contemplating. With firm trust, the farmer moves quickly toward the consultant's recommended action because it is a good business decision.

Producers who remain engaged in ongoing training – education – and awareness of agricultural and environmental issues will be prepared to ask the correct questions when working with a consultant. They will be better able to understand recommendations offered by their consultant, and will ultimately be better able to make informed decisions.

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