

lifetimewool

more lambs, better wool, healthy ewes

Analysis of the needs and attitudes of sheep consultants and extensionists in southern Australia 2006

(Report on the email survey
September 2006)

Gus Rose &
Mandy Curnow

lifetimewool

February 2007

1.1 Introduction

Lifetimewool is a national project that has developed comprehensive ewe management guidelines to increase productivity and profitability of the Merino industry (visit www.lifetimewool.com.au). The project has been using an evaluation plan to support the adoption and impact of the research outcomes. Lifetimewool has a communication and adoption phase for 2006-2008 which will use consultants and extensionists as **agents of change**.

A survey of consultants and extensionists was conducted in 2004 (Reactions and Attitudes Associated with the lifetimewool Project Amongst Consultants and Extensionists involved in sheep production, 2004). This survey found that consultants and extensionists were mostly positive about lifetimewool but were not happy with the lack of communication between the project and them. Apart from this the consultants and extensionists were all keen to be involved in lifetimewool, making it clear that these people would be useful to use as **change agents**. The survey also found that there were gaps in the knowledge that consultants and their clients have for managing ewe nutrition. There was also a very low response rate in the survey in 2004. However, the results of this initial survey were used to write the initial communication plan.

Another email survey in September 2006 recorded the current needs of consultants and extensionists working in the sheep industry. The survey also asked questions about current perceptions of lifetimewool and the impact that the lifetimewool project has had to date.

The survey in 2006 aimed to;

1. to check how lifetimewool has impacted consultant and extensionists awareness and the recommendations they give to clients,
2. to explore the differences in information and tools needed by extensionists in the public sector and consultants in the private sector and
3. use the results to improve the delivery of lifetimewool for the adoption phase.

1.2 Methods

Lifetimewool staff from each state made a list of consultants and extensionists who give farmers advice on sheep management. The questions for the survey were developed based on the survey of consultants and extensionists in 2004 and the national survey of farmers done in 2005. Jess Dart, principal of Clear Horizon, designed and conducted the email survey on lifetimewool's behalf. The survey for the consultants and the extensionists is in Appendix A.

The big consultancy firms received one email and had the option to fill out one survey or distribute the survey to the appropriate people in the firm.

Results and Discussion

1.0 Response

Sixty extensionists responded to the survey of a total of 75 approached across southern Australia. Thirty seven consultants responded to the survey. Around 80 consultants received the email survey. The exact number is unknown because of the possible distribution within the big consultancy firms.

Western Australia had the best response from extensionists. This is because the survey was sent to more extensionists in WA with farming system staff and

Veterinary Officers included on the list. The greatest response to the survey by consultants was in Victoria, which also had the lowest response rate from public sector extensionists.

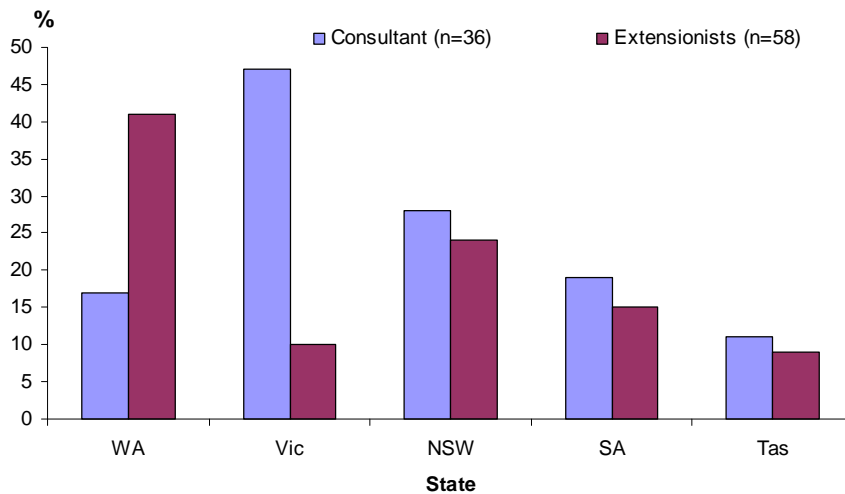


Figure 1. Distribution of consultants and extensionists surveyed in each state

Consultants were asked what proportion of their time was used in delivering sheep advice to clients (Figure 2). The response was highly variable with only 4 (11%) consulting about Merino management issues for more than 70% of their time. Some consultants surveyed did not consider themselves as sheep consultants.

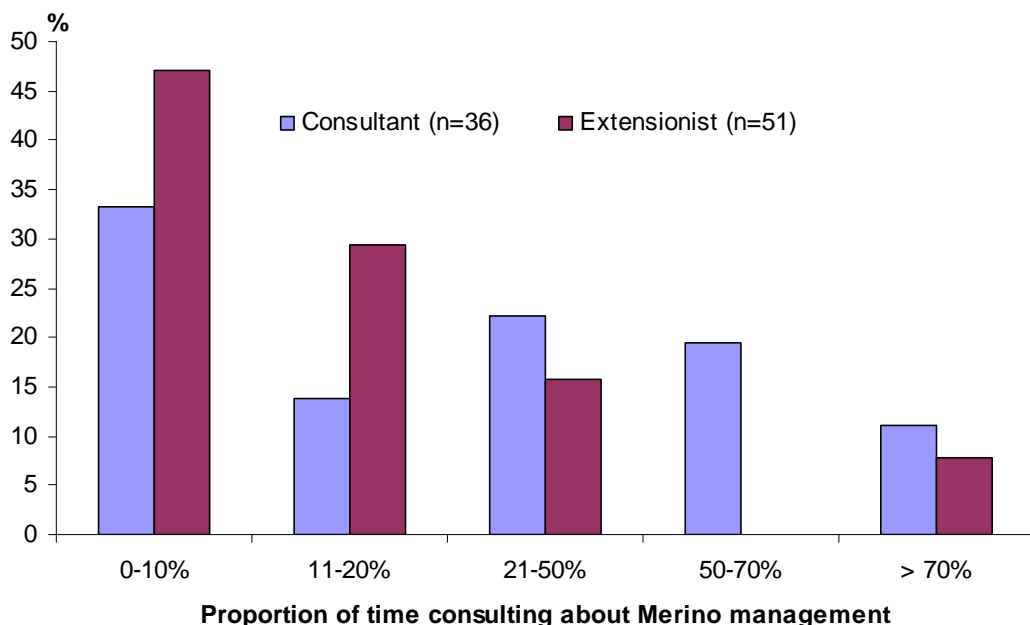


Figure 2. Proportion of time that consultants and extensionists consult to their clients about Merino management issues.

2.0 Awareness and Adoption

100% of consultants and 97% of extensionists surveyed have heard of lifetimewool. The 2 extensionists that hadn't heard of lifetimewool are from Victoria and Tasmania.

Media, presentations and seminars have been the most effective method for communication and awareness of lifetimewool during the experimental and demonstration phase (Figure 3). Given that there have been only 2 research sites and approximately 80 demonstration farms across southern Australia, these have been surprisingly effective.

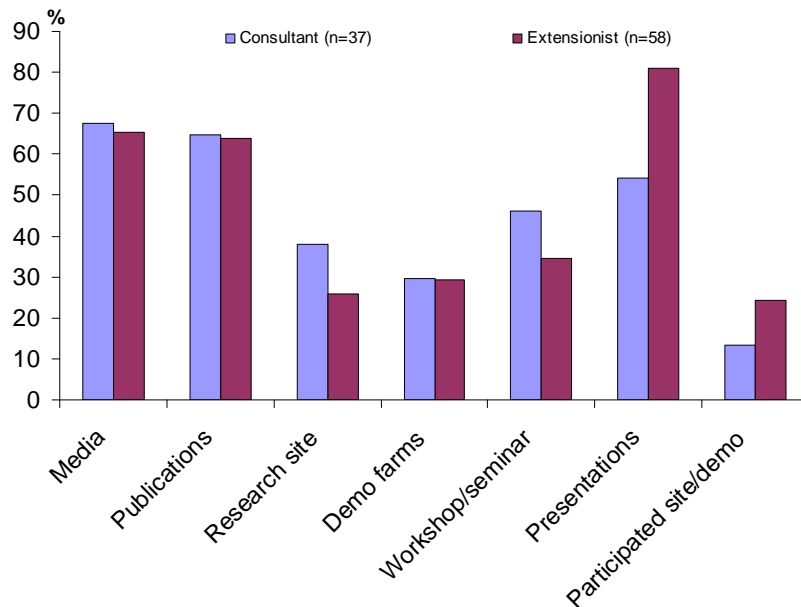


Figure 3. How consultants and extensionists heard about lifetimewool

There has been a concerted media effort in major rural weeklies, radio and in specialised journals for producers, such as Farming Ahead. Presentations at events and lifetimewool seminars have been a large commitment of the research team over the last 4 years but these have been very successful in generating interest and adoption. Having high profile researchers who are good communicators has lifted lifetimewool's profile.

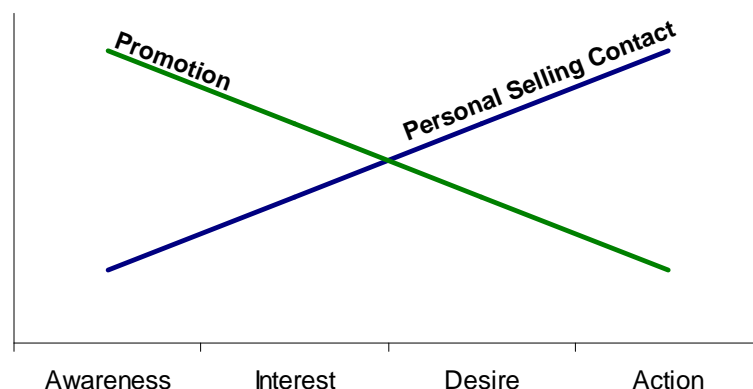


Figure 4. The relationship between promotion and personal selling

Figure 4 shows a generalised model of response to types of contact with customers. A similar response is seen in the lifetimewool project in that the communication methods largely employed over the last 4 years have been presentations and promotional events. This is reflected in the responses of the consultants and extensionists. However, although a lot of interest and awareness has been recorded

there is also considerable practice change recorded by both extensionists and consultants.

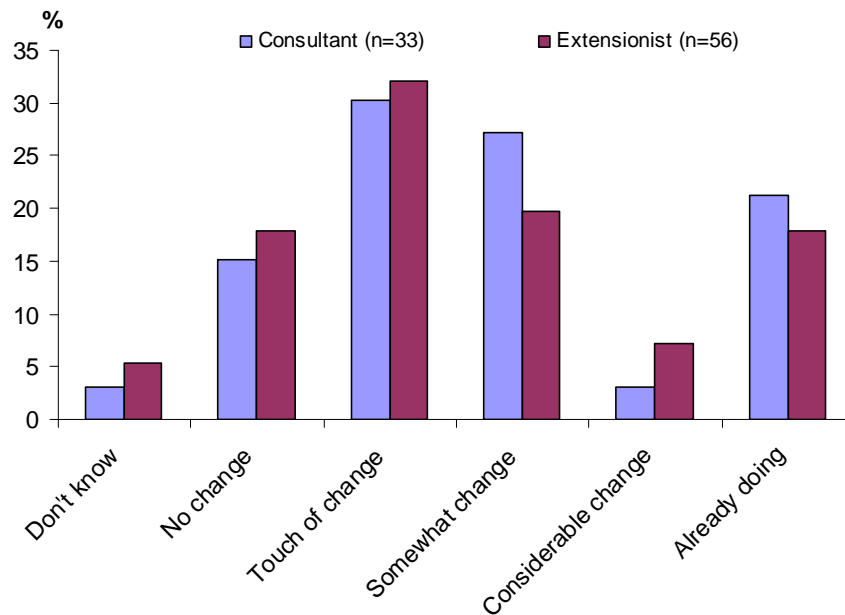


Figure 5. Extent of change, due to influence of lifetimewool, on recommendations

Twenty two percent of extensionists either had not changed or believed they didn't know enough to make changes to their recommendations as yet, and 18% of consultants had made no changes or didn't know enough to make changes (Figure 5). We expected at least some change in the small number of consultants that have been intimately involved in delivering the outcomes of the research, however, this survey shows a much larger response than expected. Some of the consultants had changed their recommendations considerably while others identified parts of the lifetimewool message that were immediately useful to their clients.

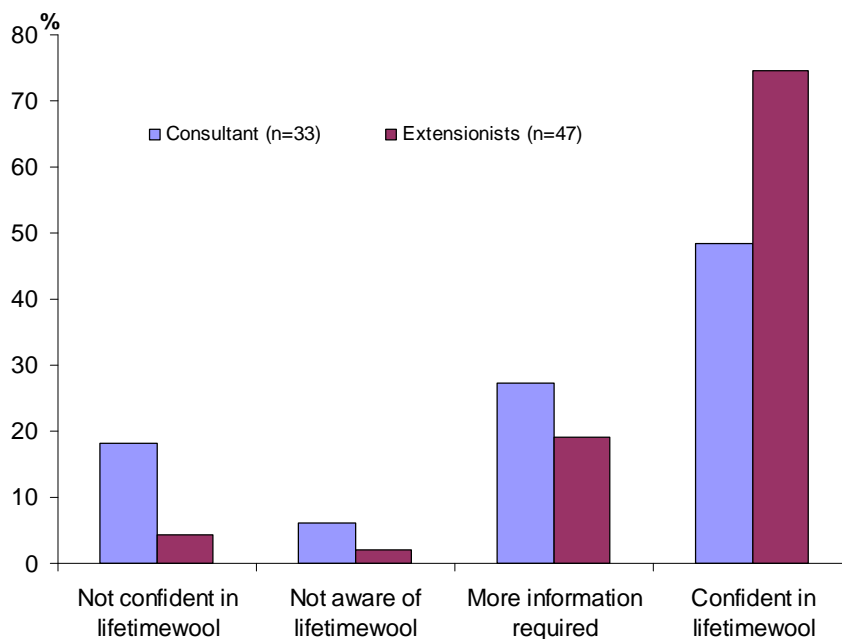


Figure 6. A summary of opinions of the lifetimewool project

Figure 6 shows that although a significant number of consultants were confident in lifetimewool results, many required further information. Of those who were confident, the messages and the practicality and applicability of the results were cited as the value of the project.

“The data produced is excellent and more producers should be adopting the messages that are simple to apply to their flocks”.

“Greater focus on ewe nutrition at critical stages through year especially prior to mating prior to lambing and immediately after lambing”.

Consultant opinions on lifetimewool

Several comments were made were about their confidence in the results and that many were waiting to make changes or more significant changes as more analysis became available.

“Not able to recommend anything at this stage”

“Until now the data was not significantly reliable over time”

“I’ll not change my recommendations until I’m convinced”

Extensionists were very confident of the results of lifetimewool although again there were a proportion who wanted further information to increase their understanding and confidence in the results.

“It was a very good project with outcomes that can be implemented practically on farm and it also demonstrates the economic benefits to farmers”

“I think the lifetime wool project is doing some good work - however it would be good to see some more economical information on the cost benefit of implementing LTW recommendations”

Extensionist opinions on lifetimewool

3.0 Differences in Needs between Extensionists & Consultants

3.1 Topics of interest

The analysis of financial impacts was the most highly requested of all topics by both consultants and extensionists (Figure 7). Extensionists expressed greater interest in the effects of ewe nutrition and condition score at joining on lambing percentage and the effects of ewe nutrition and condition score during pregnancy on lamb birth weights and survival than the consultants, whereas consultants showed slightly more interest in both ewe and progeny wool production information. Feed budgeting to meet ewe targets and managing twin bearing ewes was also important to the extensionists. The consultants didn’t show strong interest in the other topics offered, making it clear that the financial impacts analysis is what they want the most from the lifetimewool project.

The differences in the interest of the consultants and extensionists may be because consultants are more likely to work with clients on a 1:1 basis in financial planning and budgeting. Extensionists are likely to be contacted by phone for very specific tactical advice.

The overall high levels of interest in all topics indicates that there are good opportunities for lifetimewool to further engage both consultants and extensionists and there is an apparent need for better information on ewe management and feed budgeting.

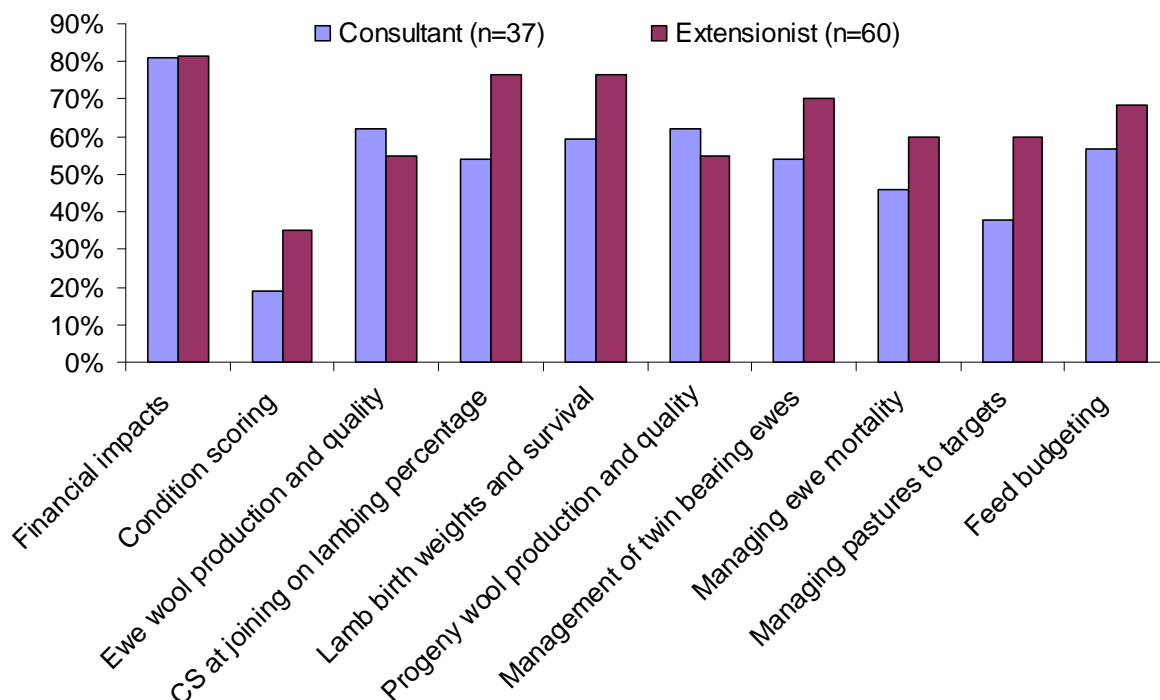


Figure 7. The percentage of consultants and extensionists requesting information on the key messages of lifetimewool.

Thirty-three (89%) consultants either currently received or wanted further information on lifetimewool. Forty-eight (80%) extensionists either already received or were keen to receive lifetimewool information. Less than half of the consultants and extensionist surveyed had been receiving information directly from lifetimewool, yet there has already been a good rate of change in their recommendations. This success could be attributed to the obvious value of the information and recommendations and to the effectiveness of the communication methods used.

3.2 Resources and tools

3.2.1 Tools for consultants and extensionists

The consultants said that the resources most useful to them are regular email newsletters and a website with full experimental results and details (Figure 8). There was also some demand for downloadable tools for use with growers. The consultants will probably re-package the information to target the needs of their individual clients instead of using the general information and resources for growers. Training in condition scoring and pasture assessment was seen as the least valuable resource.

The extensionists said that the website with general information for growers and downloadable tools for use with growers are the resources most useful for them.

They also had greater preference for the tools such as the Condition Score profile and the feed budgeting tools and accompanying training.

Lifetimewool initially believed that the resource needs of consultants and extensionists would be very different but they both appear to require a similar range of resources. The communication to consultants and extensionists will be different but they will all have the option to get any of the resources if required.

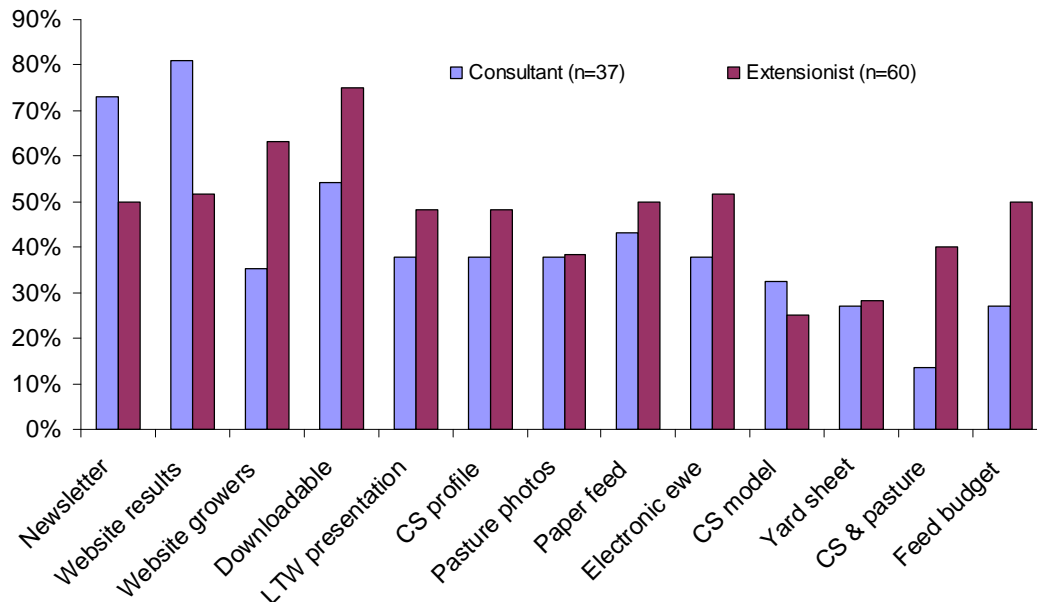


Figure 8. The percentage of consultants and extensionists identifying tools that they would be interested in using.

3.2.2 Involvement in sheep producer groups

Of the consultants surveyed, 32 (86%) are involved in a sheep producer group and of the extensionists surveyed, 44 (73%) are involved in a sheep producer group. The groups that have the most involvement are lifetimewool, Bestwool, Edge network, Grain and graze and Prograze (Figure 9). The involvement with the lifetimewool project has been as a presenter or facilitator for the group. The importance of both consultants and extensionists in influencing the learning outcomes of producers through the groups is evident. Ensuring that both consultants and extensionists are confident and knowledgeable of lifetimewool outcomes and tools will have good impact on those producers who use producer groups as learning and networking experience.

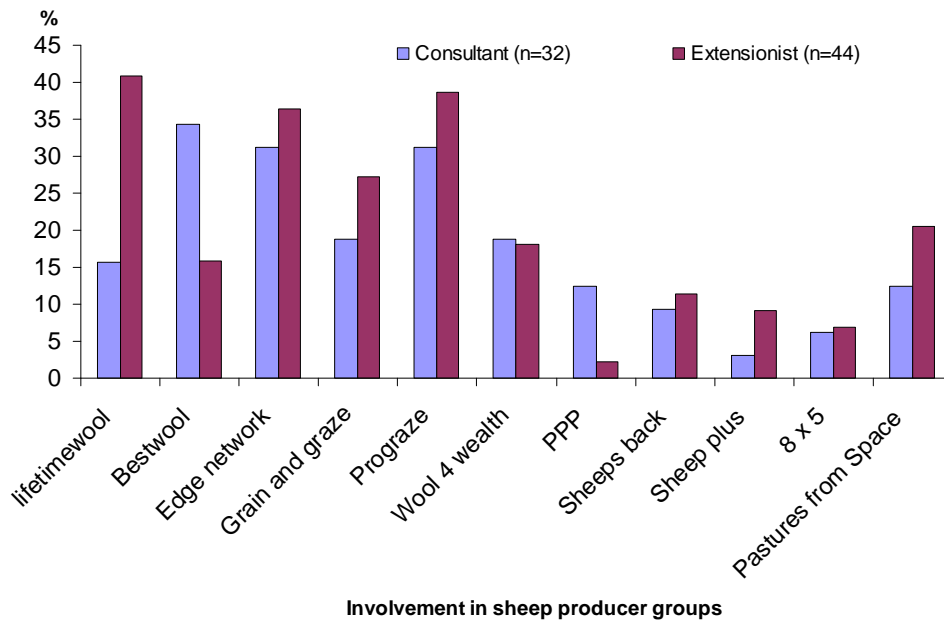


Figure 9. Involvement of consultants and extensionists in sheep producer groups

Conclusions

Private consultants are more focussed on one to one contact and for this reason need economic and financial analysis to support the generation of their own information to disseminate to clients. Private consultants are thought to service a high proportion of farmers who would be categorised as either 'innovators' or 'early adopters'. Combined these farmers represent about 15% of the total farmer population. Hence, consultants still require access to all the tools that we develop and would like as much information as possible, however, they don't see themselves necessarily as distributors of our tools and making presentations using lifetimewool branded presentation material.

Government extensionists give many presentations and are involved in organising information days, running producer groups and providing specific information, mainly over the phone in direct response to requests. Hence, these clients may represent a higher proportion of farmers who would be part of the 'early majority'. These farmers represent the next 35% of farmers and are very important to the lifetimewool communications strategy. Most extension/adoption programs in the past have failed to bridge the 'chasm' between 'innovators-early adopter' and the 'early majority' and have therefore had little impact in changing the productivity of the 'industry'.

Appendix A Survey Questions for Consultants and Extensionists

Qu 1 Have you heard of Lifetime Wool?

Choose yes or no

Qu 2 In what ways have you heard about the Lifetime Wool (LTW) Project?

- a I have read media articles about the LTW Project
- b I have read publications produced by LTW Project
- c I have visited LTW research sites
- d I have visited LTW demonstration farms
- e I have attended workshops or seminars run by LTW
- f I have listened to presentations about LTW at other events
- g I have participated in research trials or demonstration sites
- h Other

Qu 3 What is your opinion of the Lifetime Wool project?

Qu 4 To what extent has the Lifetime Wool project influenced your recommendations?

Choose one of the following

- I have changed my recommendations considerably
- I have modified my recommendations somewhat
- I have modified my recommendations a touch
- I haven't modified my recommendations at all, as I was already doing Lifetime Wool recommended practices
- I have not modified my recommendations
- I don't know

Qu 5 If LTW has influenced your recommendations, please explain further

Qu 6 What specific topics are you most interested in hearing about from the Lifetime Wool Project?

- targets
- a Financial impacts of managing ewes to condition score
 - b Condition scoring – a simple and quick assessment tool for managing ewes to targets
 - c The effects of ewe nutrition and condition score on her wool production and quality
 - d The effects of ewe nutrition and condition score at joining on lambing percentage
 - e The effects of ewe nutrition and condition score during pregnancy on lamb birth weights and survival
 - f The effects of ewe nutrition and condition score during pregnancy on progeny wool production and quality
 - g Management of twin bearing ewes to increase production
 - h Managing ewe mortality during late pregnancy and at lambing
 - i Managing pastures to targets
 - j Feed budgeting for ewe management to achieve condition score targets

- Qu 7 What resources could we develop that you might find useful?**
- a Regular email newsletters with latest analysis and guidelines
 - b Website with access to experimental results and analysis
 - c Website with general information for growers
 - d Downloadable tools for use with growers
 - e Ready to use presentations on LTW research results and guidelines
 - f Condition score profile charts
 - g Pasture target photos
 - h Simple paper based feed budget tools
 - i Ewe management decision support tools (electronic)
 - j Condition score models (reference set)
 - k Yard record sheet for flock condition scoring
 - l Training in skills such as condition scoring and pasture assessment
 - m Training in feed budgeting
- Qu 8 Please give us details of any other tools that we could develop that would help you extend LTW messages on to your clients.**
- Qu 9 Which State do you work in most of the time?**
- WA
 - Victoria
 - NSW
 - SA
 - Queensland
 - Tasmania
 - ACT
 - NT
- Qu 10 Please describe your position and the services you provide to Merino producers.**
- Qu 11 Approximately what proportion of your work time (excluding administration) concerns providing advice on Merino management issues?**
- Choose one of the following*
- 0-10% of my time
 - 11-20% of my time
 - 21-50% of my time
 - 50-70% of my time
 - over 70% of my time
 - I am not sure
- Qu 12 (Extensionists only) Approximately how many Merino farm businesses did you present seminars or give information to last financial year?**
- Choose one of the following*
- 0-20
 - 21-50
 - 51-100
 - 100-250
 - 250+

- Qu 12 (Consultant only) How many Merino farm businesses did you personally consult to on a one-on-one basis last financial year?**
Choose one of the following
0-10
11-20
21-50
51-100
100+
- Qu 13 Please rate your willingness to advise your clients to use the following practices to ewe or pasture management.**
Choose one of the following
Not willing
Only willing with more evidence
Somewhat willing
Very willing
Already do this
- a Using formal pasture assessment systems to estimate feed on offer, pasture growth rate and pasture quality.
 - b Using formal systems of condition scoring, fat scoring or weighing of ewes to monitor their condition.
 - c Separate ewes into lighter and heavier mobs and manage the mobs according to their different nutritional needs?
 - d Use a formal feed pasture budgeting program to manage ewes to a target body weight or condition score
 - e Pregnancy scanning to separate twin bearing ewes to manage them as separate mobs.
- Qu 14 Please rate your agreement with each of the statements.**
Choose one of the following
Strongly agree
Agree
Neutral
Disagree
Strongly disagree
- a Whole farm profit is sensitive to the changes in condition of ewes during the year
 - b Production from ewes and their progeny can be predicted from knowledge of ewe condition during the year
- Qu 15 Which sheep-producer groups or initiatives are you involved with?**
Lifetime Wool
Best Wool/ Best Lamb
Edge Network
Grain and Graze
Prograze
Wool for Wealth
PPP
Sheep's Back
Sheep Plus
8 X 5
Pastures from Space
Other
- Qu 16 Do you already receive information from the Lifetime Wool Project?**

Qu 17 If you are interested in receiving information on the Lifetime Wool Project please provide your contact details here - it is an anonymous survey, so if you don't provide your details we will not bother you further :)

Qu 18 Anything else you would like to tell us?