

Separating the wheat from the chaff: Decision making in a world drowning in data

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Since data and observations are logged in the field, and information must be accessed wherever it's needed, the modern grower has a tablet or smartphone at hand at all times. Farming today is all about insights and informed decision-making.



Image source: [Gallo/Getty](#)

However, not all data is created equal. Simply because something is on the internet and comes up as a hit in a Google search does not necessarily mean it is accurate, current or relevant to your farm. Never before has there been more data available in the world – a reality that is sadly not reflected in the quality of decision making across all spheres of society, agriculture included.

The pool of knowledge has become so deep and wide that most people seldom proceed beyond a paddle in the shallows. Often too, that paddle takes place in second-hand shallows – information curated, compiled and packaged by a third party who may not be qualified to put scientific research into perspective. One only has to think about the misinformation pandemic that accompanied Covid-19.

Where does this leave agri-producers?

Firstly, it is essential that growers take a step back from the information avalanche and consider the sources they consult and rely on. When researching sclerotinia, for instance, Google alone offers 1,8 million results in seconds – but how relevant and up to date is the information? Unless you know how to efficiently filter those hits for relevance and verify the accuracy, you will be no closer to the crop protection answer you need. And once you have that answer, how do you go about integrating the control of one pest with the rest of your farming operation in the context of overall crop planning, input cost management, environmental sustainability considerations and profitability?

Secondly, producers have to invest in building relationships with trusted business advisors. At IntelliGro, for example, the partnerships and alliances we have formed give us access to an unprecedented spectrum of technology and quality products on the one hand, and scientific, verified information on the other. By marrying the two perspectives with an understanding of a grower's unique circumstances, we offer credible, accurate and relevant information that informs integrated crop management strategies.

When we say it all starts on the farm, we also refer to the use of information and data. Only when specifics enter the decision-making equation is relevance guaranteed. This is the space in which IntelliGro positions itself. Our Certified Crop Advisors (CCAs), for example, are the link between a world of information and a specific set of circumstances on a client's farm.

Take, for instance, the topic of winter cover crops. An online search results in almost 9,000 hits, none of which is likely to elaborate on how to factor moisture management into the return-on-investment calculation for these crops in terms of kilograms of meat produced in the western production areas of South Africa. IntelliGro CCAs are privy to the scientific research that was done on this topic and can guide producers in their decision making.

Thirdly, producers will benefit from engaging with information through the channels that best suit their circumstances and preferences. Again, to use the IntelliGro example: while they are at the centre of our offering, the CCAs are not a grower's only information option. We regularly host information days where producers have direct access to a variety of technology, quality product experts to talk to and present virtual events to expand our reach and make information widely available. A prime example of the latter is the annual Row Crop Symposium during which growers and experts share their views, experiences, challenges and solutions with viewers. To keep the verified data available for longer, we upload shortened videos of the various Symposium topics on our different social media platforms.

We view independent experts as critical to empowering growers with knowledge, and in this regard, we are working hard to bridge the gap between academia and the industry. By focusing research resources to help solve the challenges producers grapple with, real progress can be made to ensure sustainable agriculture and long-term food security.

Growers know all about separating the wheat from the chaff on the farm; to be successful and sustainable in a fast-changing industry and marketplace, they have to do the same when it comes to the information and resources they seek out to guide their decisions.

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