

Webinars applauded by the chicken meat industry during the pandemic

Rachele Osmond¹, Felicity McIntosh² & Jillian Templeton²

¹ Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Toowoomba Qld 4350

² Department of Agriculture and Fisheries, Dutton Park, Qld 4102

Email: rachele.osmond@daf.qld.gov.au

Abstract. The AgriFutures Chicken Meat RD&E program funded *Training and extension for the chicken meat industry* project quickly pivoted to delivering online webinars in response to the global human health pandemic in 2020 caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (COVID-19). The change to an online format was met with enthusiasm by all sectors of the industry. Between July 2020 and April 2022, 14 webinars have attracted 927 participants from 1622 registrations—an average attendance rate of 57%. Key topics such as litter management, environmental sustainability, nutrition, health, biosecurity and bird behaviour have been discussed with 27 researchers, encompassing 34 individual research projects. The positive feedback from industry participants in an independent mid-term project review, where 99% are interested in attending more webinars, coupled with high attendance and registration rates, indicate that this delivery format has an important role to play alongside face-to-face activities into the future.

Keywords: webinar, chicken meat, themes, RD&E, YouTube

Introduction

The vertically integrated structure of the Australian chicken meat industry means that individual companies own most of the production chain including feed mills, hatcheries, breeder farms and the processing plant (Australian Chicken Meat Federation 2022). Growing meat chickens for market is usually contracted out to private or company operated farms, where the integrated company owns the chickens and pays a growing fee to the contracted grower. Because of this structure, the extension and communication of research was mostly delivered in traditional face-to-face forums such as industry conferences, face-to-face workshops and in-house training days.

When the national 'Training and extension for the chicken meat industry' project—delivered by the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (Queensland)—was initiated in early 2020, one of the key deliverables was to hold an annual national forum. The purpose was to showcase the investments made by the AgriFutures Chicken Meat RD&E program and enable researchers to present their work to a select group of key industry members. When this event was cancelled due to the national lockdown in 2020 due to the COVID-19 human health pandemic, plans were quickly changed, with the face-to-face forum being changed to a series of themed online webinars in order to maintain regular contact with industry.

Targeted themes and planning for success

Using webinars as a communication medium to agricultural sectors, while not new, had not been readily adopted by the chicken meat industry prior to 2020. To get people interested in this alternative mode of communication, getting the topic of the first webinar right and knowing which audience to target helped to generate further interest and create awareness of the webinars.

The first webinar focussed on litter management, a topic that is always of interest for growers, researchers, company livestock managers and veterinarians. It generated 85 registrations and an attendance rate of 73%. At the end of the webinar, 55% of attendees answered the poll that requested feedback regarding what could be improved, what topics were of interest for future webinars and if they would attend more webinars.

Seeking feedback and engaging with the audience via online polls and surveys was instrumental in getting the right mix of topics for future webinars. Following this, multiple themes emerged and focussed on:

- environmental management and sustainability
- litter management
- nutrition
- gut health
- biosecurity
- health and welfare.

In a separate survey to identify preferences for webinar time and length, we found that most respondents preferred:

- webinars that go for a total of 1 hour (70%)
- presentation length to be 15–20 minutes (66%)

- a 10am–12pm timeslot (45%) followed by 12pm–2pm (30%)

Other lessons learnt throughout the journey by trial and error have been:

- The best days to hold a webinar is mid-week.
- Send webinar information and registration details out two weeks in advance for good registration rates.
- Hold webinars regularly – monthly or bimonthly.
- Don't have too many pre-set 'Zoom' reminders. The day before and an hour before is enough.

As the webinars were originally planned to replace the face-to-face forum during the pandemic, initially there was a focus on aligning the topics of interest with current and recently completed research projects. This meant that the same outcomes of the original face-to-face forum could be achieved by showcasing AgriFutures Chicken Meat RD&E program investments. However, as the webinars and the audience has evolved, there has been the opportunity to expand the reach and topic areas of the webinars. This has allowed the inclusion of presentations from international speakers that are highly regarded within the Australian chicken meat industry and topics such as ventilation, bird behaviour and other topic areas of interest based on attendee feedback.

The webinars that included the international speakers generated the largest number of registrations with over 366 people registering across 2 webinars. This highlights the importance of having relevant topics presented by well-regarded and respected speakers with the target audience.

Participant feedback and survey results enabled the webinars to be planned well in advance. These plans, like many others, were flexible and included back-up topics and presenters. Planning the year in advance also means that certain topics are covered when they are more relevant to industry and avoids clashing with other major industry events.

Improving the reach of chicken meat RD&E across the supply chain

An advantage of changing to an online forum was that we were not limited by the number of people that could attend. This allowed people to join that do not normally attend conferences and forums, such as chicken growers, to receive information that is not readily available in an open format. The key was to target each webinar to the intended audience. This was initially done through targeted emails to key industry people, that were able to distribute the information to the right people and through the AgriFutures industry newsletter.

As time has progressed, the webinars have generated a strong following from all sectors of the industry from growers and farm managers to feed ingredient suppliers, nutritionists, veterinarians and integrator company staff. Researchers also enjoy this medium of communication as it is a way that they can share their work with the wider community, plus keep up to date with other research that is happening in their area of expertise and across the wider industry. On average participation at webinars has been industry representatives, including growers (40%), researchers (27%), supplier company representatives (21%) and others which includes consultants, government officers and service providers.

The webinars have also generated an international audience, with industry from New Zealand being the biggest supporters, as they share a similar structure as the Australian industry. The webinars that generated the largest international audience were nutrition research focussed, with people attending from the USA, Europe, UK and Asia. On average, the international audience level across all webinars was 12% whereas nutrition focussed webinars attracted an 18% international audience. Considering the two major commercial chicken breeds grown in Australia are also grown around the world, this result was not unexpected.

Topics presented during webinars have also been reported in key industry publications which has further extended the reach of the information out to the Australian industry and improved the awareness of the webinars.

Utilising other online formats

Making the presentations more widely accessible by recording them and placing into themed playlists on a designated YouTube channel has allowed people to watch the recordings at a time convenient to them. Following each webinar, all people that registered were sent the link to the recording. Links were also placed on the Chicken Meat RD&E website.

In total, 35 individual recordings have been viewed collectively over 3,780 times since July 2020. There has also been anecdotal evidence from industry that the webinar recordings were used as training resources for staff and growers. Having playlists that align with the webinar themes is beneficial as other relevant industry video resources are added to build an industry specific YouTube video library.

Presentations were only posted to YouTube with the permission of the presenter. Only three declined, mostly due to wanting to publish their work at a later date.

Success

Overall, the webinars were a welcomed resource that were valued by the industry. Between July 2020 and April 2022, 14 webinars were held, attracting 927 attendees from 1622 registrations. The average webinar attendance/conversion rate of 57% (ranging from 46–73%) achieved by the chicken meat industry webinars is above the 46% average conversion rate reported by Woodall (2022). It is also above the conversion rates for different types of webinars reported by Hallur (2022), where the average attendance rates for training and education webinars were 31% and 45% respectively.

The conversion rate is consistent with the Department of Agriculture and Fisheries (Queensland) beef industry webinar series. The average attendance (from total registrations) for the BeefConnect webinars was 46% (ranging from 33–57%) and 50% for the FutureBeef webinars (ranging from 43–55%) (N Sallur 2020, pers. comm., 24 November).

The webinars have been successful in delivering the updates and outcomes of 34 different research projects from 27 individual researchers. On average, 42% of webinar attendees complete the poll. The feedback so far shows that 44% find the webinar information very useful and 43% find it useful; 52% are likely and 35% are very likely to use the information in their business; and 99% are interested in attending more webinars.

Feedback from a project mid-term review (Coutts & Coutts 2021) also showed that the webinars were valued and seen as a useful resource for industry. Specific comments from the review include:

- webinars always come up as a highlight - enabled people to access info from research a lot more regularly
- webinars have been great - great that we can do that remotely
- highly appreciated by industry
- level of engagement of presenters and quality of those invited to present to the audience is very good
- recently the litter management workshop helped us
- webinars have been good at getting the information out there in a timely matter
- webinars have been well presented and are of a very good quality
- the research is highly relevant and one of the best they can access
- we show our growers and they use that as a training tool
- direct people to the YouTube webinars all the time
- professional and well organised.

In summary, online delivery is not a long-term substitute for face-to-face events. However, the positive industry feedback, combined with high attendance rates and good viewing rates on YouTube will see the webinars continue as a resource to disseminate useful and timely information to the chicken meat industry.

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Foreword

Volume 18, Number 1 of the *Rural Extension and Innovations Systems Journal* contains Practice papers. Practice papers are informal, accessible articles that document successes, failures and the lessons from extension professionals' experiences. They provide an opportunity for rural advisors and extension practitioners to publish stories and case studies about extension practice, which are relevant to other field operatives, but also show the application of extension theory to practice. They are assessed and edited to ensure coherency and suitability to these goals.

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