

December 7, 2018

DON'T DRINK THE KOOL-AID

At the Nebraska Cooperative Extension meeting this fall in Kearney, Dr. Robert Nielsen from Purdue gave a great presentation every farmer should hear. Since 1983, he has taught in over 1,400 Extension education programs reaching a total of 159,000 individuals throughout Indiana, the U.S. and other countries. I call him the doctor of corn. His research trials are now whole field trials utilizing current technology or large scale trials with farmers. An example, there was wide claims beginning in the 1990's that twin row corn was superior to 30 inch corn. With on-farm whole field trials he found no effect of plant population on twin-row yield performance relative to 30-inch rows in Indiana. He didn't drink the advertisement Kool-Aid, he critically analyzed and studied the issue on a large scale for his area.

Rarely in agriculture is any agronomic solution ever black and white. The devil is in the detail in correctly identifying yield limiting factors, otherwise we are just throwing darts and spending money on products or ideas that don't matter.

Nielsen praised Nebraska Extension for expanding the UNL On-Farm Research network with replicated farm trials across Nebraska. To learn more, go to: <https://cropwatch.unl.edu/on-farm-research> As Nielsen stated in his talk it is sorting out the factual from the "craptual". How can farmers do a better job of critical thinking in the decisions they make? Nielsen liked the book "A Field Guide to Lies" which leads to better decisions.

An extension educator shared a story about a biological product a company was promoting that increased corn yields by 10 bu/acre. Critically thinking about it, if it was that good every time, it would be sold to a large agricultural company immediately. Be a natural sceptic when you read farm magazines and images that are imprinted with marketing schemes. Separate the wheat from the chaff!

There was a technique to sell more Camel cigarettes in the 1940's used by the tobacco industry to reassure a worried public to incorporate images of physicians in their ads. The none-too-subtle message was that if the doctor, with all of his expertise, chose to smoke a particular brand, then it must be safe. There is a television show today in agriculture that has some really good information being presented, but don't kid yourself, the people involved are extremely skilled and smooth in sales and marketing.

So "Drinking the Kool-Aid" is a person or group holding an unquestioned belief, argument or philosophy without critical examination. Here's an example in a magazine. "Our hybrid had 90% wins against the competition." A critical thinker asks what question, who was the competition?

There are no silver bullets today concerning growing good crops. There is no one size fits all answer. Every field has a different "story". Mother Nature has the final say. No one has all the answers and agronomic principles of crops don't change. We also want black and white answers to yield limiting factors that happened this year in a field but it's never black and white.



Searching for yield limiting factors in a field requires agronomic knowledge and skill. It takes time and is often difficult. You can be aided by aerial imagery and combine yield mapping that help focus the search. Never spend dollars on solutions for problems that you don't have!

The challenge is that there is always someone willing to sell solutions. Some solutions are well documented with reliable research. Some appear to be well documented, but are not. Some rely simply on farmer testimonials. Some simply are not necessary. Farmers do not need every single input that a company has to sell them.

The bottom line is always remember to use the following technique when making choices that impact your profitability in agriculture.

1. Is the source of the information credible?
2. Are the facts being presented plausible?
3. Is there supporting data? (many farmers don't go that far and they should)
4. Critique the validity of the data and look for independent verification of the claims.

Always remember to filter the Kool-Aid before you drink it.

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