

Clicking, Learning, Telling

Get More Out of Focus Groups With an Audience Response System

By William Sparks

In Rwanda, ACDI/VOCA is collaborating with USAID and the World Food Program to help 25,000 farmers reduce crop loss and increase household income through improved post-harvest handling practices. To efficiently reach these farmers, we use cascade training: Farmer cooperatives send lead farmers to training; the lead farmers then return to train other members of their cooperatives.

But training doesn't guarantee adoption of new practices or technologies. So how do we know if our interventions are helping? If they aren't, how can we find out why?

In March 2011, I went to Rwanda to determine if specific post-harvest handling skills had been transferred from our workshops to lead farmers and then on to individual farmers in the remote villages of Kirehe District. During the first stage of my assignment, I met with focus groups, interviewing more than 130 members from eight cooperatives.

Using handheld audience response devices—called “clickers”—I was able to meet with relatively large focus groups of 15-30 people, ensure that everyone was heard, get both qualitative and quantitative data on training outcomes, and create an engaging experience for the participants.

Clicking: Give Everyone in the Room a Voice

Focus groups are an effective way of collecting information, but effort must be made to compensate for outspoken participants, response conforming and withdrawal. Clickers provided a way to address each of these concerns and yield a more comprehensive analysis.

I had 30 clickers and one handheld receiver. Participants responded to multiple-choice questions with a clicker, and I captured the aggregate results in my handheld receiver.

Outspoken participants—Some focus group participants monopolize interview time, responding at length to every question and making it difficult for others to weigh in, which can distort results. With clickers, everyone has a chance to respond quickly and anonymously. From the responses, the interviewer can then ask a question such as, “I'd like to hear from those who selected option #2,” to prompt different people, even those in the minority, to speak.



Response conforming—Participants might be inclined to adjust their initial responses to conform with perceived leaders or toward answers that appear to be more accepted. Clickers democratize responses so that the interviewer gets a truer impression of participant opinions.

Withdrawal—Withdrawal may occur as respondents are waiting for a turn to speak or because outspoken participants are dominating the conversation. Clickers allow everyone to respond to each question right away. And because participants are eager to hear the results and assess their own behaviors and performance, they remain engaged in the interview process.

Learning: Are Rwandan Farmers Applying New Skills?

I loosely adopted Kirkpatrick's framework to measure the effectiveness of training. My goals were to record trainee satisfaction and perceived relevance of the training (level 1), confirm learning of new skills (level 2) and identify skills being adopted in the fields (level 3). It was too soon to tell if the new skills resulted in less crop loss and more revenue for the farmers (level 4), but I could begin to collect predictive data. Clickers helped me collect information for each level as follows:

Level 1: Trainee satisfaction and perceived relevance of training

I reviewed the four stages of the post-harvest training (collecting, processing, drying and storing) with the participants. I asked participants to click on the stage that was most helpful and least helpful. The clickers allowed people to force-rank the workshops, and then I could lead a discussion about how the low-ranked trainings could be improved and made more relevant.

Level 2: Learning of new skills

Typically, Kirkpatrick's level 2 asks if participants have acquired new knowledge or skills. Because this was a cascade training program, I asked questions about how lead farmers were delivering the training to other farmers. With the clickers, I could rapidly collect information on number of farmers trained, number of hours spent training each farmer and which skills were well-received (for example, drying on plastic sheets). I was also able to identify skills that were not being adopted. Through the use of clickers, the results showed few people adopting new techniques for measuring moisture content. This led to in-depth discussions to identify the reasons for resistance and to adjust our training materials.

Level 3: Adoption of new skills

As with any training program, adoption is essential for success. What skills had the lead trainers observed their trainees (individual farmers) adopting? Clickers, as with any self-reporting instrument, can be biased toward telling interviewers whatever they want to hear. First-hand observation cannot be omitted. However, having clickers gave me a clear picture of what to look for and the type of questions to ask during my observation visits to the fields.

For example, the clickers helped me see a glaring inconsistency. In level 2, trainers reported that trainees found drying grain on plastic sheets a great improvement for enhancing grain quality. But here in level 3, trainers reported that farmers were not actually following this practice. Follow-up discussions quickly revealed that the more-remote villages did not have access to the plastic sheets. When I later conducted my observation visits, I was prompted to ask those farmers using plastic sheets where they had purchased their materials and to

talk to cooperative leaders about including them in their supply stores.

Level 4: Impact at the organization (cooperative) level

The goal of the program is to reduce harvest losses to provide more food and income for farmers and their families. Although it was too early to measure the program's success at achieving this goal, I could use the clickers to collect information from farmers about current land size, historical losses and anticipated loss reduction with the new skills. Although the forward-looking responses are conjecture and subject to environmental factors, the clickers allowed me to rapidly collect and aggregate information from the people closest to the field.

Telling: Share Results With External Stakeholders

The most effective reports contain both quantitative and qualitative information. Clickers helped me collect quantitative information, which was then emphasized with specific qualitative examples from follow-up discussions. This process helped prevent overemphasis of interesting, but atypical, stories. Not only did it provide a more accurate and comprehensive story when reporting to stakeholders, but the use of clickers also made the presentation itself more engaging.

To demonstrate how the clickers worked to donors and other project staff to whom I was reporting, I had them use the clickers to guess the information I had collected. For example, before presenting how many hours the average trainer trained a farmer or which training session was most popular, I had stakeholders click a possible answer. (Audience response systems also allow insertion of clicker responses, in real time, into a PowerPoint presentation.) Not only did this demonstrate the use of the clickers, it helped stakeholders learn about the training process. And it invited active participation and meaningful discussion throughout the presentation, as stakeholders reconciled their predictions with the actual results.

Tips for Best Results

No single method of data collection should be used exclusively. An appropriate balance of observation, interviews and record review must be considered. Here are a few suggestions for using an audience response system:

- » **Introduce the clickers to focus groups by asking simple questions.** I asked, "Will it rain tomorrow?" as my first question. This helped participants become familiar with the clickers. Also, the diverse answers led to a discussion of the value of differing opinions.
- » **Show how results are aggregated and kept anonymous.** After the first question, I walked around and showed everyone the results on my device. They could see what information I had and that there was no way to identify them individually.
- » **Share results after each question.** Participants are extremely curious to see the aggregate results. Providing information back to them is the least we can offer those who are volunteering their time to meet with us.
- » **Avoid abstract scales.** When I asked people to rate their satisfaction on a scale of 1-9 with 9 being high, I got blank stares. It was more effective to say, "Press 1 if you didn't like it, press 2 if you did like it, press 3 if it was your favorite." Each number needed to represent a specific answer.
- » **Research vendors.** There are several vendors offering audience response systems. Be sure to research your options before selecting a system.

Remote settings can be challenging, but an audience response system empowers trainers and evaluators to rapidly gather extensive information with a minimal amount of equipment. There are so many voices waiting to be heard, and you can be just a click away from listening.

William Sparks is vice president of program services at ACDI/VOCA.



Radio Improves Health in the Philippines

Radio programming on good health practices, maternal and child health care, disease outbreaks and other health issues reaches 2 million people in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao in the Philippines, thanks to the USAID-funded Sustainable Health Improvements through Empowerment and Local Development (SHIELD) program. Weekly programs aired by local radio stations include call-in shows, an audio drama and syndicated plugs for family planning and free child-health services. The radio hosts pictured are government health professionals who were trained by ACDI/VOCA on anchoring, interviewing, reporting, writing radio scripts and managing radio programs.