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How Cotton Incorporated proactively substantiated grower practices and their concern for the environment

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The Situation	The cotton industry has faced long-held and often erroneous beliefs about cotton production and its impact on the environment. The Cotton Research & Promotion Program needed current data on cotton grower stewardship of natural resources in order to accurately inform its global customers and guide production research.
The Goals	• Obtain fresh data on current successful production practices to support U.S. cotton promotion efforts • Ensure Cotton's research program is focused on growers' key issues and needs • Benchmark production practices to supplement and control declining sets of public data
The Method	Conduct an online survey of cotton growers across the United States. Put together a Cotton Survey Team to include professionals from Agricultural Research, communications, consultants, and survey partners to design and deliver the assessment to 15,000 growers.
The Results	Over 1,300 valid responses substantiate the industry's commitment to conservation and sustainable practices in four key areas: water, soil, wildlife habitat, and energy.
The Application	Utilize fresh data to support cotton specific industry research and promotion. Deliver Cotton's untold story to its customers about improvements in soil and wildlife habitat and reductions in use of water, energy and crop protection chemicals.

Conducting the Survey

Cotton Incorporated, headquartered in Cary, NC, implements the Cotton Research & Promotion Program, which is administered and overseen by the Cotton Board of Memphis, TN. The Program works to increase the demand for and improve the market position of cotton and is funded by America's cotton producers and importers. In order to inform cotton's customers around the world with accuracy, Cotton Incorporated identified a need to survey US cotton growers to quantify current production practices.

To gather such crucial information in a timely manner, Cotton Incorporated needed a survey partner with an understanding of agricultural issues as well as online survey techniques. They turned to OrgWide Services (OWS) based in Collierville, TN. OWS specializes in online surveys, elearning, and communications.

Since creation of statistically valid and reliable surveys can be difficult, OWS' measurement specialists followed a proven survey methodology that began with a needs assessment and formation of a Cotton Survey Team. The team included Agricultural Research scientists from Cotton Incorporated, Cotton Board communications staff, consultants Dr. Andy Jordan and Rachel Holloway, and OWS survey specialists.

Next, the Team outlined their business information needs and developed plans for data collection and analysis. Cotton team members contributed subject matter expertise for item design while the measurement specialists focused on scale design and analytic procedures. The final result was an assessment tool that resulted in unambiguous, interpretable, and actionable analyses. Seventy-seven questions were selected to collect data on four topics (water, soil, habitat/wildlife, and energy).

OWS created an online survey that was linked to the Cotton Incorporated web site. An initial letter was sent to 15,000 cotton growers, inviting them to take the survey. Specially designed follow-up postcards with incentives, industry newsletters, and trade news outlets promoted the online survey. A paper/pencil version was also offered to Cotton Field Day participants in several locations across the Cotton Belt. These efforts resulted in a 10% online response rate, which yielded over 1,300 valid grower participants (representing 16% of the U.S cotton acreage and 1.7 million acres of rotational crops). This high participation rate, representing all size farms and geographic regions, harvested reliable data for robust statistical analysis.

In addition, an online survey was conducted of cotton crop consultants to provide a cross-validation data set.

Results and Application to Survey Goals

Cotton Incorporated set out to capture data that could be applied to its research and marketing efforts with the following results:

- **Obtain "fresh data" on current successful practices**
  The results are allowing Cotton Incorporated to counter misconceptions with hard facts and support marketing efforts aimed at brands and retailers.

- **Ensure Cotton's research program is focused on growers' key issues**
  The data supports the current program focus on production practices and consumer attitudes, but also identified the need for additional research and education on several key topics. To effectively deliver new production research data, the survey also gathered data on how growers receive information.

- **Benchmark production practices to supplement and control declining sets of public data**
  Federal and state funding for agricultural research has declined in recent years, forcing industries such as Cotton to bear an increasing burden regarding data collection. Data quickly becomes outdated - for instance, the United States Department of Agriculture stopped collecting information on acres under conservation tillage in 2004, a practice unique to both the cotton industry and geographic regions.

Leading the Way

As America's food and agricultural industries are challenged with growing demands for enhancing yields in a sustainable environment, organizations are benchmarking current best practices and developing general guidelines for producers. While cooperating in these initiatives, Cotton Incorporated has also taken a proactive role for its industry segment by conducting this first of its kind Natural Resource Survey. Data from this groundbreaking assessment is yielding long-term direction to production research and to retail promotion of fiber and other products from cotton.

OrgWide Services is pleased to support this professional and scientific approach to data collection by one of the country's premier commodity organizations and can provide additional details of the commodity survey process.