

The Dispatch

The October 2021: Redefining “Yield”

One of the benefits of Lance’s sabbatical was that it gave him time to think and explore new topics, as well as old topics in new ways. This month’s Dispatch, about “yield,” is the result of that thinking. When the agricultural community talks about “yield,” it means primarily the production of crops in early Fall. But the word “yield” also has a wider meaning in English. Lance and Davon discuss aspects of yield as it relates to the crop cycle and beyond, while Bill looks at the history of the word “yield” in English and comes up with some interesting findings. Share your thoughts with us in response!

Yield – A Word Worth Looking Into

[Bill Long](#)

When Lance told me he was thinking of a Dispatch issue devoted to “yield,” my first thoughts were not agricultural. Why? Well, just that week I had been helping the 15 year-old daughter of a friend try to pass her driver’s test. One of the first signs I needed to explain was a “yield” sign — which has to do with giving way or surrendering place in the road to another vehicle. While she was worrying about her test, and Lance was concerned about crops, I fell into a reverie wondering about how crops and yield signs were related.

So, I spent time with the authoritative Oxford English Dictionary, a historical dictionary describing the evolution of our language. I am almost sorry I did so, for there are more than 20 definitions of “yield” in its 1000-year existence. Several of these definitions have sub-definitions. Thankfully, nearly all the definitions now are “obsolete,” according to the OED, which is a comfort to us but also suggests that we have lost more of our language than we still retain.

Upon digging into the word, I discovered there were three basic meanings of “yield.” The oldest is to “give as one’s due,” such as “yielding” thanks to God—who rightly deserves our gratitude. The second oldest is the agricultural meaning, to “put forth, produce, generate.” But then, appearing about 1400 is the third meaning, to “hand over, give up, surrender.” The sentence, “He yielded place to the Queen,” captures this meaning.

Now we can see how “yield” might be used both for the produce of land and “giving way” or “surrendering” a position in traffic. I was grateful to have uncovered a tiny mystery. But the really interesting thing was to learn that the “Yield” sign was only invented in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1950, to keep cars from crashing into each other at an intersection not busy enough for a stop sign. I am interested in your crop “yield” but, frankly, I am just as interested now in whether my young friend passes her driver’s test!

Yield Beyond Numbers

[Davon Cook](#)

During the harvest season, there is much focus on yield – the numerical measurement of a farm’s output of its product. It is the most tactical indicator of performance, the measure of a season’s worth of work. We grow bushels or pounds of a given crop. But what is the larger product of our work, beyond numerical yield?

Some farmers say that they ultimately “grow people”. This recognizes that talented and dedicated people are

critical to their ability to grow crops or livestock. For some, the phrase also recognizes a broader purpose for the business—to support the livelihood, development, and overall well-being of individuals and families they value. Their success is measured by the lives they impact and enrich. And an even broader application of the concept is that the crops physically feed and clothe people. The crops are a means to the end of sustaining humanity.

Others consider themselves stewards of natural resources. The yield is the “harvest” of God-given resources of sunlight, water, soil, or grass. Their value-added product is converting those resources into a different, usable format. This outlook balances the priorities of numerical yield with longer term impact on those resources, and relates to the third definition of the word “yield” that Bill shared: to hand over, give up, surrender. The bounty of the crop is a product of God’s resources, thus we give credit to, and thank, God for the harvest.

These ideas underscore that numerical yield may not be the ultimate end or measure of our success. Reframing your product yield to a larger purpose helps sustain motivation and momentum through good times and bad, as well as guide decision making. How do you best measure the yield of your efforts? What is the product you seek to harvest?

Five ~~Costs~~ Investments to Achieve Yield

[Lance Woodbury](#)

We know that to achieve a good yield on farms or ranches, there is a cost, an investment, in things like genetics, fertilizer, land improvements, equipment, labor, and even rest. What are some of the investments needed to achieve the broader notion of yield suggested by Davon?

Investments of Time & Attention. To achieve a family business that has a multi-generational yield, care must be given to the culture of ownership, the process by which strategic decisions are made, and the development of and communication with family members.

Investments in Diversity. Sometimes yield is achieved not just by maximizing output, but also by minimizing the impact of failures. Investing in different types of businesses, locations, or even industries may be key to avoiding a concentrated amount of risk in your organization.

Investments in Education. Yield also comes from making wise choices, and wise choices come from investments in learning. Learning can mean spending time in school or self-education. More often it comes from watching and learning from others, and from reflecting on your own successes and failures.

Investments in Feedback. Improvement in yield comes from getting better over time. Often, how we get better – beyond self-reflection – is by both offering and listening to feedback from others.

Deferred Returns. Family agriculture businesses benefit from family member’s sense of passion and vocation. People will take pay cuts, delay transitions of equity, and move to remote locations to carry on the family business. Those investments yield opportunities for future generations of family members and staff.

As you ponder the idea of redefining yield, take time to consider the important investments in your family business that are tied to that definition.