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I have been a crop consultant for the past six years. During that time, I have had the opportunity to work independently, as well as through a local Co-Op and a local dealership. Working with the latter two organizations, my services have been offered both for free and for a fee based on acreage, to their customers. These experiences have given me the opportunity to observe practices at that level as well as practices acceptable to the major chemical companies that service these entities.

As the agricultural economy has declined, I have seen an increased emphasis on the part of Co-Ops, dealerships and major companies to not only maintain their current levels of business but to increase their income and visibility within their communities, by offering “services” to customers. These services are in direct competition with independent consultants. I have seen Co-Ops or dealerships that have actively pursued the business of a producer who already employed a consultant. I have seen scouting programs sprout up through these entities, which offer comprehensive services beyond insect monitoring but do not employ qualified people to provide the necessary information and recommendations. The major chemical companies that sell insecticides have in the past provided interns to these locations to check fields for free during critical times of the year when insect populations are a concern. These interns are often minimally trained and usually only trained to find problem insects and do not consider the ecology of the field in question. They often have very little experience if any in scouting fields, and in my experience, do not take the work seriously. In other words, they are trained to find a target insect in a field and then recommend the company product to treat the “problem”. The same statements can be made about dealerships and Co-Ops in my area, as to the quality of the interns or “scouts” that they employ. I can think of very few individuals serving as consultants or scouts through a Co-Op or dealership that are truly trained and qualified to make observations and recommendations.

Another issue that typically arises in these situations is the amount of acreage that an individual is asked to cover, and the time in which they have to cover it. With the intern programs or scouting programs that I am familiar with, these individuals are typically expected to cover thousands of acres each and every week during the growing season, and when insect infestations begin to rise, even more demand is made on their time as other producers request the service in response to a panic that seems to spread through the area. Chemical companies have typically responded to this by asking their salespeople to “scout” fields for their dealerships but again, they are typically not trained for this type of work, and their focus tends to be on a target insect and not the totality of the field. They are typically asked to look at dozens of fields in a day for a particular location.

I believe that sales of pesticides over the internet will only exacerbate this situation. In order to either maintain customers, or regain the losses due to internet sales, it will become necessary to provide “services” for a fee. Or in the case of the chemical

companies, their salespeople will begin to play more of a support role for the line of products as opposed to actually selling them. I think it is important to remember, that just as with consulting, the bottom line is that a product has to be sold to remain in business. Hopefully, the quality of that product will become an issue and will improve as the business evolves, but if there is no demand for improvement from any quarter, then business will continue as usual.