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Best Fit, Not Best Practice

Why Farm-Specific Diagnosis Outperforms Standardized Consulting Packages on Mid-Size Texas Farms

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Abstract- ***This practice essay argues that joint problem definition, a deliberately limited number of farm-specific recommendations and scheduled follow-up produce higher implementation rates and clearer commercial results than standardized consulting packages. Drawing on the agricultural extension literature, on the diffusion-of-innovations framework and on practical experience managing lean commercial operations in Brazil and advising producers in South-Central Texas, it describes a four-step "bounded customization" model, illustrates it with three composite farm cases from the Bexar County region, answers common objections, and discusses implications for consulting firms, for producers and for broader agricultural efficiency.***

Index Terms- ***agribusiness consulting, agricultural extension, best fit, customized advisory services, farm-specific diagnosis, implementation, mid-size farms, Texas***

I. THE PROBLEM WITH THE AVERAGE FARM

Every agricultural consultant eventually faces the same temptation. After advising a few dozen farms in a region, patterns emerge: most farms over-apply phosphorus, most irrigate by calendar, most keep poor records, most sell at harvest. It seems efficient to turn these patterns into a package — a standard soil-fertility program, a standard irrigation protocol, a standard record-keeping kit, a standard marketing plan — and offer it to every client at a fixed price.



Figure 1. Texas agricultural landscape. Local variation in soils, water and enterprise mix reduces the effectiveness of uniform recommendations. Source: YourBasin.

Standardized consulting packages have proliferated in U.S. agribusiness for exactly this reason. They are easy to sell, easy to price and easy to deliver with junior staff. Technology vendors bundle them with equipment; input retailers bundle them with products; software firms bundle them with subscriptions. For large operations with technical staff who can filter and adapt the recommendations, packages can work reasonably well.

For mid-size and family farms, however, the results are frequently disappointing. The reason is simple: **the average farm does not exist.** A package designed for the average farm in a region is, by construction, a poor fit for most of the actual farms in that region. Two farms of 600 acres a few miles apart in Bexar County can differ in almost every variable that determines what advice is valuable: soil depth and texture, irrigation reliability, the age and condition of equipment, the operator's experience and time, family labor, debt level, landlord relationships, and the market channels through which they sell.

II. WHAT STANDARDIZED PACKAGES ASSUME

It is useful to make the hidden assumptions of a standardized package explicit, because each one corresponds to a reason it under-performs on real farms.

Table 1. Assumptions built into standardized packages and the reality on mid-size Texas farms

Package assumes	Reality on mid-size farms
Soils and water are similar across clients	Large differences in soil depth, salinity, irrigation access and well capacity
The operator has time to implement many changes	The owner is also the main operator, mechanic and marketer
Capital is available for recommended investments	Operating credit is committed; investment competes with debt service
The farm's binding constraint is the one the package addresses	The binding constraint varies: water, labor, cash flow, market access, succession
All recommendations are equally valuable	A few changes produce most of the value; the rest dilute attention
Results will be evident without measurement	Without a baseline and an indicator, results are invisible

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When these assumptions fail, producers behave rationally. They adopt only the parts of the package that obviously fit, postpone the rest, and rarely return to it. Partial adoption of a package designed as a whole often fails to deliver the projected returns, which in turn reduces the producer's confidence in consulting in general. The consultant, meanwhile, rarely learns what was implemented, because the package has no built-in follow-up.

III. HOW ADVISORY MODELS EVOLVED

U.S. agriculture has a long and successful tradition of public advisory services. The Cooperative Extension System, created by the Smith-Lever Act of 1914 and linked to the land-grant universities, brought research-based recommendations to farmers through county agents, demonstrations and publications. For much of the twentieth century, extension was the dominant source of independent agronomic advice, and its model — research at the university, transfer through agents, adoption on the farm — shaped how agricultural knowledge was understood.

From the 1980s onward, the landscape became more pluralistic. Public extension budgets came under pressure, farms grew larger and more specialized, and private advisors expanded rapidly: independent crop consultants, retail agronomists linked to input dealers, equipment dealers offering precision-agriculture support, farm-management firms, lenders' farm advisors and, more recently, software platforms with built-in recommendations. Each of these actors has strengths, and each has incentives that shape its advice. Input retailers have an interest in product volume; equipment dealers in hardware sales; software firms in subscriptions. Public extension remains independent but has limited time for individual farms.

Mid-size farms sit in an awkward position within this landscape. They are too large and too commercial to be served adequately by occasional extension meetings, and too small to justify the dedicated advisory teams that large operations hire. The packages offered by private actors are frequently designed for the scale and staff of larger farms. This gap — between generic public information and packages designed for others — is precisely where independent, farm-specific consulting can add value.

IV. BEST FIT, NOT BEST PRACTICE

The extension and advisory literature has recognized this problem for decades. Anderson and Feder (2007), in their review of agricultural extension, emphasize that the effectiveness of advisory services depends on the fit between the advice and the farmer's circumstances, and that top-down transfer of uniform technical messages has repeatedly under-performed. Birner and colleagues (2009) propose replacing the search for "best practice" with a search for "best fit": advisory approaches should be designed around the specific characteristics of the farming system, the farmers and the institutional context.

The diffusion-of-innovations framework (Rogers, 2003) offers a complementary explanation. Innovations are adopted faster when they offer a clear **relative advantage**, are **compatible** with existing practices and values, have low **complexity**, can be **tried** on a small scale, and produce **observable** results. A standardized package typically scores poorly on several of these attributes at once: it is complex (many changes simultaneously), its compatibility with a given farm is uncertain, it is rarely designed for small-scale trial, and its results are seldom made observable through measurement.

"A recommendation that is not implemented has a value of zero, however good it is in theory."

The practical implication is that the quality of a consulting engagement should be judged not by the sophistication of its recommendations but by the value of the changes actually implemented and sustained. That shifts attention from *what* is recommended to *how many* recommendations are made, *how* they are selected and *whether* anyone checks the results.

V. A BOUNDED CUSTOMIZATION MODEL

The model used by Walter's Agribusiness Consulting, LLC (WA Consulting) is deliberately bounded. It limits the scope of each engagement in order to raise the probability that recommendations are implemented. It consists of four steps that form a cycle, with one production cycle as the unit of time.

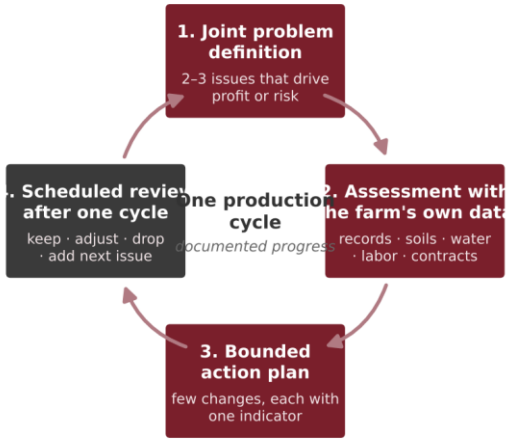


Figure 2. The bounded customization cycle. Each turn of the cycle covers one production season and ends with a documented review.

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A. Step 1 — Joint problem definition

The engagement begins with a structured conversation, on the farm, to identify the **two or three issues that most affect near-term profitability or risk**. The producer and the consultant define them together. This matters for two reasons. First, the producer knows things about the farm that no data set contains — which field floods, which employee is reliable, which buyer pays late. Second, people implement solutions to problems they have defined themselves far more readily than solutions to problems defined for them. Typical issues include high pumping costs, recurring pest losses, a buyer's documentation request, an expiring lease, or uncertainty about whether to invest in equipment.

B. Step 2 — Assessment with the farm's own data

Each issue is assessed using the farm's own records — input invoices, yield tickets, pumping meter readings, soil tests, lease agreements, sales contracts — supplemented by field visits and, where necessary, simple new measurements. Regional averages are used only for comparison. The assessment answers three questions: how large is the problem in dollars or risk; what is causing it; and what changes are feasible with the labor, equipment and capital the farm actually has.

C. Step 3 — A bounded written action plan

The plan is short — typically two pages — and limited to changes that the farm can execute with available labor and capital. Each change has **one simple indicator** (for example, irrigation events per season, insecticide cost per acre, hours spent answering buyer requests) and a responsible person. Changes that would require new permanent staff or major investment are deferred or presented as options for later decisions.

D. Step 4 — Scheduled review after one cycle

The review date is set when the plan is delivered. At the review, the indicators are compared with the baseline; each change is kept, adjusted or dropped; and the next issue is selected. The review is what converts consulting from a one-time event into a learning process, and it produces the documentation that builds the producer's confidence.

This sequence draws directly on experience managing commercial operations in Brazil under lean staffing, where a manager responsible for thousands of hectares with a small team must concentrate attention on the few variables that matter most in each season, write them down, assign them, and check them on fixed dates.

VI. THE DIAGNOSTIC INTERVIEW

The quality of the first step determines the quality of everything that follows. Joint problem definition is not an informal chat; it is a structured interview with a short list of questions designed to reveal the farm's binding constraint. The questions below have proved useful across many types of operation.

1) Which decision in the last two seasons do you most wish you had made differently, and why?
2) What costs have grown fastest over the last three years?
3) Where do you lose the most time during the busiest month of the year?
4) Which buyer, lender, insurer or landlord request causes the most stress?
5) If one field or enterprise disappeared tomorrow, would the farm be better or worse off financially?
6) What is the one thing you would change if you had an extra person for a season?
7) What would you need to see in one year to consider this engagement worthwhile?

The answers are written down in the producer's own words and read back at the end of the visit. From them, the consultant and the producer select the two or three issues for the cycle. This step typically takes two to three hours and is the single best investment of consulting time in the engagement.

Signs that the problem definition is wrong

- The issues chosen are the consultant's favorite topics rather than the producer's concerns.
- More than three issues have been selected.
- No issue can be expressed in dollars, hours or a measurable risk.
- The producer cannot explain the chosen issues to a family member or employee.

VII. CHOOSING INDICATORS

An indicator turns a recommendation into something that can be checked. Good indicators are simple, already partly available in farm records, and directly linked to the change being made. The bounded model uses a small library of indicators, from which one is selected for each change.

Table 2. Examples of indicators used in bounded engagements

Change	Indicator and source
Irrigation scheduling	Inches applied and kWh per irrigated acre (meter, utility bill)
Scouting with thresholds	Insecticide cost per acre; number of applications (invoices, field log)
Record templates	Hours to answer external requests (simple time log)
Nutrient program adjustment	Pounds of N per bushel or per bale (invoices, yield tickets)

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Change	Indicator and source
Lease formalization	Share of rented acres under written lease
Equipment decision	Cost per acre of owned versus custom operation

Indicators are recorded at baseline and at review. They are deliberately few: the purpose is not to build a research data set but to make progress visible to the producer and to inform the next decision. Where a change affects yield, the indicator is complemented with a simple comparison — a check strip, a neighboring field or the previous season — interpreted with caution because weather differs between years.

VIII. WHY FEWER RECOMMENDATIONS WORK BETTER

The central claim of the bounded model — that fewer, farm-specific recommendations produce more implemented change than many generic ones — can be illustrated with a simple implementation funnel. Imagine a standardized package of twenty recommendations and a bounded engagement of four. Each recommendation must pass through several filters: the producer must accept it, implement it as designed, keep it in use through the season, and someone must document its result.

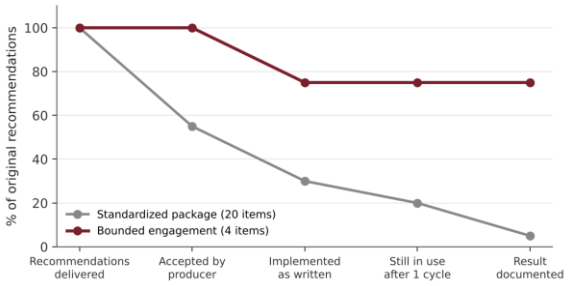


Figure 3. Illustrative implementation funnel. A large package loses most recommendations at each stage; a bounded plan keeps most of them. Values are illustrative, based on typical advisory experience rather than a controlled study.

In the illustration, the package delivers twenty recommendations but only one ends with a documented result; the bounded engagement delivers four and documents three. The absolute number of implemented changes is similar, but the bounded engagement has three practical advantages: the implemented changes are the ones chosen as most important; the results are documented, so the producer and the consultant both learn; and the producer's confidence grows instead of eroding.

Table 3. Expected differences in engagement outcomes

Outcome	Standardized package	Bounded engagement
Number of recommendations	15–30	2–5
Share implemented as designed	Low	High
Time to first measurable result	Often > 1 year or never	One season
Results documented	Rarely	Always (built-in review)
Producer confidence	Declines with partial adoption	Increases with documented progress
Consultant learning	Little feedback	Systematic feedback each cycle

IX. THREE FARMS, THREE DIAGNOSES

The following composite cases are drawn from typical situations encountered in the Bexar County region. Details have been altered and combined; they are illustrations of the method, not descriptions of specific clients. All three farms are of similar size. A standardized package would have offered all three the same program. The bounded model produced three different plans.

CASE A — THE IRRIGATED FARM WITH HIGH PUMPING COSTS

Profile. 720 acres; two center pivots on 280 acres; corn, sorghum and wheat; owner-operator with one employee.

Joint definition. Pumping energy had become the largest variable cost after seed; the owner suspected over-irrigation but had no data.

Assessment. Meter readings and energy bills showed water applied well above estimated crop water use in two of three seasons; one pivot had poor uniformity at the outer spans.

Plan. (1) Install soil-moisture sensors and schedule irrigation using sensors and TexasET data. (2) Repair nozzle package on the outer spans. Indicator: inches applied and kWh per acre.

Review. Fewer irrigation events in the first season with no yield penalty; repair paid for itself in energy savings. Next issue selected: nitrogen management under the pivots.

CASE B — THE DRYLAND FARM WITH A DEMANDING BUYER

Profile. 540 acres dryland sorghum and wheat, plus cow-calf herd; family operation.

Joint definition. A buyer began requesting documentation of production practices; the family spent days reconstructing records each season and feared losing the contract.

Assessment. Information existed but was scattered among receipts, phones and memory; scouting was informal and insecticide was sometimes applied preventively.

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Plan. (1) A one-page field log and a one-page seasonal summary designed around the buyer's questions. (2) Weekly scouting with written thresholds for sorghum. Indicators: hours to answer the buyer; insecticide cost per acre.

Review. The buyer's request was answered the same day; one preventive application was avoided. Next issue: cover crops on the most eroded field.

CASE C — THE FAMILY FARM IN TRANSITION

Profile. 650 acres, partly owned and partly leased from three landlords; cotton, sorghum and hay; father preparing to hand over to daughter.

Joint definition. The main risk was not agronomic: two leases were verbal, one landlord was considering selling, and the daughter did not know the financial history of each field.

Assessment. Profitability by field showed that one leased tract had lost money in four of five years.

Plan. (1) Written lease agreements with clear terms. (2) Field-level profitability summary to support the decision to renew or release the losing tract. Indicator: leases documented; margin per acre by tract.

Review. Two leases written; the losing tract was renegotiated with lower rent. Next issue: equipment replacement plan.

X. WHAT THE CASES TEACH

Three lessons stand out. First, **the binding constraint differs from farm to farm** — water in Case A, documentation in Case B, tenure and succession in Case C — even among farms of similar size in the same county. A package designed around any one of these constraints would have been largely irrelevant to the other two farms.

Second, **linked and limited changes can be executed without additional permanent staff.** In each case, the plan contained two changes that reinforced each other: scheduling and pivot repair; record templates and scouting; leases and field profitability. Because they were linked, they shared effort; because they were limited, they fitted within the existing workload.

Third, **documentation is part of the result, not an administrative extra.** In every case, the indicator chosen at the start made the result visible at the review. This visibility is what sustains the change and justifies the next step.

XI. LESSONS FROM LEAN OPERATIONS IN BRAZIL

Large commercial farms in the Brazilian Cerrado offer a useful perspective. Many operate thousands of hectares with small management teams, under variable rainfall and logistics constraints, and with heavy dependence on contractors and multiple partners. Under these conditions, management culture tends to emphasize a few disciplines: written seasonal plans with a limited number of priorities; field protocols and notebooks; clear assignment of responsibility; and fixed review dates. Experience in agricultural inspection reinforces a further habit: information that cannot be retrieved quickly might as well not exist.

None of these disciplines depends on Brazilian technology or regulation. They are organizational habits that transfer readily to Texas farms when adapted to local conditions. The bounded customization model is, in essence, a way of bringing these habits to mid-size operations through a consultant, without requiring the farm to hire a management team.

XII. OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES

A. "Customization is too expensive."

Customization is more expensive per engagement than a package, but not per implemented result. Because the bounded model limits scope, the consultant's time is concentrated on a few issues, and the cost of an engagement for a mid-size farm remains modest. The relevant comparison is the cost per documented improvement — on which bounded engagements perform well.

B. "It does not scale."

The model scales through method rather than content. The four steps, the two-page plan format, the indicator library and the review protocol are standardized; what varies is the content, which is determined by the farm's own data. This is similar to how medical practice standardizes diagnosis procedures while customizing treatment.

C. "Producers want a complete solution."

Some do, initially. But producers also have long experience with complete solutions that were never fully implemented. In practice, producers respond well to an approach that starts with their own priorities and shows results within one season. Additional issues are addressed in later cycles — over three or four seasons, the farm may implement more changes than a package would have achieved.

D. *"How do we know it works?"*

The model's built-in review produces a record of indicators before and after each change. Over multiple engagements, these records allow the consultant to evaluate which types of changes deliver results on which types of farms. A formal comparative study with matched farms would strengthen the evidence and is a natural next step for collaboration with extension programs.

XIII. APPLICATION IN THE BEXAR COUNTY REGION

South-Central Texas presents particularly strong reasons for a bounded, farm-specific approach. Soils vary sharply over short distances; irrigation depends on groundwater sources with different regulatory frameworks and well capacities; farms combine row crops, hay and cattle in many different proportions; and the urban growth of San Antonio creates land-tenure pressures, leasing complexity and succession questions that standardized packages ignore entirely.

Engagements in the region can combine, for example, a modest irrigation-scheduling change with a one-page seasonal summary that satisfies a recurring buyer request. Because the changes are linked and limited, they can be executed without additional permanent staff. Neighboring farms with different primary constraints receive different recommendations.

Table 4. Typical issue clusters on mid-size farms in the Bexar County region

Primary constraint	Typical first-cycle changes
Water and energy	Sensor-based scheduling; pivot uniformity check; well and meter records
Pest and input costs	Written thresholds; weekly scouting; product selection review
Documentation and market access	Field log; seasonal summary; single compliance repository
Tenure and succession	Written leases; field-level profitability; transition timeline
Investment decisions	Payback analysis with farm data; custom service versus ownership comparison

XIV. INDEPENDENCE AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

The bounded model places significant trust in the consultant's judgment, which makes independence and professional conduct essential. Three principles guide practice at WA Consulting. First, **no commissions on products or equipment**: the consultant is paid for advice and follow-up, not for sales, so that recommending a custom service instead of a purchase, or no change at all, carries no financial penalty. Second, **transparency about evidence**: when a recommendation rests on limited data or on regional experience rather than farm-specific measurement, the plan says so. Third, **confidentiality**: farm data are used only for the client's engagement and, in aggregated and anonymized form, for improving methods.

These principles matter for the sector as a whole. Producers who have experienced advice tied to sales are understandably skeptical of consultants. Independent, documented advice rebuilds trust and makes producers more willing to engage with new practices and technologies.

XV. WHAT PRODUCERS SHOULD ASK A CONSULTANT

Producers evaluating advisory services — including WA Consulting — can use a short set of questions to judge whether an engagement is likely to fit their operation.

- Will we define the problems together before any recommendation is made?
- Will the recommendations be based on my farm's records, not only on regional averages?
- How many changes will the plan contain, and can my current team carry them out?
- What indicator will show whether each change worked?
- When is the review scheduled, and is it included in the fee?
- Do you receive any payment from input, equipment or software suppliers?

XVI. IMPLICATIONS FOR FIRMS AND THE SECTOR

For consulting firms, bounded farm-specific engagements are a source of differentiation. Technology vendors sell equipment; input retailers sell products; generic advisors sell programs. An independent consultant who sells implemented and documented results occupies a distinct position — one that is difficult to replicate without field experience and a disciplined method.

For producers, the model offers a way to obtain professional advice proportional to their scale and needs, without committing to large programs that may not fit.

For the sector, the cumulative effect matters. Mid-size and family farms account for a large share of U.S. farms and a substantial share of agricultural land (USDA ERS, 2021). Improvements in input efficiency, income stability and market linkages on these existing farms contribute to national objectives of agricultural productivity, resource conservation and rural resilience. Advisory approaches that actually

change practice on these farms are therefore not only a private service but a contribution to sector performance.

XVII. CONCLUSION

Standardized consulting packages under-perform on mid-size farms because they are designed for an average farm that does not exist. Farm-specific diagnosis, a limited number of recommendations and scheduled follow-up — the bounded customization model — align advice with each farm's binding constraint, fit within its labor and capital, and make results visible. The three composite cases show how farms of similar size in the same county can require entirely different plans, and how linked, limited changes can be implemented without new staff. The approach generates documented results that support both private profitability and broader efficiency goals, and it offers consulting firms a clear and defensible way to add value.

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