

Panel IV: Case Studies Promising Practices in New Product Development

**Financiera Trisan:
An Agricultural Credit Card Innovator**

Mark Wenner
Rodolfo Quiros

DRAFT: ONLY FOR COMMENTS

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to analyze a program that extends credit cards to agricultural input suppliers and rural producers in Costa Rica and to determine whether this program is financially viable and potentially replicable to other rural areas of Latin America.

A credit card program is very innovative and unusual for a rural setting. Credit cards, normally, have been promoted in urban areas with business firms and salaried employees who have steady cash flows.

Credit cards in rural areas are not as common because potential rural clients, especially agricultural producers, have more seasonal and uncertain monthly cash flows. This chapter seeks specifically (i) to recount the genesis of the agricultural credit card program (section 2); (ii) to describe the product, the typical client, and service delivery methodology (section 3); (iii) to analyze the financial performance of this product (section 4); and (iv) to conclude with outstanding challenges facing the expansion and replication of the product (sections 5 and 6).

2. The Genesis of an Agricultural Credit Card

The agricultural credit card offered by Financiera Trisan S.A. grew out of a confluence of factors—a company tradition of product innovation, changes in capital control laws in the country, the desire to lower administrative costs, and compliance with a ruling of the Superintendent of Banking.

Tradition of Innovation

Financiera Trisan S.A. is a registered and regulated finance company that operates in Costa Rica and is part of a conglomerate that has a long established record for innovation. It is a related company to the Trisan Group, a family-owned holding company, consisting of three other related agribusiness undertakings: Trisan S.A., TransAgro S.A. and Agro Agil S.A. Trisan S.A., the parent company and core business, specializes in the import and wholesale distribution of agricultural and industrial chemicals. TransAgro S.A. specializes in providing farm management consulting services to commercially-oriented farmers. Agro Agil S.A. specializes in the retail sale of agricultural and industrial chemicals.

The parent company dates back to 1961. In that year, Fritz Trinler van der Water, a Swiss immigrant, arrived in the country and started selling veterinary medicines and agricultural chemicals on a small scale. His company, Trisan S.A., grew over time to become one of the three largest agricultural input wholesalers in the country with US\$10 million in sales as of December 1997.

Since the beginning, the Trisan Group has developed a reputation for being a pioneer and innovator. It was the first agricultural input wholesaler in the country to use radio phones to place and receive orders, cold rooms to store veterinary products; a fleet of trucks to deliver products to retailers, elaborate showrooms to promote particular lines of products; and to hold demonstration seminars

on the premises of retailers. At present, it is at the vanguard in Costa Rica in promoting the use of bioengineered agricultural inputs and environmentally friendly technologies for textile dying and food preparation. Thus, the idea to spin-off a financial subsidiary and introduce a credit card fits the pattern of visionary leadership and corporate development.

Changes in Capital Account Controls

Up until the late 1980s Costa Rica had capital accounts controls in place that resulted in a rationing of foreign exchange. Applications for the use of hard currencies were necessary. Financiera Trisan was formed in 1985 and charged with the mission to handle foreign exchange rate transactions, account receivables, and factoring for all companies within the Group. It made administrative and economic sense to consolidate all financial aspects of import transactions in one unit. As exchange rate markets were gradually liberalized and capital account controls finally eliminated between 1989-92, the principal activity of the Financiera became factoring or the discounting of account receivables.

Administrative Convenience and Superintendent Ruling

In the early 1990s, the impetus to introduce a credit card came from two sources. First, the management of Trisan Group started to brainstorm about ways of how to improve the financial management of account receivables. The administrative costs of contacting vendors-clients by phone/fax, mailing invoices, and making personal visits to collect on overdue accounts etc., were rising rapidly. Second, the Superintendency (Auditoría General de Entidades Financieras (AGEF), now known as the SUGEF) believed that Financiera Trisan was engaging in excessive related party financial dealings because 100% of its factoring was with the Trisan Group. Financiera Trisan disagreed and argued that it was purchasing account receivables from the various retail distributors affiliated with Trisan Group and thus had more than one client. The consensus solution that emerged out of a series of discussions was to introduce a credit card for retailers affiliated with Trisan S.A..

The credit card would serve as a substitute for a traditional 30-day line of supplier credit. As a consequence, this innovation would serve to lower transaction costs, to increase credit sales volumes, and to resolve the conflict with AGEF because there would clearly be distinct individual accounts in the portfolio.

3. Credit Card Product Description and Service Delivery Mechanism

3.1 Products

Financiera Trisan, S.A. has developed two credit card products aimed at the agricultural input suppliers and rural producers in Costa Rica: (1) credit card **Agrimax**; and (2) a value-added enhancement to Agrimax called **Maxicuenta**.¹

¹ The Finance Company also offers other financial services to the larger public, namely, (1) loans to individuals and corporations; (2) factoring; (3) investment management services –Invermax, and (4) certificates of deposit.

3.1.1 Agrimax

There are two types of Agrimax, the green card, which is aimed at retail distributors of agricultural chemical products, and the silver card, which is aimed at individuals who desire to purchase agricultural inputs from affiliated distributors. The same terms apply for affiliated retailers as for individual users. The only differences are that the typical maximum limits are much higher for businesses compared to individuals and that the guarantees required from businesses are accordingly more substantial. The absolute maximum limit is C30 million (US\$117,187 as per the SUGEF ruling that no more than 20% of paid-in capital can be loan to a single party). In practice, each applicant's limit is set according to repayment capacity and both cards carry a market adjusted rate of interest.

In 1998 it was 45% rate of interest per annum². Both cards have a billing cycle of 30 days and the typical guarantees used are co-signers who must have pledgeable assets in the case of individual accounts and real property in the case of business accounts. If the balance is not canceled in full, the client has to pay a minimum of 33% of the outstanding balance the first month. Thereafter, interest would accrue on the unpaid balance. As of December 1998, Agrimax credit card accounts represented approximately half of the outstanding credit balances. Approximately, 250 were green cards, or distributor accounts, and 1,950 were silver cards, or individual accounts.

Historically, the green card predated the introduction of the silver card. The green card was introduced in August 1992. Initial positive results with the green card aimed at retailers lead the managers of the Financiera to believe that that end-user clients would use the Agrimax card to charge more of all types of products purchased, and while not restricted to purchasing only products exclusively distributed by Trisan, the widespread use of the individual card would contribute to increased consolidated profits for the Trisan Group. The silver card was introduced in 1993. For preferred customers, cash advances were allowed.

3.1.2 Maxicuenta

Maxicuenta is an additional enhancement service available to preferred Agrimax individual clients that takes into account the seasonality of rural household cashflows. It is intended to be used to help finance short-term agricultural and livestock production and marketing. Instead of having to make regular payments within 25 days of billing, the client can make his or her first payment as a balloon payment once he or she has had the opportunity to harvest and market their product. It is granted to current Agrimax cardholders who have good repayment records (minimum of three months standing). The maximum limit is negotiable and depends on the type of agricultural/livestock activity and the repayment capacity of the individual. The Financiera Trisan Sales Agent must visit the farm and verify the viability of the farming enterprise and review bank statements and sales receipts of previous crops. Another visit is scheduled 15 days prior to the due date of the first payment to ascertain if there will be problems with repayment. Maxicuenta has the same rate of interest as Agrimax and the same conditions apply. As of December 30, 1998, the Financiera reported 273 Maxicuenta holders with an outstanding balance of C151 million (US\$556,333), representing 26% of the Financiera's portfolio.

² Exchange of June 1998 US\$1=256 colones.

The logic behind this additional service is that rural clients desire more flexibility in managing finances. Maxicuenta is essentially a product enhancement that serves to increase the average outstanding balance and to keep clients satisfied and loyal.

3.2 Service Delivery Mechanism

3.2.1 Product Marketing

At the start of the credit card program, Financiera Trisan depended on indirect marketing but later switched to more direct marketing campaigns. In 1992 and 1993, Financiera Trisan asked distributors affiliated with the Trisan Group to use the credit card as opposed to the traditional supplier credit financing arrangements. The advantage to Trisan S.A. was that the management of accounts receivable was essentially being transferred to Financiera Trisan with two attractive financial benefits? lower administrative costs and improved cashflow. The advantage to the retailers was the promise of improved service in the future due to realized cost savings and efficiencies realized by Trisan S.A.. The marketing campaign sometimes relied on aggressive tactics such as threatening cancellation of distribution rights if the credit card was not accepted. Once the retailers responded, Financiera Trisan then followed three distinct stages of product promotion on the individual client level.

In the first stage, Financiera Trisan strongly encouraged distributors affiliated with the Trisan Group to promote the use of Agrimax with individual clients who had existing credit accounts. The credit card was presented as a substitute for traditional supplier credit provided by the retailer to end-users--farmers. The advantage to the retailer was that the management of accounts receivable was essentially being transferred to Financiera Trisan with three attractive financial benefits? lower administrative costs, improved cashflow, and the elimination of default risk. The retailer received immediate payment for charges made on the Trisan credit card within 24 hours of a presentation of a claim.

In the second stage, Financiera Trisan requested lists of clients from the retailers affiliated with the Trisan Group. It issued cards to persons on these lists with little or no further screening. The goal was rapid growth in the number of clients in order to lower unit operating costs.

In the third and current stage, the promotion process is more direct and selective. Growth in clients is slower due largely to the fact that the strategy of contacting clients from affiliated retailers proved to contain inherent moral hazard risks.³ Personnel of Financiera Trisan now promote the product with prospective clients through presentations or ? charlas? held in the locales of various agricultural input vendors, many of whom are not affiliated with the Trisan Group. The advantages of affiliation with the Trisan Group and of the card are touted and the mechanics of the program explained. In

³ Retailers had vested interests in promoting the widespread acceptance of its clients regardless of creditworthiness, since the possession of a credit card was bound to increase sales without the attendant default risk for the retailer.

addition, to the direct presentations, the sales representatives request retailers to identify preferred clients with excellent credit histories and reputations for technical and managerial capacity. These preferred clients are then visited at home or at their place of business.

3.2.3 Evaluation, Approval, Issuance, and Billing Processes

The evaluation and approval procedures for obtaining credit cards are rigorous in the first instance but less involved and more automatic at the time of increasing the maximum credit availability. The steps are briefly described below.

First, a six-page application form is filled out and analyzed. Most often a representative of Financiera Trisan completes the application in the home or business of the prospective client and makes whatever additional visits to third parties that are necessary. The form gathers socio-economic and business/household income data. The analysis focuses on determining repayment capacity for the business/household, the willingness to repay, and the quality of guarantees that can be offered. To determine the repayment capacity, current debt servicing burdens are compared to projected income flows. To determine willingness to repay, credit bureau reports are used. To determine the quality of guarantees, the guarantees are classified and points are assigned for the four commonly accepted forms of guarantees: (1) personal guarantee (most risky-least points), (2) lien (somewhat risky-a few points), (3) titled property (less risky-more points), or (4) a certificate of deposit (least risky-high number of points). Three risk classifications can be assigned to an application based on the total number of points: A (acceptable), B (marginal), and C (poor). If the classification is C, the application is automatically denied.

Second, once the application is evaluated a recommendation is made whether to issue a card with corresponding limits. The higher the limit, the more persons are involved in the decision (Table 1).

Table: 1 Credits Limits and Composition of Credit Approval Committee	
Credit Limits	Persons Involved in Approval
C.5 to C1.5 million (US\$1,953 to 5,859)	Credit Analyst and Credit Manager
From C1.5 to 7 million (US\$5,859-27,343)	Credit Analyst, Credit Manager, Operations Manager, and Deputy Manager
From C7 to 20 million(US\$27,343-73,529)	Credit Analyst, Credit Manager, Operations Manager, Deputy Manager, and Manager
From C20 to C30 million(US\$78,125-117,187)	Board of Directors

Note: Exchange rate June 1998 US\$1=C256

Third, once the application has been approved, legal contracts are drawn and signed by the cardholder and guarantors. A card is printed and delivered to the residence of the client. Financiera Trisan usually assumes the lion's share of the transaction costs involved.

Fourth, once the card is activated, monthly statements are sent by mail no later than four days after the close of the billing cycle.⁴ Clients have 25 days to pay from the end of the billing cycle. Payments can be made four ways. They are in order of descending frequency: (1) deposit in an account of the Financiera in one of the state-owned banks conveniently located throughout the country (very reliable); (2) to the sales agent of Financiera Trisan on routine visits (very reliable); (3) in person at the regional or headquarters offices of the Financiera (most reliable); or (4) by mail (least reliable and rarely used).

3.2.3 Collection Processing

Normally, the personnel of Financiera Trisan monitor Agrimax clients on a periodic basis (once or twice during the growing season). In the case of Maxicuenta holders, the monitoring may be more frequent. Billing statements are mailed after the close of one of the 5 billing cycles in the month (the 5th, 10th, 15th, 20th, and 25th of each month). If payment is not received within 2 days past the official due date, the following steps are taken:

- (1) a phone call is made;
- (2) a telegram is sent after the 5th day and the co-signers are contacted by phone;
- (3) a letter is sent after 10 days;
- (4) a letter from a lawyer is sent after 15 days;
- (5) a marketing and sales agent from Financiera Trisan visits the client in person after 30 days; and
- (6) if a mutually satisfactory agreement cannot be made, legal enforcement begins.

At each of the above steps, additional charges are added to the outstanding balance (each phone call C500(US\$1.84); telegram C1000(US\$3.68); letter from the Financiera C2000(US\$7.37); letter for retained lawyer C2500(US\$9.21); and each visit by a Marketing and Sales Agent C3000. Late

⁴ From 1992-97, several problems were encountered with the postal service but since 1998 the quality of service has improved, and the number of lost and returned to sender statements have diminished considerably. In the earlier years, due to poor postal services, marketing and sales agents either delivered the statements personally or made arrangements for pick-up at a central location, normally a dry goods store or an input supply store.

penalty interest charges are also added to the balance.

3.3 Client Profiles

The typical credit card client of Financiera Trisan is a primary school educated, middle-aged, male, medium-sized farmer with a substantial asset base and relatively high yearly income. The card holders tend to be more commercially oriented and specialized than the typical farmer in the country. For example, Financiera Trisan's clients tend to generate close to 79% of income of one activity. The more common agricultural activity is horticultural production. In comparison, the typical farmer in Costa Rica has a farm of less than 10 ha, depends on a mix of field crops and livestock to generate income and subsistence. Likewise, whereas 26% of Trisan's credit card clients have completed secondary schooling, only 16% of the general population has done so.⁵ Lastly, the household income levels are above the norm for rural areas but roughly equal to national per capita income level (US\$10,849/5.2 average rural household size=\$2,086; national per capita income level in 1997 was \$2,081).⁶

Table 2: Client Profile-Individual End-Users	
Variable	Value
Number Surveyed	100
Mean Age	39.89 years
Education (% Completed Indicate Level)	58.0% Primary 25.7 % Secondary 3.0% University
Sex	Male 97% Female 3%
Average Farm Size (Owned Land)	15.52 ha
Total Assets	US\$26,516.68
Average Gross Income	US\$23,196.55
Average Yearly Household Net Income	US\$10,849.70
Value of Principal Crop	US\$18,423.54
Main Agricultural Activities	Horticulture 39% Coffee/Tobacco 10% Livestock 7% Diary 3% Grains 28%

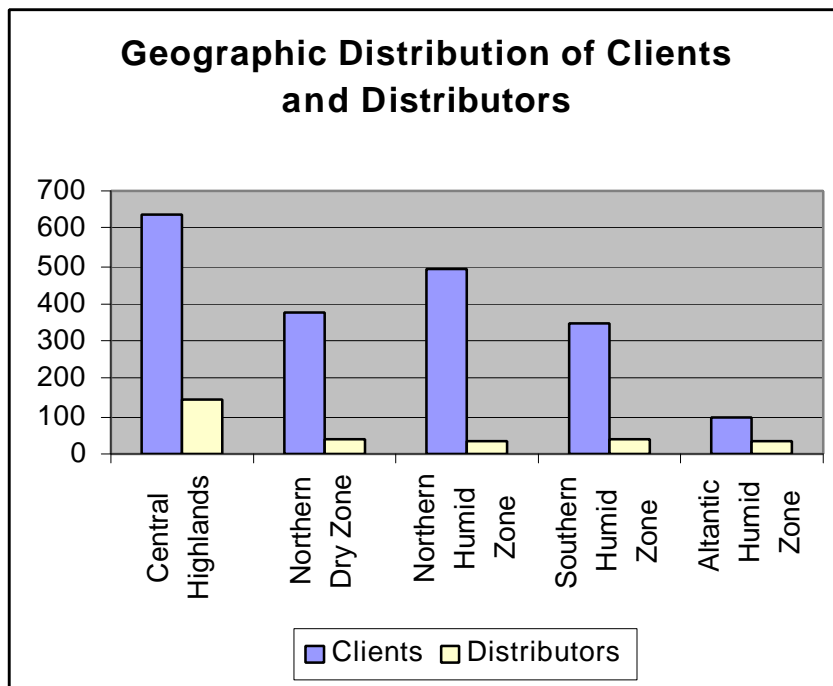
Source: Financiera Trisan June 1998

Note: Sample includes only individual clients. Random sample.

⁵ Dirección General de Estadística y Censos, 1999

⁶ IDB Database.

Figure 1:



Source: Financiera Trisan July 1998

As can be seen in Figure 1, the largest number of clients and distributors are concentrated in the Central Highlands, the area of the country with the highest population density and the most developed infrastructure. In the Central Highlands, the predominant cash crop is coffee but other main crops include sugar cane, vegetables, and basic grains. Average farm size is smaller. The second largest concentration of clients is in the Northern Humid Zone, that runs from the Central Mountains north, northeast to the frontier of Nicaragua. It is an area characterized by lower population density, more rudimentary infrastructure, and larger farms dedicated to dairy, beef cattle, and the cultivation of export tree crops (citrus, African palm, and heart of palm). Average farm sizes are larger in this region compared to the Central Highlands.

4. Performance Analysis

4.1 Outreach and Growth Indicators

Financiera Trisan has exhibited high growth in the number of clients and nominal outstanding balances but a slight drop in average outstanding balance. The nominal dollar portfolio in the same

period has increased from US\$1.58 million in December of 1995 to US\$2.32 in December of 1998, or 47%. The number of clients have increased in the same period from 1,658 to 2,467, or 49%. Over the same period the average outstanding balance has declined from US\$953 to US\$940.

Table 3: Growth of Outreach, Financiera Trisan 1995-1998

Year*	Total Credit Card Portfolio		Number of Active Clients		Average Balances	
	Total Portfolio(US\$ millions)	Growth %	Total #	Growth %	Average Outstanding Balance (US\$)	Percent Change %
1995	1.58		1,658		952.95	
1996	2.09	32%	2,375	43.2%	880.74	-7.5%
1997	2.25	7.6%	2,746	15.6%	819.37	-6.8%
1998*	2.32	3.1%	2,467	-10%	940.41	14.7%
Total Change		46.8%		48.79%		-1.3%

Source: Financiera Trisan

Note: December figures are reported. * As of June 1998.

Also the average number of new cards issued monthly has fallen over time. Whereas the average number of cards issued monthly in 1996 was 69, it fell to 14 in 1998. Similarly, the number of cards cancelled or revoked has been a sizeable percent of the total number issued up to May 1999 (715 out of 2,289 or 31%). These trends reflect a switch from a “massification” strategy toward a more deliberate selection process and greater concern about delinquency management.

Table 4: Number of Cards Issued

Month	1996	1997	1998
January	33	53	19
February	46	67	18
March	72	59	11
April	35	65	9
May	109	86	8
June	69	65	13
July	70	58	9
August	92	45	24
September	87	19	12
October	88	16	11
November	74	21	18
<u>December</u>	<u>51</u>	<u>15</u>	<u>14</u>
Total	826	569	166
Average	69	47	14

Source: Financiera Trisán

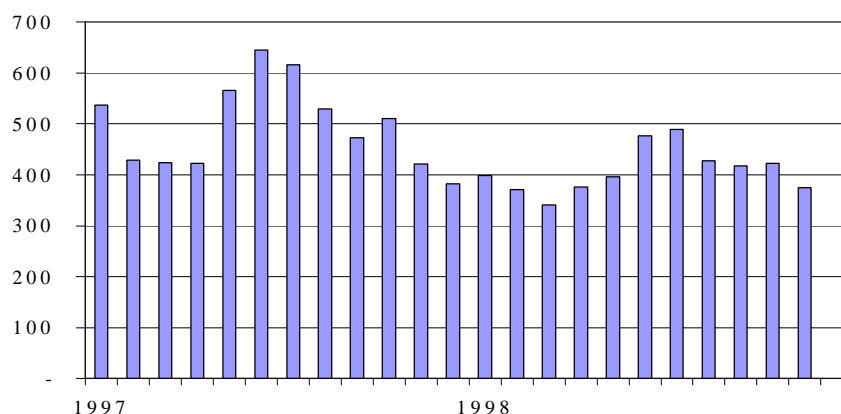
Table 5: Agrimax: Closure Rates November 1997 to May 1999

Reason for Closing Credit Card Account	Number of Closed Accounts	Percent
Client's request	366	51%
Poor Repayment Performance	283	39%
Other	66	9%
Total	715	100%

Source: Financiera Trisan

Despite the growth in the credit card portfolio over time (Table 3), the number of cards that have transaction activity have trended downward in the last two years on a monthly basis (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Agrimax: Number of Credit Cards with Transactions January 1997 to November 1998



In January of 1997, slightly over 500 accounts had transaction activity while in November of 1998, the number of accounts with transaction activity dipped below 400. The peak of accounts activity coincides with the agricultural cycle. In Costa Rica there are two agricultural seasons, one that starts in May-June and one that starts in October-November. During these months, the volume of monthly transactions increase as producers purchase inputs. During the harvest periods and the dry season (January to March), the number of transactions fall as clients tend to pay down balances. At the end of 1998, 64% or 1,240 accounts had transaction activity at some time during the year with transactions totally C1,180 million (US\$4.3 million). A fifth of these transactions were cash advances.

4.2 Financial Analysis:

The two credit card products constitute nearly 75% of the Financiera Trisan's assets; thus, the performance of these products largely shape and determine the performance of the entire finance company (Table 6). On the liability side, the finance company accesses funds strictly on commercial terms. It receives no concessionary loans or grants.

**Table 6: Principal Assets and Liabilities
(December 31, 1998)**

Type	Balance (Millions of US\$)	Percent Share
Credit	2.17	100.0
Agrimax	1.03	47.5
Maxicuenta	.556	25.6
Loans in Local Currency	.438	20.1
Loans in Dollars	.138	6.4
Factoring	.008	0.4
Deposits from Public	2.14	100.0
Certificates of Deposit-Stock Exchange	1.55	72.3
Certificates of Deposits-Walk- in	.59	27.7

Source: Financiera Trisan

Note: Financiera Trisan issues certificates of deposits in the national securities exchange and to walk-in clients

4.2.1 Structure of Assets, Liabilities, Capital and the Portfolio

As can be seen in Table 7, Financiera Trisan had on average 67% of its assets in the credit card and loan portfolio but also a sizeable share in liquid assets, on average 25% in the period 1992 to June 1998. Over time the ratio of capital to assets has been increasing. Delinquent loans to net loans ratio tended to be high in the mid-1990s but has declined. The loan loss reserve to net loan ratio has mirrored the previously mentioned indicator, reflecting a prudential response on the part of management.

Table 7: Financial Indicators: Structure of Assets, Liabilities, and Capital

Indicator	1992*	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998**	Avg.
Asset Structure								
Cash/Total Assets (%)	15.19%	19.60%	13.30%	14.34%	15.08%	13.97%	15.12%	15.23%
Temporary Investments/Total Assets (%)	10.91	15.86	11.13	2.26	10.79	7.63	8.90	9.64
Net Revolving Credit/Total Assets (%)	68.60	60.00	61.32	69.54	65.18	71.67	71.06	66.77
Fixed and Other Assets/Total Assets (%)	4.00	3.62	14.94	14.52	8.98	7.04	6.16	8.47
Liability Structure								
Deposits/Total Assets (%)	52.65	44.62	59.98	60.53	63.76	68.24	68.76	59.79
Other Liabilities/Total Assets (%)	4.45	1.74	0.99	1.07	9.65	1.35	1.53	2.97
Capital Structure								
Paid in Capital/Total Assets	35.33	41.89	28.85	25.71	16.13	24.22	21.74	27.69
Reserves/Total Assets	1.49	1.54	1.16	1.22	0.89	0.97	0.87	1.16
Portfolio Structure								
Gross Portfolio/Net Loans	103.88	103.94	104.61	106.31	102.58	102.85	103.41	104
Delinquent Loans/Net Loans	18.18	25.04	46.44	40.82	45.65	33.19	21.90	27
Loan Loss Reserve/Net Loans	3.88	3.94	4.61	6.31	2.58	2.85	3.41	4
Total Assets (US\$ millions)	1.511	1.608	2.140	2.03	2.861	2.833	3.004	2.28

*Change in Accounting Calendar

** Up to June 1998

Source: Financiera Trisan

4.2.2 Profitability and Sustainability

Financiera Trisan, has consistently posted profits and respectable returns on assets (Tables and 9). The return on equity has not been as high due to the relatively strong equity position, a high share

of paid-in capital compared to total assets. Between 1995-97, Financiera Trisan, however, reported high levels of extraordinary income that made substantial contributions to net earnings. The average share of extraordinary income in net income before taxes and distributions for the three years was 39%. The sale of property generated this income. As a result of this high dependency on extraordinary income combined with a large bad debt write-off, Financiera Trisan did not attain financial self-sufficiency in 1997 because extraordinary income does not enter the numerator. Due to sustained profitability in all years, Financiera Trisan has been able to attain operational self-sufficiency in all years with available data.

The yield on portfolio compares favorably with medium scale microfinance institutions in Latin America targeting a broad set of clients. For example, the peer group including ProEmpresa(Peru), FAMA(Nicaragua), FUNDADEH, FED(Ecuador), CHISPA (Nicaragua), ACTUAR(Colombia) among others for which portfolio size ranges from US\$1-8 million, reported a group average portfolio yield (interest income/avg. loan portfolio) of 62.6% compared to Financiera Trisan's average of 68%.⁷

As can be seen in the table below, Financiera Trisan two principal sources of income are interest paid on the credit card and loan products (financial margin) and commissions received from affiliated vendors and merchants who accept Trisan's cards(net operating income). These two, generate a clear surplus over administrative costs, yielding a positive profit margin or positive rate of return in all years.

Table 8: Financial Margins and Costs in Financiera Trisan (Percent)

	1992*	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998**
a. Financial Margin/Avg. Assets	16.07	11.85	22.97	21.06	20.18	15.69	7.86
b. Write-offs/Avg. Assets	0.00	0.00	1.39	1.70	2.41	5.13	0.31
c. Net Operating Income/Avg. Assets	4.05	11.91	1.34	1.23	0.79	7.06	3.31
d. Administrative Costs/Avg. Assets	12.63	18.01	20.09	20.46	16.34	16.77	8.38
e. Other Income/Avg. Assets	0.00	0.00	0.00	3.54	1.49	2.95	0.00
f. Rate of Return on Assets	7.49	5.75	2.84	3.67	3.71	3.79	2.49

Sources: Profit and Loss Financial Statements of Financiera Trisan

Notes: * Accounting Calendar Change

** As of June 1998

a-b+c-d+e=f

4.2.3 Asset Quality

⁷ See the *MicroBanking Bulletin* Issue No. 3 July 1999.

Financiera Trisan's portfolio at risk has been consistently high (Table 9). However, over time the finance company has made some improvements in improving collection efficiency. The aging structure of arrears shows a divergent pattern. Whereas the portfolio with payments overdue of more than 90 days has consistently remained greater than 5% in the period 1994-97, the portfolio with overdue payments less than 30 days and between 30 and 90 days has improved dramatically. One would expect higher rates of delinquency with a credit card product compared to a normal loan product, but the delinquency tends to be pronounced in the near term rather than the long term. This is an area of weaknesses for Financiera Trisan and a number of factors explain the less than ideal delinquency control performance: (1) difficult economic times (e.g. 2.4% GDP growth rate in 1995 and -.6% in 1996); (2) difficulties in screening and monitoring clients; (3) a pervasive culture of late payment or no repayment; and (4) weakness in the legal framework of contract enforcement and the distribution of creditor and debtor rights.

4.2.4 Liquidity and Leverage

Costa Rica has experienced macroeconomic and financial sector fragility in the mid-1990s—weak economic growth in 1991 and 1995, a slight economic recession in 1996, some bank failures in 1996 and 1998, and successive years of high public budget deficits. Against this background, Financiera Trisan has decided to maintain a fairly liquid position, largely to satisfy the potential demand of savers not renewing certificates of deposits and to avoid extending credit in weak economic times. Many other financial institutions in the country have decided to follow the same course. Nonetheless, the leverage ratio has increase slowly over time indicating that Financiera Trisan is not totally risk averse and has acquired more confidence in managing the credit card program.

4.2.5 Operating Efficiency and Staff Productivity

Financiera Trisan reports average operational efficiency (operating expenses/average total assets) of 19% and average operating income as a percent of average total assets of 40% for the period 1993-98 (Table 9). These figures all compare well with other microfinance institutions in Latin America⁸. Where Financiera Trisan is weak is in staff productivity. It has a total staff of 27 and as of March 1999 had 2,289 active card holders, yielding a productivity ratio of 84. What explains the mostly favorable efficiency ratios are large average balances and a high degree of automation. In short, its streamlined operating processes and structure of costs compensate for small portfolio (scale) and low staff productivity.

⁸ See *MicroBanking Bulletin* Issue No. 3 July 1999 (medium Latin American (broad targeting) and small Latin American (low-end targeting) peer groups). Note that Financiera Trisan is not the typical microfinance organization (MFO). It is a deposit-taking, regulated entity that is self-sustaining. In contrast, most MFOs are not regulated and depend on donor funds. Financiera Trisan shares much in common with American Express Corp. and banks that issue VISA cards such as high delinquency rates and a high dependence on computer automation. However, its small scale, low average outstanding balances, high operating costs, and its focus on a difficult to serve clientele, makes it similar to MFOs.

Table 9: Selected Financial Indicators

Category of Analysis	Indicator	1992*	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998**	Avg.
Profitability	Net Income (US\$)	113,242	89,683	53,252	76,560	90,752	107,874	72,585	86,278
	Return on Assets (%)	7.49	5.58	2.49	3.77	3.17	3.81	2.42	4
	Return on Equity (%)	12.69	10.41	7.00	9.82	10.86	12.50	11.19	11
Asset Quality	Yield on Portfolio(%)	48.65	36.33	82.95	104.10	99.70	75.28	28.77	68
	Portfolio at Risk (%)	18	26	43	38	44	32	21	31.71
	Portfolio< 30 days past due/Total Portfolio (%)	16.88	24.91	26.56	19.00	20.76	13.28	5.90	18.18
	Portfolio>31<90 days past due/Total Portfolio (%)	.04	.66	8.07	6.13	8.17	7.88	7.19	5.44
	Portfolio >91 <180 days past due/Total Portfolio (%)	.58	.17	5.38	5.29	6.60	5.46	2.68	3.73
Liquidity	Liquid Assets/Total Assets (%)	26.10	35.46	24.43	16.60	25.87	21.60	24.02	25
Capital Adequacy	Total Equity/Total Assets (%)	59.05	53.55	35.55	38.40	29.19	30.45	21.59	38.26
Assets at Risk	Total Equity/Total Assets less Cash Equivalents (%)	79.92	82.97	47.05	46.05	39.38	38.84	28.41	51.80
Leverage	Total Assets/Equity (%)	1.69	1.87	2.81	2.60	3.43	3.28	4.63	3
Operating Efficiency	Operating Costs/Average Total Assets (%)	12.70(a)	18.40	20.30	20.64	18.46	19.02	18.52(b)	19.22
	Total Operating Income/Avg. Total Assets (%)	37.49(a)	35.25	39.06	41.33	41.73	41.17	38.54(b)	39.51

*1992 Change in accounting calendar.

(a)Not annualized, not included in average.

**1998 Figures up to June.

(b) Annualized. Included in average.

Overall Performance							
	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
Operational Self-Sufficiency (%)	124.98	119.49	107.85	100.32	105.6	102.08	114.82
Financial Self-Sufficiency(%)	1.21	113.73	104.63	97.92	103.5	100.28	110.97

4.2.6 Structure of Interest Rates

Financiera Trisan historically has charged high rates of interest. The reason for this is that it must compete with large state banks to capture deposits and to cover the higher costs associated with operating in a rural setting (Table 10).

Table 10: Agrimax: Structure of Interest Rates December 1998

Rates of Interest	Lending Rate of Interest (Percent)	Cost of Funds (Percent)	Margin of Intermediation (Percent)
Nominal	45	26.5	18.5
Effective	38.1	30.5	7.6

Source: Financiera Trisán

The effective rate of interest paid for raising funds (issuing certificates of deposits) is increased due to legal reserve requirements. Similarly, on the lending side, effective lending rate of interest charged to clients is lower than the nominal lending rate because clients can pay in full at the end of the billing cycle and many do. Thus, the difference between the effective lending and cost of funds rates is 7.6%. In comparison, the average margin for the banking system is 9 points. Financiera Trisan's lower margin is due to two factors. First, it has to compete for public deposits with strong state banks, who dominate the financial market and enjoy implicit deposit insurance, by offering higher rates on certificates of deposits.⁹ Second, it has largely agricultural clients with marked seasonal in

⁹ The Government of Costa Rica paid all depositors in full when a state-owned bank, Banco Anglo-Costarricense, failed in the late 1980s. In comparison when a number of finance companies failed depositors were reimbursed partially. Since then, depositors seem to believe that similar actions will be taken in the event of the collapse of one of

income flows. There are limits to what interest rates agricultural projects can bear.

5. Challenges Facing the Expansion and Deepening of the Product

Financiera Trisan faces a number of challenges in expanding and perfecting its credit card product(s). The challenges can be grouped into three broad areas: (1) marketing; (2) legal, institutional and technological constraints; and (3) competition.

5.1 Marketing Challenges

Financiera Trisan has three marketing options: (1) maintain current individual clientele but increase average outstanding card balances and add services/enhancements; (2) focus on expanding the distributor clientele and rural small retail business clientele; or (3) target more ? downmarket ? clients, those with less total household income, smaller asset bases, and more seasonality in cashflows. Each option has profound implications and could be mutually exclusive.

The first alternative marketing strategy of maintaining its current individual clientele base but increasing card transaction activity and the outstanding balance would imply getting more vendors to accept the card, aggressively promoting the use of the card through mailings and offering special discounts for the purchase of selected products purchased with the card. In addition, to the credit card, Financiera Trisan could entice its clientele to invest or purchase other products such as certificates of deposits, offer an intelligent or smart card, that would be multifunctional (debit and credit) as well as provide instant access to account balance/payment history information thereby further reducing transaction costs, and/or offer financial investment advice. The focus would likely have to be on high worth “up market” individuals with very predictable cash flows. The strategy would have to building long-term relationships and develop brand loyalty.

The second alternative marketing strategy would be to target small non-farm, retail businesses located in rural areas and convince them that it would be advantageous to use the credit card to finance inventory. Just as Financiera Trisan convinced agricultural input suppliers that there were administrative cost savings to be realized by using the card as opposed to the traditional 30-day supplier credit arrangements, Financiera Trisan can do the same with dry good stores (pulperias), gasoline stations, restaurants, gift shops and a number of other retail establishments. This strategy, however, could be countered by wholesalers extending more generous supplier credit terms, 60 and 90 day terms as opposed to 30 days, for example. Nonetheless, the credit card should be theoretically superior to traditional supplier credit could effectively extend the term of financing beyond 60-90

the three, remaining large, deposit-taking, state-owned financial institutions: Banco Nacional de Costa Rica (BNCR), Banco de Costa Rica (BCR), and Banco Crédito Agrícola de Cartago (BCAC). Therefore, depositors are more attracted to state-owned institutions despite lower rates of interest paid.

days, and thus be attractive. In certain subsectors, such as handicrafts retailing, consignment arrangements may remain superior to a credit card arrangement and thus demand may not be high for a credit card product in these subsectors.

The third alternative marketing strategy would be to go "downmarket" and attempt to increase the volume of cards, cognizant that the outstanding balances on each card will be smaller due to the lower economic means of the clientele. The challenge of a "mass market strategy" is that new investments in technology and changes in operating procedures will be needed in order to keep the transactions costs down and to quickly evaluate and maintain collection discipline. The requisite investments in product design, technology, and staff training will be high in order to achieve a high level of productivity and efficiency in control systems. The focus would be on "standardizing" the process as much as possible.

5.2 Legal, Institutional, Technological Challenges

Regardless of the marketing strategy chosen, Financiera Trisan has a series of legal, institutional, and technological challenges that will have to be overcome. The choice of marketing strategy will depend on how binding these constraints are. The specific challenges can be identified as having to do with credit bureaus, the postal service, computer technology and connectivity, and delinquency control.

Credit Bureaus: Only three credit bureaus are functioning in Costa Rica. These credit bureaus have limited databases due to a financial secrecy law that protects consumers from having data reported on their repayment performance without prior permission. This legal restriction tends to limit the reach of credit bureaus. Those clients that appear in the databases tend to be high worth individuals and well-established businesses that clearly see in their interest to grant permission. Thus, many moderate and lower-income persons tend not to apply due to an absence of a formal credit history and refusal to grant permission for release of data in the event they do have credit. The information in the credit bureau helps mostly in determining if prospective clients have "negative marks", such as liens and collection actions realized and not positive indicators such as consistent on-time payment patterns. Accordingly, the absence of "negative marks" on a credit report has limited predictive power. The current system helps in identifying who not to approve and less so the likelihood of someone with a certain set of characteristics repaying on time. The lack of fuller and more complete information on clients retards efforts to develop credit scoring models appropriate for developing countries that could represent a significant cost-reducing innovation in credit analysis.

Postal Service: The quality of postal service has improved in the last two years, especially in making a successful delivery, but can be a limiting factor in a campaign of aggressive outreach. The average time for the delivery of mail from one point to the other can still be quite variable (3-10 days). This variability in time needed to successfully deliver the mail, forces the Financiera to use a very long effective billing cycle. This has significant cost implications. A reduction in the delivery time could contribute to the ability to lower interest rate and thus increase demand for credit card services. When the postal service fails and alternative arrangements have to be made, such as leaving the bill at a centrally located store to be picked up by the client, it increases transaction costs and creates

unreliability.

Computer Technology and Connectivity: Financiera Trisan invested a significant amount of its own resources in developing a management information system to handle the credit card operations.¹⁰ Furthermore, it has acquired realtime connectivity between its branch office in Muelle and the headquarters and with a number of vendors. Future growth and expansion will hinge on the ability to handle more types of individual client subaccounts and a greater absolute number of clients. The ability to recruit more vendors to accept the Trisan credit card will hinge on the reliability and cost of communicating and transmitting data. To date the data transmission is largely over fixed land lines and the cost of the service is high. For example, the cost of monthly cost for telecommunications averaged US\$3,932 in 1999.

Delinquency Control and Contract Enforcement: In Costa Rica, debtors have more rights than creditors and coupled with poorly functioning property registries and an overloaded judiciary system, financial institutions of all types are disadvantaged and subsequently face higher intermediation costs and risk that would be the case if the environment were more favorable. The solution lies in improving the overall legal framework as well as refining the delivery and collection technology. Financiera Trisan has little control over effecting change at the national level. However, more can be done to improve screening and collection systems within the organization, such as experimenting with the notion of specializing the staff to focus on accounts with peculiar risk factors, building rudimentary credit scoring models, and offering the staff performance incentives based on a composite measure of number of clients served, volume of portfolio, and quality of portfolio.

5.3 Competition

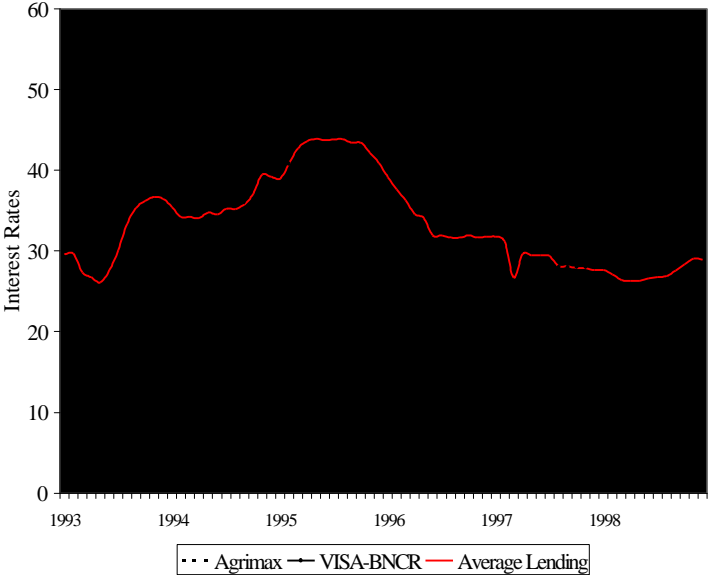
Currently, Financiera Trisan's has no major competitor for credit cards in rural areas. Several private commercial banks offer VISA and MASTERCARD products, but the clientele consists of mostly of urban, wage earners. The Banco Nacional de Costa Rica (BNCR), a state-owned bank with the most total assets and the most extensive branching network in the country(125 branches), is experimenting with a similar product, an intelligent debit card called **Futura 3000** in conjunction with the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (BCIE) in rural areas. To date, **Futura 3000** is a purely prepaid debit card. Limits are quite low, (US\$105 for individuals and US\$3,500 for businesses). No interest is paid on mandatory deposits backing the account and a 4% fee is charged for its use.

In addition to this rural focused product, BNCR has a VISA product that is well accepted in urban areas. BNCR charges a rate of interest that is considerably lower than Agrimax, close to the average lending rate in the entire banking system (Figure 4). BNCR lending rate is very low due to its

¹⁰ It is estimated that Financiera Trisan spent US\$250,000 starting in the late 1980s to develop software to manage the credit card program. This amount has been fully depreciated. Source: Interview with Managing Director.

advantages in capturing savings from the public. The public prefers to save with BNCR because of an implicit deposit insurance scheme in place although the deposit rates paid are considerably lower than the average in private commercial banks and finance companies. Given the size, reputation, and branching networking of the bank, it could quickly emerge as a strong competitor in rural areas. If the state banks were to enter the rural areas with a credit card product, Financiera Trisan would most likely have to compete on quality of service (timeliness in processing of applications, billing accuracy, and on-time payment of vendors); its reputation as an innovator, and the promise of product enhancements (insurance products, financial consulting, intelligent card).

Figure 4: 1. Nominal Interest Rates Charged for Agrimax and VISA-BNCR Compared to the Average Lending rate in the financial System, September 1992-December 1998



6. Conclusions

Financiera Trisan is a pioneer in introducing a wholly rural credit card. The card has been generally well accepted by the target population and demonstrates the viability of a new financial service that helps to better manage risk and liquidity. More importantly, the product has been profitable and the entire firm is operationally self-sufficient. While outreach has been limited it is particularly driven by attempts to better contain delinquency. Below is listing of principal findings concerning replicability, lessons learned that may help others contemplating introducing a similar product, and short- to medium-term institutional needs.

6.1 Replicability of the Product

The credit card product that Financiera Trisan has pioneered seems to be replicable to other areas of Latin America if certain conditions hold. Those conditions briefly are: (1) a density of rural clients with variable but predictable cash flows; (2) a minimum level of functioning physical infrastructure (telecommunications, electricity, postal services, roads); (3) minimum of appropriate legal and financial regulatory infrastructure that permits profitable intermediation; and (4) profit-oriented, client-driven service provider with a history of active participation in the rural sector. Most of Financiera Trisan's clients are located in a densely populated central highlands or in a northern zone of high agricultural potential and characterized by high value agricultural production. Costa Rica has high rates of teledensity and rural electrification. For example, it has 155 main telephone lines for 1000 people compared to the average for low and middle Latin American and Caribbean countries of 102 per 1000 people in 1996.¹¹ Also Costa Rica's electric power consumption per capita exceeds the regional average; 1,348 kilowatt hours (kwh) verses 1,298 kwh.¹² The lack of a large manufacturing base suggests that the consumption is evenly distributed across the country. Similarly, the financial regulatory framework does not hinder profitable intermediation but the legal framework does increase the cost and risk of intermediation. Lastly, the parent company enjoys a strong reputation for quality service and innovation built up over nearly 4 decades of operations in rural areas. It also has a staff extremely knowledgeable about local conditions and skilled in agricultural credit analysis.

6.2 Lessons Learned

The key lessons to be drawn from the Financiera Trisan experience are the following:

- ? Incremental product innovation is a safe and proven route to sustainability. Financiera Trisan essentially promoted the credit card as a substitute to factoring and traditional 30 day-supplier credit provided by the parent agricultural input wholesale company to a "captive clientele"-- agricultural input retailers. Once experience was gained, the card was introduced to individual end-users. A massive intervention, beyond requiring a substantial investment of resources, may

¹¹ Source: *World Bank Development Report: Knowledge for Development*. 1998/99 pg 226.

¹² Ibid, pg. 224.

have resulted in a larger volume of clients but greater delinquency.

- ? The typical first wave of adopters will be most likely be higher income rural residents with large and predictable cash flows. An agricultural credit card is not a product best suited for low-income, subsistence-oriented agricultural producers. Non-farm enterprises may be an even more attractive clientele than farmers.
- ? Infrastructural weaknesses such as slow postal service, high percentage of unpaved roads, and the limited utility of credit bureaus can be overcome through creativity, i.e., leaving bills at centrally located stores and using sales agents visiting clients to deliver bills to other clients on the route. These steps, nonetheless, increase operating costs and may reach a threshold that makes the credit card product non-viable. Fortunately, the infrastructural weaknesses in Costa Rica are not severe.
- ? A clear and well developed plan for product testing, expansion, and enhancement is crucial. Financiera Trisan constantly seeks feedback from clients and staff to fine-tune its product, pricing, and processing procedures. The company also is actively seeking to increase its scale of operations.

6.3 Institutional Needs

While Financiera Trisan is an interesting example of how to engage in financial product innovation in a rural setting, it still faces some challenges and has short and medium-term institutional needs. The company's needs are as follows:

- (1) Financiera Trisan needs to undertake cost accounting exercises, marketing studies and product testing in order to determine how best to expand and refine its product(s). At present, the company is serving two distinct segments—retailers and individual farmers—and little is known about the costs of serving these two niches. Moreover, non-farm enterprises is a potentially new market segment, and the company needs to research and test products suitable for this segment.
- (2) Financiera Trisan needs the services of experts in credit card operations in order to help the company learn about industry best management practices in developed country markets and adopt them to its peculiar rural setting.
- (3) Financiera Trisan needs access to additional financing (deposits, debt, equity, or some combination) in order to grow.

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