

# Creating a productive relationship with small-scale farmers

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The American public has experienced a renewed interest in where their food comes from in recent years. This has led to a resurgence in small-scale farming – especially in the face of the Covid pandemic – which presents several unique challenges to veterinarians, including client knowledge of animal husbandry and financial limitations. There may also be a disconnect between veterinarians, who have high standards for animal husbandry and welfare, and producers, who may be unaware of those standards or view them (and the attached bills) as excessive or unwarranted. The following are some insights from my time as a solo, mixed animal practitioner in southern California's Inland Empire where 99% of my livestock clientele were farms with less than 20 animals. Not every suggestion will work in every situation and some practitioners may find this completely useless. All I can do is share the knowledge that allowed me 4 very happy and productive years as a veterinarian to the hobby farmers and homesteaders of southern California.

## Perspectives

There is a distinct sense of pride in being part of the small percentage of Americans that provide food for the rest of the country. The American public places a high intrinsic value on family farms that have been kept running for generations. However, there is a growing trend toward “new blood” within the agricultural community. Farmers and ranchers comprise less than 2% of the U.S. population and of that number 25% have been involved in agriculture for less than 10 years (American Farm Bureau Foundation for Agriculture, 2021). I call these “first generation farmers”.

Animal rights groups and anti-meat marketing have left many livestock producers feeling ostracized and misunderstood. In contrast, small-scale farming has gained exceptional popularity and social acceptance, especially as the Covid pandemic and working remotely allowed many to abandon their urban or suburban homes while maintaining their livelihood. Many new farmers hearken back to their family history when asked why they decided to become involved in agriculture. Fond childhood memories at a relative's farm can often be cited as their first interaction with farming and livestock and as adults, they are hoping to recreate that golden magical place from their youth when there was always plenty of wholesome food to eat, you just had to go out to the farmyard and pick it out. At the heart of most of these stories is these new farmers' desire to be connected with their food. Understanding what has happened to an animal from the time it is born to the time it is consumed is a noble pursuit and, I believe, should be encouraged whole-heartedly. As an industry that laments the loss of family farms and the public's lack of understanding, how can we reject the new blood?

As many livestock veterinarians have learned, this crowd comes with a unique set of challenges which have many DVMs pulling their hair out and losing sleep. The logic that I have settled on which has made this group of producers bearable, and

(dare I say it), even fun to work with, is that all clients present challenges and frustrations, but many of the biggest headaches that small-scale farmers present are conceptually simple in comparison to larger clients. Subjects like basic husbandry, animal handling, basic nutrition, and biosecurity are frequently unknown to these producers before they buy the property and animals (or they have been educated by video bloggers spreading questionable information), and gaining a better understanding of these topics would solve many of the veterinarian's headaches. This is often comprised of basic information that any livestock veterinarian could spit out in their sleep – the trick is presenting it efficiently so as not to waste time giving the same spiel at every farm.

The other major frustration that small-scale farms present is an unwillingness to invest in infrastructure and veterinary care. I can't promise you that I have a complete solution to every aspect of this challenge, but I will offer some insight on communication techniques that can help to mitigate some of this tension. At the end of the day, if producers don't see the value in your services, you don't need them as your clients.

## Producer categories and priorities

There are 5 main categories of producers that I have come across, and each comes with their own basic goals and values. By understanding their motivation for owning livestock, we can begin to help guide them to accomplish their goals and maintain animal health and wellbeing. Producers may fall under more than one of these classifications or may be in a class all their own. This is simply a mechanism to help you organize and simplify your understanding of your clients' needs.

The first group consists of commercial producers who are selling their products to the public. Generally, economics is prioritized very closely following animal health, and their main motivation for raising animals has a large financial component. The second group are the homesteaders who utilize their products for at-home consumption. Their priorities are usually very similar to commercial producers, but their motivation is more closely linked to a desire to be involved with food production for themselves and their families. They may also have certain preferences that are not easily accommodated through purchasing commercial products, or they believe they can do better than commercial farmers. Next are the show clients – finances and conformation are their top priorities and they are generally motivated by a show deadline or expense of care as compared to what they paid for the animal and what it may bring in the show ring. In a similar vein, seedstock operations or breeders (as they're known in the small animal world) also prioritize specific traits within each animal and may be willing to spend more on certain animals that are considered more valuable. Their motivation is often largely financial. Finally, we have the pet livestock owners. These are the clients with a strong emotional attachment to their animals or to the idea of

keeping livestock. The health and well-being of their animal is often more separated from financial considerations than the other categories, and their emotional attachment usually plays a role in their motivation during the decision-making process.

Understanding your producers' goals and values can go a long way toward directing your interactions with them. Sometimes, small-scale producers don't even know what their goals are for their operation. Creating a questionnaire to identify these goals and develop an actionable plan to achieve them is an excellent way to structure annual visits and provides clients with a sense of value in the form of tangible deliverables and a step-by-step plan. Utilizing the SMART goal format can ensure that clients have a clear pathway for success in accomplishing these objectives. Let's look at an example using a dairy goat operation:

**S – Specific:** Instead of saying “I want to improve milk quality on my goat dairy” a client might say “I want to take my somatic cell count down by 300,000 cells/mL rolling herd average in the next 6 months by re-training milkers and improving our hygiene practices in the parlor.”

**M – Measurable:** Somatic cell count is easily measured quantitatively and at routine intervals.

**A – Achievable:** Setting an SCC goal of 100,000 would likely be impractical for a goat dairy, so setting a more achievable benchmark or using margin of change is a great option.

**R – Relevant:** Somatic cell count is a widely accepted indicator of milk quality. Something like kid death loss would not be a prudent metric to evaluate if one was trying to improve milk quality.

**T – Time-bound:** Setting a deadline gives the client a target and sets an ideal time for you to check in on their progress. This can be in the form of a phone consult or in-person meeting. If the client is meeting this goal, this may be a short interaction. If they are struggling, they may reach out to you ahead of time, or you may need to plan for a longer meeting to assess where the shortcomings are.

## Business practices to ease the burden

As a former business owner and the daughter of a credit and collections manager, I am begging you – collect payment before you leave the farm. I think this should go without saying, but experience tells me otherwise. If you want to bill your large farms monthly, then that's up to you, but as someone who entered every bill and collected payment for every call before I left the farm (I am not exaggerating here), I can tell you that scheduling an extra 10 minutes onto each call for this purpose will pay dividends financially as well as psychologically as you avoid the end-of-month panic to enter every bill for the past 4 weeks before invoices are mailed. With so many options for payment collection and veterinary software, even not having cell service isn't a valid excuse for postponing this most essential task. Not only does it eliminate work for you in the future and minimize the risk of missing some charges, it provides the opportunity to talk to the client about the bill. Questions are much more easily addressed when they can be brought up immediately in a face-to-face setting than if the client stewes on them for weeks, tells all their friends, and then decides never to call you again. You could even have a receptionist enter an estimate before you go on the call which you can adjust on-site. Reviewing the bill with a client also gives them insight into how you charge and opens room for discussion about how to make the next visit more efficient (read: cost-effective).

Have a minimum call fee and make it something that is worth your time. I learned this from the AABP Rural Practice Management Workshop so this is a plug for participating in that – so many great minds to learn from! This means that whenever anybody calls for an appointment that will likely take less than an hour (i.e. vaccinating 3 goats, a hoof trim on 1 pig, castrating 1 calf) they are informed that you charge a minimum call fee of \$xxx.xx for the drive and the work up to 1 hour of time; anything additional will be billed hourly and payment is due at the time of service. This immediately provides some structure and people like structure. You know that call is going to be worth your while because you are guaranteed to be compensated appropriately. Your client also knows what the bill will be up front. They might decide not to move forward with the appointment or they might decide to add more to it, but they will be prepared.

Set the standard at “Unicorn”. Our clients probably won't treat us well if we don't tell them how we want to be treated. Some of them just don't know better and most of them are too busy to figure out our needs. It is my firmly held belief that there are very few legitimate reasons for clients to call with an emergency after 8 pm (other than the fact that they work mid-shift and they weren't home at a normal time to check their animals). A late- or middle of the night phone call out of the blue usually means that the problem was noted earlier in the day and the caretaker decided to “see if it got better” for a while. This is the time they should actually be picking up their phone and calling you. The phone call doesn't have to be a request for a visit, they can just let you know what is going on. This gives you an opportunity to weigh in on how to try managing at home or push them to have you out immediately. If you don't need to go out right away, this process allows you to mentally prepare for a later call and set a deadline for when the client needs to let you know if it can wait until morning or not. As a solo practitioner with no receptionist and a very deep desire for at least 6 straight hours of sleep, I was much happier to leave my house for an evening emergency when I knew about the problem earlier in the day than when it was sprung on me after I was ready to wind down.

Truthfully, I turned my phone on silent at 10 pm when I was in practice because my clients knew I didn't take kindly to late night calls without warning and I didn't see emergencies from non-clients at night as a safety precaution. The key is to set your standard and make it known, then reinforce it financially. When I went on a call after 5 pm that I had advanced warning on, I didn't charge an emergency fee. When I got urgent calls for service in the evening, you had better believe they got the full emergency charge plus a fee for bringing my assistant (aka husband) along. Money talks, folks.

Consolidate your communication: Use community education events to spread your message. I know what you're going to say: “Okay Michelle, I really don't have time for any work other than what I already have on my plate. There is no way I can prepare and host a producer meeting on top of all my other veterinary responsibilities.” I hear you, I really do. But hear me out: This is an opportunity to cover information that you find yourself talking about at every farm, and it doesn't have to be complicated. It is amazing how different people's understandings are of topics such as animal husbandry, basic nutrition, housing, reproduction and biosecurity. Providing basic information sets a baseline of knowledge among your clientele so you know that you are all on the same page. This is also an excellent time to set your standards. Let people know about your minimum call charge, your emergency policies and explain that you collect payment at the time of service. I also recommend including

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photos of yourself doing non-veterinary things and a brief introduction in order to humanize yourself a bit more in the eyes of your clients. If they understand that you have a life outside of work (or that you want to have one eventually), then they are more likely to respect the boundaries you set. Contact your local feed store, extension service, or even a pharmaceutical company and see if they'll sponsor a meal. Other practitioners may have already developed lectures such as this that they are willing to share to provide a framework that you can tweak with your own insights and information.

## “Pro” tips

I am exceptionally guilty of getting myself all worked up about a problem on my way to a call. “Why would someone keep an animal like this?”, “Why don't they know how to evaluate a dystocia?”, “The goats don't know they are brother and sister, of COURSE he bred her!” By the time I got to the farm, there would be steam practically pouring out my ears. My only saving grace was the communications training we got in vet school based on the Veterinary Healthcare Communication course from the Institute of Healthcare Communication. It was pounded into our heads to start by asking questions. Open-ended questions to be precise. “Tell me what's been going on” and “So what made you decide to do x?” were my go-tos. After a few minutes of listening and getting to know the situation, I almost always felt guilty for my dashboard tirade. Key point: Most producers don't do something “wrong” on purpose. Usually, they don't know better, and they often don't have the infrastructure. This can be true for producers on any size operation, not just small farms. The thing that I always appreciated about working with first-generation farmers is that they didn't have a lifetime of bad habits ingrained in them already. Sure, they probably got some dumb ideas from social media, but when I took the time to explain why that was a bad idea and what the appropriate options were, they were generally very appreciative and enthusiastic to do it “right”. These situations went into my phone notes as

inspirations for community education topics. These interactions also inspired many of my clients to call and consult me more in the future when they were unsure of what to do.

Unfortunately, phone and email consults for every little question can also become a huge time and energy suck so my next area of focus was to curate good resources that I could direct my clients to. The *Storey's Guide* book series provides a comprehensive overview of husbandry topics for most livestock species and was my first recommendation for all clients. I purchased most of the books in the series as well! Extension and University websites also generally have accurate and useful information and you are always welcome to create your own handouts or fact sheets (I know, in your free time). The American Association of Small Ruminant Practitioners is also working on building up resources for producers as well as veterinarians and suggestions for future topics (or better yet, completed resources to be shared with the membership) are always appreciated.

One final message that applies to every aspect of veterinary medicine: You are not obligated to provide service to every person who calls your office. By laying out your rules and standards for clients, you are giving them fair warning. Those who ask you to compromise your principles for them do not need to be your client and, in my experience, generally do not present opportunities for mutual growth and positive interactions.

## Final thoughts

First-generation farmers and small-scale producers can present unique frustrations for veterinarians. They may also help to provide a way to bridge the gap between producers and consumers and to bring new life to the shrinking agricultural population in the United States. Veterinarians are poised to play a unique role in educating these new producers about livestock health, husbandry and welfare without sacrificing their own precious time or sanity.

