

# Building Management Partner Relationships with Your Key Clients

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## Abstract

Veterinary practitioners serving beef producers are faced with the challenge of providing expert services in an environment in which many veterinarians have opted out of agriculturally-based practices, leaving an increased demand for services. In an effort to adapt to a rapidly changing beef industry, some practitioners have fundamentally changed the way they practice. This paper describes changes made in my central Missouri practice that have helped me develop a thriving practice based on serving beef producers' needs.

## Résumé

Les vétérinaires praticiens en production de bœuf ont le défi de donner des services d'expert alors que la demande est de plus en plus grandissante en raison de l'abandon de plusieurs vétérinaires pour les pratiques agricoles. Afin de mieux s'adapter aux changements rapides de l'industrie du bœuf, quelques praticiens ont changé leur façon de faire du tout au tout. Cet article décrit les changements apportés à ma pratique du Missouri central qui m'ont aidé à développer une clinique florissante basée sur les besoins des producteurs de bœufs.

## Introduction

Optimizing the delivery of veterinary services to beef producers is a necessity in today's rapidly changing practice environment. The veterinary-client-patient relationship for beef practitioners has changed. No longer are traditional veterinary services sufficient to keep producers profitable and enable the practitioner to be profitable. Optimizing delivery of services depends on a "management-partner" relationship where veterinarians are integrated into the operation's management team and can approach problems from a systems level. This kind of client relationship has allowed me to provide services to a larger client base, as well as to solve disease problems which were difficult to solve with traditional approaches. Developing management-partner relationships requires paradigm shifts for both practitioners and producers. An extraordinary opportunity exists for veterinarians and producers to develop skills together

that will be mutually beneficial. Management-partner relationships evolve over time as both parties learn the skills needed for the arrangement to work. To successfully develop these relationships, practitioners must:

- Accurately assess the needs of the producer;
- Develop the professional and personal skills to meet those needs.

## Producer Needs

Beef production in many ways has outpaced the veterinary profession's ability to provide professional service. Many production oriented beef producers no longer need many of the traditional services we learned in school. From the producer's viewpoint, the local veterinarian might not be the most cost-effective cattle processor, although progressive producers would find it cost-effective to have a practitioner as part of the management team that trains and monitors farm employees who process cattle.

Beef production on most levels is a profit driven business, and one of the greatest difficulties of practicing in a rural environment is having a client go out of business despite the fact that cattle health was never a problem. I think most of us as beef practitioners have been led to believe that it was our job to keep the cattle healthy, and the profits for the producer would follow. As we all now know, this is not the case. Producers in my part of the world need help to accurately determine their cost of production. There is a tremendous opportunity for practitioners willing to learn certain skills to become a part of the management team on many operations.

Production and financial records are needed for success in any business. Practitioner involvement in this area brings a new perspective to the relationship between the veterinarian and producer, and is the foundation for development of a management-partner relationship.

Involvement in production records casts new light on every service or good you provide for a particular operation, and how you arrange your compensation. Once you are on the management team, your job has been redefined.

Investigating and dealing with disease problems on a herd level rather than on an individual or outbreak level is the future of veterinary medicine. Effectively

practicing production medicine is contingent on production records and truly being a part of the operations management team. In my experience, management recommendations from individuals not on the team are looked at with skeptical eyes. A management recommendation made by an individual on the team holds more credibility.

There are many areas in which practitioners can provide non-traditional services. Beef operations, producers, and veterinarians are very diverse, which provides a lot of opportunity for development of management-partner relationships.

### **Professional Development**

As beef production systems change, it behooves practitioners to develop professionally to meet the needs of the industry. All practitioners might not be comfortable with redefining traditional roles between clients and veterinarians, but for those who are looking to expand their horizons, it all starts with a motivation to change.

The first step I took in my practice was to listen to my top clients. It was an enlightening experience in that my clients needed to take our professional relationship to the next level, and they were more than willing to be part of the process. In fact, my best clients take a lot of pride in being part of my professional development.

The University of Nebraska-Great Plains Veterinary Educational Center offers state-of-the art continuing education in the form of the Beef Cattle Production Management Series. Dr. Gary Rupp has provided the leadership and vision in putting together what I believe

is the premier and most worthwhile educational opportunity available for practitioners wanting to expand their skill set to meet the needs of the changing beef industry.

Cattle producers are great sources of information. I am always impressed by what they have to contribute when given an opportunity. Making yourself accessible enhances the producers' chance to contribute and is essential for the management-partner relationship to develop. Showing your clients that you are available and accessible on their terms instead of your terms conveys to them the importance you place in their success.

### **Conclusion**

Positioning my practice to meet the needs of progressive beef producers has streamlined my business into a very rewarding and successful enterprise. Somehow, helping beef producers improve their business strategies has rubbed off on my own business. In the transition from a mixed practice to a cattle-only practice, I gained the ability to focus my energy on developing my skills and providing more expertise to my clients. From the perspective of the management-partner relationship, my clients see value in the services I offer and have gladly paid me to be a part of their team.

Having a business that is dedicated to providing professional veterinary service to beef producers has greatly increased the amount of professional and personal satisfaction I derive from practice. If more practitioners and beef producers could develop management-partner relationships, the veterinary profession could better meet the needs of the changing beef industry.