

Growing Your Cattle Practice by Building “Management-Partner” Relationships

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Abstract

Veterinary practitioners serving beef producers are faced with the challenge of providing expert services in an environment where 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 the changes made in my rural Missouri practice that have helped me develop a thriving practice based on serving beef producers' needs.

Résumé

Les praticiens vétérinaires servant les producteurs de bœuf font face au défi de donner des services d'expert-conseil dans un milieu où plusieurs vétérinaires ont abandonné les pratiques de type agricole créant une demande accrue pour ces services. Pour tenter de s'adapter au changement rapide de l'industrie du bœuf, certains praticiens ont changé dramatiquement leur façon de pratiquer. Cet article décrit les changements apportés à ma pratique rurale du Missouri qui m'ont aidé à développer une pratique florissante ayant pour but de rencontrer les besoins des producteurs de bœuf.

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 in keeping producers profitable and enabling the practitioner to be profitable. Optimizing delivery of services depends on a “management-partner” relationship in which veterinarians are integrated into the beef producer'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 solving 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 have the need for many of the traditional services we learned in school. From the producers view point, 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 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 with accurately determining their cost of production. I think there is a tremendous opportunity for practitioners willing to learn certain skills to become a part of the management team on many farms.

Production and financial records are needed for success in any business. Practitioner involvement in this area brings a new perspective to the relationship between 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, as well as and how you arrange your compensation. Once you are on the management team, your job has been redefined.

I believe investigating and dealing with disease

problems on a herd level rather than on an individual or outbreak level is the future of veterinary medicine. 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. Some 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; 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 to put 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 on 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 dedicated to providing professional veterinary service to beef producers has greatly increased the amount of professional and personal satisfaction I derive from practice. I believe that if more practitioners and beef producers could develop “management-partner” relationships, the veterinary profession could better meet the needs of the changing beef industry.