

Client Education

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Abstract

Client education has been practiced in small animal medicine by both veterinarians and technicians for some time and is commonplace. However client education in large animal medicine especially in the cattle industry is not as common and is traditionally done by the veterinarian. Using technicians to educate producers is a management tool that veterinarians are starting to utilize.

As a technician you need to know your limitations both personally and legally. Use a teaching style that best suits you and works for the producer. Using continuing education to educate you both on teaching skills and keeping up on industry trends will help the veterinarian and technician feel more comfortable. Educating producers may be done one on one or in a group, each having benefits according to the situation. Large numbers of people can be reached by producer meetings, peer group sessions, newsletters or websites. One on one sessions give more personal attention and may be necessary in topics of sensitive issues or with a person who can not learn in a group setting.

Educating clients can be profitable for both the clinic and the farm if done correctly. Using the talents of educated technicians to provide client education will free up time for the veterinarian and increase technician revenue all while benefiting the producer.

Résumé

L'éducation des clients se fait couramment en médecine des petits animaux par les vétérinaires et par les techniciens depuis longtemps. Toutefois, l'éducation des clients en médecine des grands animaux et plus spécialement dans l'industrie bovine n'est pas aussi commune et reste le domaine du vétérinaire. L'utilisation de techniciens pour éduquer les producteurs est un outil de régie que les vétérinaires commencent tout juste à contempler.

En tant que technicien, on doit connaître ses limitations tant au point de vue personnel que légal. Il faut utiliser un style d'enseignement qui nous convient et qui fonctionne avec le producteur. L'usage de la formation continue pour acquérir des compétences d'enseignement et se tenir au fait des tendances dans l'industrie rendra le technicien et le vétérinaire plus à

l'aise. L'éducation des producteurs peut se faire seul à seul ou en groupe selon ce que l'on recherche dans une situation particulière. On peut rejoindre plusieurs personnes dans les rencontres de producteurs, les sessions avec les pairs et par l'intermédiaire de bulletins ou de sites web. Une rencontre seul à seul permet de donner une attention plus particulière qui peut être nécessaire pour des sujets délicats ou lorsque le producteur n'est pas à l'aise en groupe. L'éducation des clients peut être bénéfique pour la ferme et la clinique lorsqu'elle se fait correctement. L'utilisation des compétences des techniciens formés dans le but d'éduquer les producteurs libérera du temps pour le vétérinaire tout en augmentant le revenu des techniciens et en aidant les producteurs.

Introduction

Client Education has been practiced by veterinarians for some time. Using technicians in small animal medicine is now a very commonplace, but what about using technicians to educate production animal owners. It is my hope that I will be able to educate you, to enable you to educate others. Let's start by focusing on ourselves.

What about You?

When teaching others there are a few things we should first consider about ourselves. What personality traits do you have that will help or hinder your ability to teach? Are you an introvert or an extrovert? For people who are shy or have a fear of public speaking one-on-one sessions may be more comfortable, whereas an extrovert has no trouble speaking to a large group and entertaining questions. Inversely, if you like to talk it may be hard to keep quiet long enough for others to get a word in. Sometimes listening and asking questions will allow a producer to formulate an answer for themselves. Potentially, they can learn to ask themselves the questions that will lead them help themselves the next time.

We tend to do better at subjects we enjoy, so what is it about this industry that interests or excites you? Finding and using your interests will allow you to shine when talking about that issue. Maybe you grew up in the cattle industry, but really like new technology. If so

use your passion about technology to teach others about new software systems for their dairy. Perhaps young-stock is your forte, then focus your energies to learn more about calf-raising and pass it on to others. Being proficient in a few areas will be of a greater benefit to the practice than knowing a few things about many different topics.

Know your limitations, both personally and legally. The person I trust the most is the one who is willing to say “I don’t know”, and I find that many agree. When working with others do not be afraid to say “I don’t know” — just be sure to follow up with the willingness to find someone who does. As technicians, we are not able to legally diagnose, prescribe or perform surgeries. Producers may not understand the complexities of these rules, or you may be tempted to answer a seemingly straightforward question about a sick animal that crosses that diagnosis line. Do not jeopardize your professional integrity for fear of looking incompetent. Simply state that your training and education is not the same as a veterinarian, and that the question would be better answered by a doctor, which of course, you will be happy to have one contact them with the answer.

Ways to Be Better Educators

Now that we discussed how we, as individuals, will work with others how can we become better? Educating you! We were trained in veterinary medicine, not in teaching methodologies. Take a class or two that will teach you to become a better communicator or better teacher. Taking classes that are not veterinary related broadens your horizon. Computer classes or learning a new language is not directly related to veterinary medicine, but these topics certainly can be applied. Be sure to update your knowledge on your specialty areas as this industry changes daily and you want to stay current.

It is impossible to know and remember everything. Resources in any form help you manage information. Keeping paper files of client handouts or product details is a low tech way to store information. Your computer can also hold these files along with contact information for other agri-business persons or keep track of your favorite web sites. It doesn’t matter how you keep your information as long as it’s easily accessible.

The industry is full of a lot of people who are smarter and have greater resources than us. They spend time and money on producing educational material. Many of these of which are available for our use, so use them. The materials that are already produced are professional looking, can be mass produced, sometime be modified to fit your clinics recommendations, and most of all are less work for you. Use what works and throw out the rest.

Educating Producers

Educating can be broken down to educating a person or a group of people. In working with individuals, some similarities arise. You are requested by either the producer or a veterinarian to work on specific issues. The work is done in a one-on-one environment that can be tailored for a specific learning style. You also have the opportunity to measure results by seeing changes or asking questions. Your results should tell you whether or not you were effective.

There are many areas in which you can coach clients. Computers and technology are used more and more commonly in agriculture. You may be able to help find a software program that would fit a particular operation, or detail software to facilitate the needs of that operation. Some farms have bought great programs and need to be taught how to use them and get the specific information in form of reports and graphs; all opportunities for you to use your knowledge.

It seems that more and more producers want to perform laboratory testing on farm whether we think it’s a wise decision or not. If they are going to do it, let’s teach them the proper way to it. Collection of the specimen is the first place where mistakes can happen. Timing, location, technique, and handling and storage are all variables. Obviously, each test is different and has different specifications. Teach those people doing the collection the specifications and why it needs to be done that way.

Running of those tests also has some important details that must be conveyed. Proper storage and handling of test materials, the test procedure itself, quality control issues, how to read results, and how to manage those results when you get them are areas that can be taught.

Management topics are also an issue that many farms deal with. They are farmers not managers, and the ability to perform those tasks can reflect that helping to write standard operating procedure (SOP) may be as simple as laminating a sign that says “Dip-Strip-Wipe”, or a 3-ring binder with complete farm procedures. If you have never advertised and hired an employee the task can seem daunting. Help the client write an ad or detailed job posting. We know what kind of ad draws what type of response. Give the client a list of questions they may want to ask when interviewing. Let them then benefit from our experiences. Employee handbooks and training manuals can be very beneficial to an operation but seem impossible to start. Even helping organize and write down the thoughts of the individual is valuable. Many of us do these tasks daily, but just apply them to a farming operation.

The above listed items are just a start to the many opportunities we have to teach others. Using your situ-

ation and imagination will lend to subject matter and the way in which you can effectively educate.

Working with groups has some similarities to working with individuals, but there are many differences. The education may not be time sensitive or needed for a specific situation. It may be harder to reach some individuals in a group if they do not have a conventional learning style. Results or the effectiveness of your communication may be difficult to assess unless you make an effort to find that out. Again, possibilities of how and what information to get out is endless.

Your clinic may write newsletters. Newsletters can have many variables, making easy to fit it to your organization. It may be a one page black and white sheet sent out with billing statements or a multi-page, colored bulletin that includes advertising paid by manufacturers to offset the cost. Newspaper articles have the ability to educate people about a particular subject and promote your clinic to potential clients. Does your clinic have a website? Many do and what a great way to offer constant information like clinic hours and contact information, but also well timed articles. Office displays can be a simple, inexpensive way to get the word out about a new product. Putting that same product out on the shelf without any material can be easily missed. Use displays that are colorful, informational and prompt questions.

Public speaking, they say, is one the biggest fears that people have. If you are willing, and skillful, public speaking has many benefits. Large numbers of people can be educated in a short amount of time, one person may ask a question that five other people were afraid to ask and now they all have the answer. Or a question may arise that a producer would have never thought of asking, but is important to his or her own situation.

Producer meetings could be held with a speaker from your clinic or outside source. There could be a single topic or various topics depending on your needs. The meeting could be sponsored by an outside entity or entities to help provide speakers, facilities, or funds to cover costs.

Peer groups are a great way to get a small group of people together. The key is to find farms that have similarities, whether it be cow numbers, facility type, production level, age, etc., the possibilities are endless. In this forum your responsibility is to facilitate the meeting by posing questions to get the group talking, helping those who have valuable information but are too timid to speak, and occasionally helping those who talk too much to let others speak.

I encourage clinics to be willing to speak at youth or association events. These audiences are the future industry generation or potential clients. Don't wait to be asked, but rather offer this service to local 4-H groups, FFA, breed associations, or high school career days. You may be surprised that by educating others you learn more yourself.

Don't Forget

Don't forget when educating others to communicate with your own office. If working with an individual, talk with the farm veterinarian to let them know what you plan to discuss as they may have some insight for you. After a meeting write a small synopsis of what was discussed and put it in their file along with a copy of any information you left. It will be helpful to have if they need another copy or have future needs.

Conclusions

What is all of this worth? Do you charge clients for your time or is it an added value to the service they receive from their veterinarian? The reward may be good PR for your clinic, and, the return on investment might be new clients. The education provided may help a producer be more profitable, and the clinic may benefit from the "trickle down" effect. This really is a clinic or personal preference, but remember that you are providing a valuable service.