

# The Veterinarian's Role in Profitable Cattle Production

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- Has the practicing veterinarian played a role in the profitability of livestock enterprises?
- Shouldn't this role be expanded?
- How will this expansion take place?

These are challenging questions for today's members of the American Association of Bovine Practitioners. How one may respond to these challenges will influence the rate of success in a given food animal practice.

## The Traditional Role

Dairymen and beef cattle producers who keep any kind of accounting record have an entry labelled "Vet. & Medicine"; they list it under "costs of production." The veterinarian's presence at the farm has been associated with loss of productivity from illness and/or death. Historically most cattle producers and managers have viewed the veterinarian as a skillful "technician" who is capable of defining (diagnose) and correcting (treat) health problems in their animals. Although respected for their abilities, veterinarians have been perceived as an unavoidable farming expense. Numerous producers have tried to reduce expenditures by buying biologics and drugs from OTC channels, including mail order catalogs and local feed stores. Then came the "farm crisis of the 80's" and veterinarians have observed that their income derived from dispensing is eroding even further. The traditional veterinarian's role has been limited to individual animals, the ill ones; it has not involved the healthy, productive groups of animals.

It is undeniable that many producers have perceived the veterinarian as an effective ally in their efforts to cut down on losses from disease; unfortunately the term "losses" has a negative connotation. A better alternative for the practitioner is to be perceived as directly responsible for an enterprise's profits; to be seen in charge of healthy herds rather than sick individuals.

## The Expanded Role

Any veterinarian wanting to influence the profitability of livestock enterprises today must be a skillful executioner of principles of herd health; just treating sick animals will not do it at least in the eyes of livestock managers who are result-oriented.

**The change from a "fire engine" practice to a herd health practice is likely to be evolutionary rather than revolutionary; it will take time to evolve. Nevertheless this change must start *now* if one wants it to occur at all. Procrastination will not break the silence which now affects cash registers in many "busy" clinics.**

The rest of this short essay mentions some requirements needed to fulfill this expanded role: "Profits Through Herd Health." To fulfill this expanded role the veterinarian must act and be perceived as a health specialist rather than a disease specialist.

## Characteristics of the Health Specialist

More veterinarians than ever before are devoting most of their time to totally integrated animal health and production management systems. Those who are successful at it are characterized by:

- Ability
- Accountability
- Availability
- Affability
- An All-business Attitude

*Ability:* Most traditional curricula at veterinary colleges have emphasized the health of the individual animal. To have an active role in profitable herd health practice the veterinarian must broaden his/her horizon; must be able to appreciate the many aspects of a successful livestock enterprise:

Genetic base  
Nutritional adequacy  
Shelter and environmental quality  
Record keeping, business practices  
Diagnosis and prevention of diseases

Ability means also enthusiasm and a firm belief in the benefits of the herd health approach and the willingness to sell the concept to clients.

Ability is maintained and enhanced through continuing education. Ability means improvement of the practitioner's knowledge in business methods, record keeping systems, nutrition, epidemiology, customer relations, etc.

Ability is reflected in effective education of one's clients in as much as client education is paramount to a successful

herd health practice; the client must understand the veterinarian's recommendations and must also accept and implement them.

*Accountability:* The practitioner of herd health must give sound advice and be held accountable for his/her recommendations. To generate unbiased and reliable recommendations (and to get paid for them!) the veterinarian has to conform to the technical and ethical standards of the veterinary profession. Accountability and professionalism are one and the same.

Why can't the veterinarian get paid for his/her knowledge? Why rely on drug/vaccine sales? Wouldn't a producer detect a conflict of interest when the veterinarian advises and sell products at the same time? Professionals get paid for consultation and advice. On the other hand farmers and ranchers are reluctant to pay for veterinary advice and consultation...they want it for nothing because we have given advice and consultation for nothing! We have acted like herd health missionaries...we have tried to apologize to everyone who owns livestock! Why not, instead, ally one's knowledge with the better managers and become part of their success story?

*Availability and Affability:*

"My secret to succeed in business? Find a need and fill it with quality"

(S. Jobs, Co-founder Apple Comp.)

"Probably the most important management fundamental that is being ignored today is staying close to the customer to satisfy his needs and anticipate his wants. In too many companies, the customer has become a bloody nuisance whose unpredictable behavior damages carefully made strategic plans...and who stubbornly insists that purchased products should work"

(L. Young, Editor-in-Chief, *Business Week*)

"A customer is not an interruption of our work...he is the purpose of it. We are not doing a favor by serving him...he is doing us a favor by giving us the opportunity to do so. A customer is not someone to argue or match wits with; nobody ever won an argument with a customer"

(From poster at L.L. Bean Corp., Freeport, MA)

### "All-Business" Attitude

Veterinary practitioners do not need to be "buddy-buddy" with their customers in order to have a flourishing business. Conversely, no veterinary business will succeed unless hard core business principles are used in running all aspects of practice. In regard to herd health it becomes essential that the veterinarian documents progress to his/her client. The customer has a right to question what return, if any, arises from investing in a *herd health and production management system*.

The "all-business" attitude implies that the practitioner of herd health **and** his/her client:

- a) Have assessed the present performance of the herd
- b) Have set forth a target of performance, and put down in writing specific objectives to be achieved over a determined period
- c) Have kept relevant records and analyzed them to measure progress and adjust procedures, as needed.

The "all-business" attitude implies that the veterinarian takes leadership in all aspects of animal health... that he/she earns the client's demand for advice and consultation... and is paid for this advice and consultation.

And, finally...

"The veterinarian that succeeds in the next decade will be the person that is an "idea person." He or she will develop **profitable** ways to help their clients."

R. A. Vinson, DVM (AASP, March 86)

### References

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