

The American cow vet: How veterinarians can add value to ag operations and communities

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Abstract

The role of a bovine veterinarian continues to change and differentiate, as the structure of the traditional farm evolves. Our cow vets will adapt into new roles on these farms and within our communities. Veterinarians have long been trusted sources of non-biased information for consumers and community members alike. As consumers, customers, and brands look for greater transparency from their supply chains, veterinarians can help facilitate meaningful communication and value-added services.

Key words: social media, community, social license

Social License

“Social license” is rooted in the beliefs, perceptions, and opinions held by our consumers. This is given and taken away by consumers based on the information they receive. To keep our social license, we must work on building consumer trust. Building trust is a 2-way street, which starts with understanding who our consumers are and what drives their purchasing decisions, but also involves agriculture openly sharing their story. Veterinarians can and should be involved with maintaining our industry’s social license.

Communication

Whether it’s through social media advocacy, supply chain relations, community outreach or just speaking to your small animal clients about agriculture, food animal veterinarians should be communicating and educating. In a Gallup poll that ranked the public on ethical professions, veterinarians ranked third.¹ This reinforces the point that veterinarians are continually called upon to be sources of reliable information. Every day, veterinarians are translating complicated medical jargon into easy-to-understand concepts for their clients. The same skill can be used when communicating about agriculture within our communities and beyond.

Key Topics

Our consumers assume we are doing the right thing (that’s our social license), so we must continue to keep a pulse on what they are concerned about. WHAT we are communicating is just as important as HOW we are communicat-

ing it. Our consumers don’t care about the intricacies of the ideal ov-sync program, but they do care about how we use reproductive hormones on our farms. They don’t care about your average somatic cell count, but they do care that their milk is fresh and safe. Veterinarians should be communicating about what’s happening on our farms, but in a way that is easy to understand and creates trust among consumers. Key areas such as animal care, judicious antibiotic use, cow-calf separation, environmental impact, and nutritional value are all areas that veterinarians can help communicate about in a meaningful way.

Team Players

Bovine veterinarians continue to develop value-added services that allow them to be integrated into on-farm management teams. Traditionally, veterinarians would be included on these teams strictly for medical advice, but there is an opportunity for them to bring much more to the table. Opportunity areas for veterinarians in the future include second and third party audits, consumer education, and on-farm compliance.

As dairy and beef start to follow in the footsteps of the swine and poultry industries, third-party audits will become increasingly more common. Veterinarians are already routinely on their clients’ farms and can easily start performing unannounced second-party audits for their clients. This service can help reinforce industry standards and identify risk areas.

Consumer education doesn’t have to be a big, elaborate production, it really takes baby steps. Talking to FFA students, 4-H groups, getting neighbors to come for a farm tour are great ways to reach out and build trust within your community. Social media can play a huge role in building trust, but it must be done in a way that targets people outside of agriculture – we must avoid “preaching to the choir”. The way we talk within agriculture is not understood from the outside and can lead to consumer confusion and ultimately distrust.

On-farm compliance involves helping build “culture”. On-farm culture development starts with leadership from the top, and you must have buy-in from all key decision makers. By developing a strong farm culture that puts the care of employees and animals first, we can mitigate the risk of unwanted exposure. We must learn to develop a “culture of care” integrated into a “culture of production”. Veterinarians

play a huge role in helping instill animal ethics and attitudes towards animals into farm teams.

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Reference

1. Gallup News Service. Public rates nursing as most honest and ethical profession. 1 Dec. 2003. Available at: news.gallup.com/poll/9823/public-rates-nursing-most-honest-ethical-profession.aspx.