

Cow calf consulting: Getting your foot in the door while your arm is in a cow

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Abstract

Providing cow-calf consulting services can add value to your clients' operations, as well as your practice's bottom line. When making the transition to a consultant, find a client that challenges you and focus on building rapport. Ask open-ended questions in order to better understand the client's goals and determine where you can add value. While many veterinarians have the knowledge and the desire to become a consultant, structuring consulting services and monetizing your time can be a challenge. Decide upon a pricing model that benefits both parties and clearly outline the agreement in a contract. Following each site-visit or virtual consult, provide the client with a 1-page document that clearly outlines your observations and recommendations. Continue to seek opportunities to provide other value-added services and never underestimate what you have to offer.

Key words: added-value, goals, site-visit, virtual consult

Introduction

Traditional veterinary medicine practice models carry some inherent conflicts of interest. For example, if a veterinarian is called out to perform a cesarean-section on a heifer, it is likely the result of multiple failures. Potentially, the client failed to adequately develop that heifer or select a proper calving ease bull. The client, and often the client's neighbor, failed to successfully deliver that calf, and now both the heifer and the calf are at high risk of morbidity or mortality. This highly unprofitable and disheartening day for the client may in fact be a very profitable day for the veterinarian. Providing cow-calf consulting services can alter that relationship and add value to your clients' operations, while improving your practice's bottom line.

Before making the transition from "cow vet" to "consultant", it is important become familiar with production practices in your area and master your clinical skills. Like it or not, clients will judge you based on the terminology you use and your ability to perform simple tasks such as opening and closing gates, operating chute systems and handling cattle. Demonstrating proficiency when performing these tasks, as well as pregnancy diagnosis, collecting semen samples, replacing prolapses and correcting dystocias, will help the client gain confidence in you as a veterinarian and future consultant.

Transitioning to a consultant

When performing routine services, take advantage of down time by asking the clients a lot of open-ended questions. This will help you gain an understanding of the operation and identify areas where you can potentially add value. An effective consultant should have just as many questions, if not more, for the client than the client has for the consultant. Expressing a genuine interest in the client's operation will help you build the rapport that is necessary to make the transition to a consultant. Often this process will happen naturally as there are certain

clients that more progressive and tend to challenge you more than others. Take advantage of this opportunity and consciously look for "teachable moments" or other ways to add value that could further strengthen your relationship with the client. When asked difficult questions, don't be afraid to say "I don't know," and make an effort to reach out to a mentor or colleague in real time or conduct research later that evening and follow up with an answer in a timely manner. It is highly recommended that you always follow up on cases in order to strengthen your relationship with the client. An excellent method to help build additional rapport while improving your competency, is to offer a necropsy at no charge for cases that don't turn out as you hoped. It is also recommended that you reach out to clients during more stressful times of the year such as calving season or harvest. You will be surprised how often these "check-ins" result in some sort of billable service. It is equally important to demonstrate an interest in other aspects of the operation as well as their personal life. Odds are, when this client has a question or experiences an issue, you will be the veterinarian they turn to for help.

Cow-calf consulting topics

Once you've identified a client whose interactions lend itself to a consulting relationship, it is time to schedule a non-clinical site visit. Ensuring that this meeting not associated with a herd health appointment is important so that you have the client's full attention during the meeting (personal communication: Dr. W. Mark Hilton). Otherwise, they may be distracted by pregnancy check results or the fences that were damaged while performing breeding soundness evaluations on the bulls earlier that day.

Perhaps the easiest topic to address for a non-clinical site visit is development or re-evaluation of a comprehensive herd health program. Every single client will benefit from a written protocol with their customized vaccination, anthelmintic and treatment protocols. This is also an excellent opportunity to discuss growth-promoting implants, which are one of the most profitable, but frequently underutilized, technologies in the cow-calf industry.

Some other examples of consulting topics that are applicable to every cow-calf producer include:

- **Mission and goals** – Your client's cow herd should be run as a business and every business should have a clearly defined mission and goals. Helping your clients write down 1-, 5- and 10-year goals and committing to a timeline will help them monitor progress and increase profitability.
- **Sire selection** – Very few clients adequately understand how to read and interpret EPDs and select either a maternal or terminal sire that will help them attain their goals. A good rule-of-thumb is to match the cows to their environment and the bulls to the market. Additionally, crossbreeding can add value to almost every single commercial cow-calf operation.

- **Replacement heifer management** – Heifers calving in the first 21-day cycle are proven to have improved longevity in the herd and wean heavier calves through their sixth calving season.^{1,2} You can increase the profitability of your clients' operations by helping them increase the proportion of heifers calving early in the season. Strategies such as the "short cycle" trick (Figure 1) can help clients achieve 85% pregnancy rate in 30 days.
- **Strategic calving pasture management** – Implementing strategies such as the Sandhills Calving System can improve calf health by minimizing contamination of calving grounds and reducing transmission of pathogens from older, clinically normal-appearing calves to younger, more susceptible calves.³

Everything mentioned thus far has limited value to you as a consultant if you can't show the clients how your recommendations and implemented changes impact their business. Peter Drucker is credited with the famous quote, "You can't manage what you can't measure." Even if you do not have access to in-house cow-calf data management software, there are numerous apps, tools, calculators and spreadsheets available to you for free that will enable you to collect data and monitor progress. The following websites have fantastic resources to help you build your cow-calf consulting repertoire:

- Beef Cattle Research Council: <https://www.beefresearch.ca/>
- Iowa Beef Center: <https://www.iowabeefcenter.org/>
- Kansas State University Beef Cattle Institute: <https://ksubci.org/tools/>
- Midwest Beef Cattle Consultants: <https://www.mwbeefcattle.com/educational-material>
- Oklahoma State University Beef Extension: <http://beefextension.okstate.edu/pages/calculators>

Supporting documents

A good practice is to provide every regular client with a customized herd health protocol. Other supporting herd health documents that add value include a standard operating procedures or a best management practices manual and a customized "cow" lendar (Figure 2) that outlines key events throughout the year. Developing templates for these documents and proper utilization of veterinary technicians can help streamline the customization process. Ultimately, these documents will help the both you and the client stay organized and reduce confusion in future years. Providing the client with something tangible will also help justify charges for the added value you provide.

At the conclusion of each site visit, outbreak investigation or virtual consult, it is recommended that you provide the client with a 1-page written document that summarizes key discussion points. This document should outline the reason for the consult, your observations and resulting practical recommendations, along with clearly defined action items for both parties. A separate document may be used to define 1-, 5- and 10-year goals and track progress. Your objective should be to make it as easy as possible for the client to understand and implement your mutually agreed upon changes.

Enhancing client experience

Just like you want your clients to be above average, your clients want to know that they are receiving recommendations from an above-average veterinarian. Presenting a positive image via your website, social media and newsletters is important, however, these platforms may no longer distinguish you from other practices. Offering annual producer meetings, virtual consults, calving gift bags, and volunteering for your local community organization such 4-H or FFA clubs can help add a personal

Figure 1: Estrous synchronization strategy to help achieve 2 cycles with a bull in 30 days.

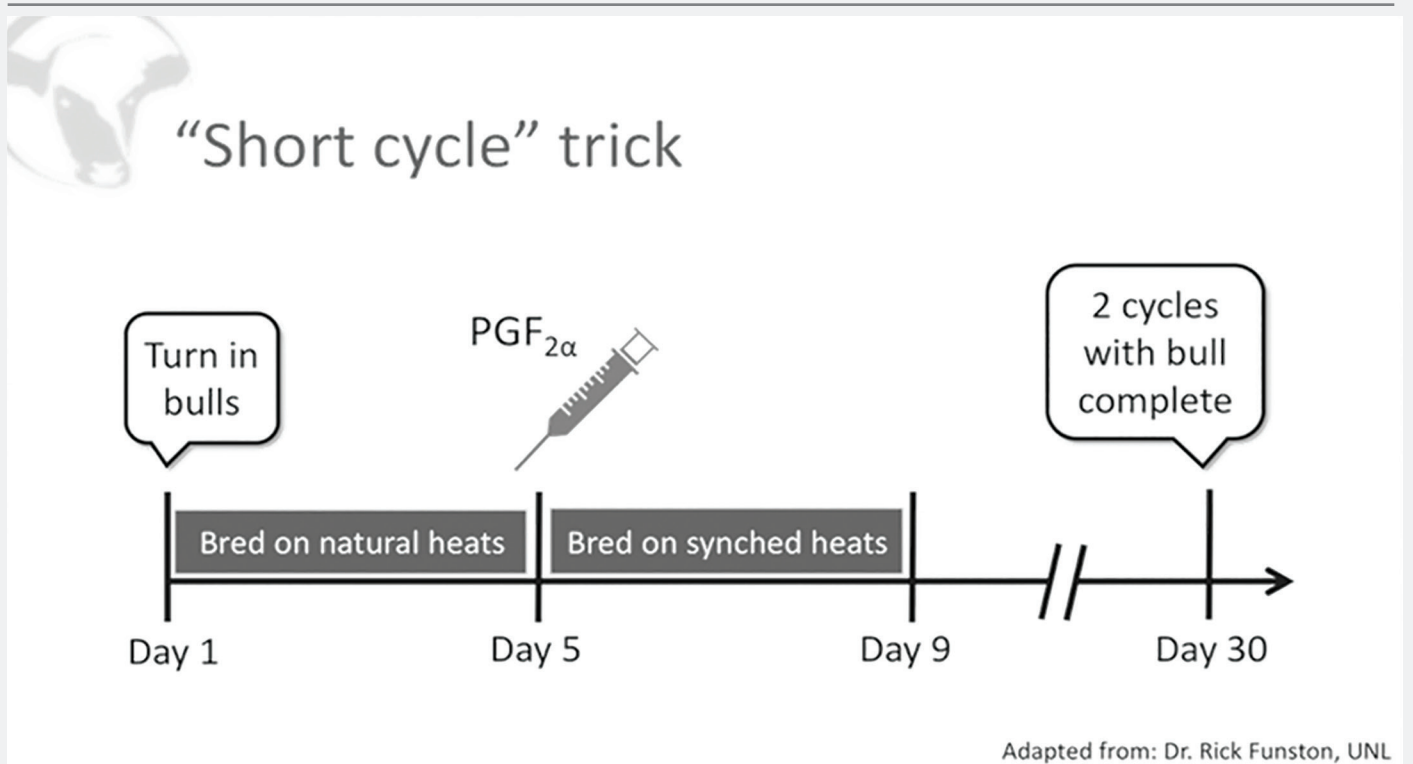
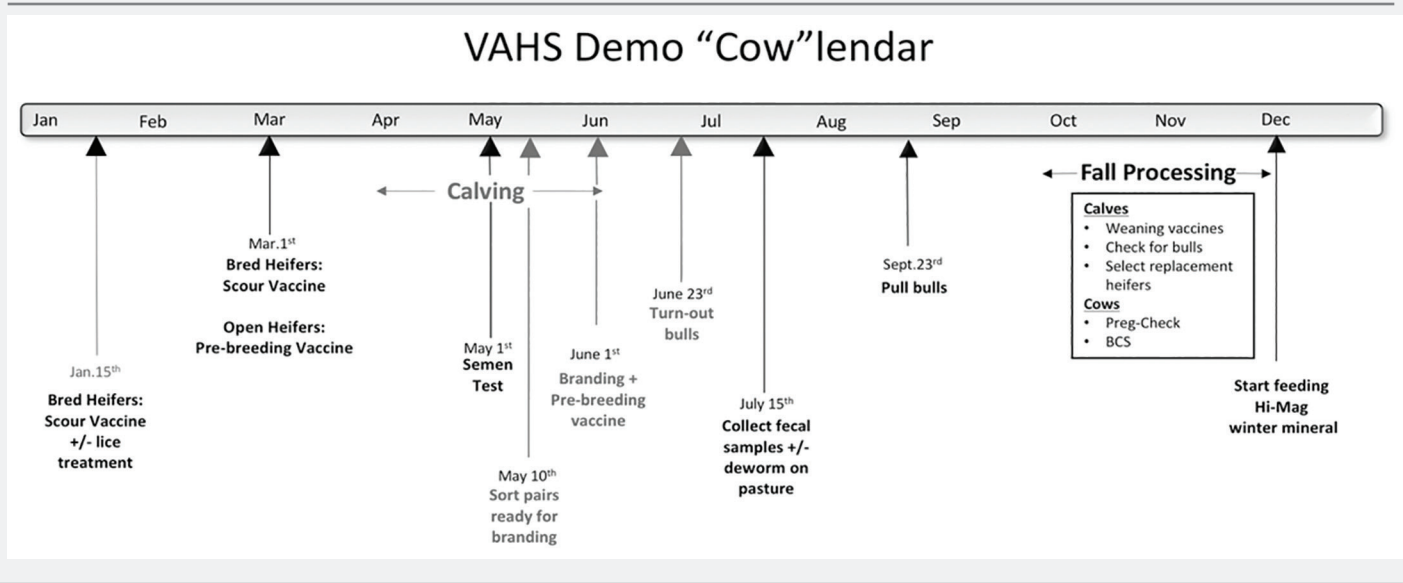


Figure 2: Example of a customized “cow”lendar with annual processing events to help promote good organization and client compliance.



touch to your growing relationship. These approaches are more likely to impact the profitability of your practice indirectly rather than directly. It is recommended you use the client service matrix (Figure 3) to evaluate each new service and re-evaluate each current service to see if it truly adds value to your practice model and consulting relationship.

Consulting services pricing models

There are numerous pricing models used by consultants. In fact, some practices may offer differ models to different clients. Ensuring that you are in fact charging for your time and expertise is far more important than which model you choose. Examples of commonly used pricing models are as follows.

Fee/head

Success of the fee/head model, adapted from the feedlot industry, depends heavily on the size of the herd and maintenance level of the client. Some veterinarians choose to bundle the consulting services with herd health services such as pregnancy diagnosis and bull breeding soundness evaluations. However, developing a strategic calving pasture management system may require the same amount of time for a 100head herd as it does a 1,000-head herd. If the client is high maintenance and has a small herd, the veterinarian may not be fairly compensated. If the client is low maintenance and has a large herd, the client may not be receiving adequate value.

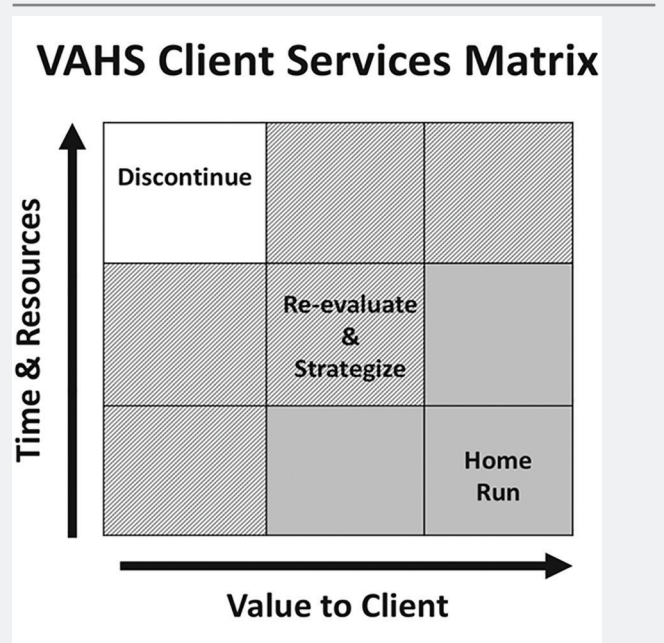
Hourly

The hourly pricing model has proven successful in the dairy industry and often encompasses a variety of services. There is some ambiguity when it comes to how to charge for time preparing for a consult, researching material or writing site-visit reports. Unfortunately, most veterinarians would likely end up undercharging for their total time inputs as the client may only expect to be charged for the time the veterinarian was on-site. The other concern with this model is the client may occasionally be reluctant to reach out for assistance because the clock starts as soon as the veterinarian answers the phone.

Flat fee/year

Another common pricing model is charging a flat fee/year. This model should theoretically promote excellent communication from the client. Additionally, it can be adjusted annually if the fee is not evenly matched to the services provided. The biggest downfall of this model is that the onus is more heavily weighted to the veterinarian to fulfill all items outlined in the agreement. If the contract states 4 site visits will be conducted by the veterinarian each year, but only 3 were completed, the veterinarian may feel compelled to reduce the fee by 25% even if they fulfilled all the needs of the client and otherwise provided adequate value.

Figure 3: Matrix designed to help evaluate current services and make educated decisions regarding implementation of new services by balancing inputs with perceived value by the client.



Annual base + hourly

This hybrid program has a lot to offer both parties. A base fee is charged to compensate the veterinarian for time associated with preparation for a consult, supporting documents and the initial site visit for the year. Other value-added services such as a subscription to in-house software or access to VIP events or training sessions may be bundled into this base fee. Following the initial site visit, all of the other services and consultations are charged on an hourly basis and the onus falls on both the veterinarian and the client. If one consult per year fulfills the client's needs, then the veterinarian has been fairly compensated and the client is not left wanting more. If the client is higher maintenance and requires several additional consults, then the veterinarian is still fairly compensated and client's needs are fulfilled.

Regardless of the pricing model you choose, the most important factor is that you clearly outline the agreement in a contract so both parties are aware of the arrangement. Having this contract in place will help prevent you from giving away your time and expertise. There are many occasions when the discussion veterinarians are having while their arm is in a cow has a much larger impact on our client's bottom line than the individual animal service we are providing at the time. If you find yourself giving away your expertise for free, let the client know. Don't be afraid to itemize that consult on the invoice along with what the full charge would be and then provide a note outlining the discount that was given for that service. The client will recognize the value you provide and anticipate a charge the next time you provide consultation services. This approach works well for distance exams and all the other, "While you're here, Doc..." requests. Given the day and age, it is also recommended you develop a strategy to monetize virtual consults provided by your practice. While virtual consults may be included for your clients on consulting contracts, charging an hourly rate for non-consulting clients may be appropriate. It is recommended you consider charging for any virtual consults longer than 10 minutes. Another approach is to suggest a formal site visit in lieu of a virtual consult so that you may better fulfill the client's needs and charge appropriately.

Conclusion

In conclusion, many veterinarians have the necessary knowledge and the desire to become a consultant, however, structuring consulting services and monetizing your expertise and time can be a challenge. One of our greatest fears as a profession should be realizing our opportunity costs too late. Are food animal veterinarians at risk of becoming irrelevant in the future because we are too busy performing today's routine "bread and butter" services? Will we be replaced by technology or lay persons? Nevertheless, when deciding to make the transition to a consultant, find a client who challenges you and be certain to ask open-ended questions to determine their goals and where you can add value. Select a pricing model that benefits both parties and clearly outline the agreement in a contract. Following each site visit, provide written documentation of your observations and recommendations. Never underestimate what you have to offer and demonstrate to the client that the value you provide reaches far beyond that of traditional veterinary medicine models.

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