

# The Mechanics of a Feedlot Veterinary Consultant

Dr. John Young  
*Monfort Feedlot*  
*Greeley, Colorado*

## Introduction

The beef industry is the largest segment of agriculture in the U.S. The revenue from the sale of cattle in the U.S. is approximately 15 billion dollars annually. The beef industry nets more dollars than is netted from the sale of the eleven largest crops combined. It is big business and yet only 5% of the U.S. population are farmers and today American agriculture is still the number one industry—even over the steel, utilities or auto industries.

Each year our per capita consumption of beef goes up. What does all of this mean? I believe that it means that modern American agriculture is rapidly changing to meet the demands of consumption. How is it changing to meet these demands? Feedlot sizes are increasing. Today's feedlot industry is a market-oriented agribusiness which is dynamic and demanding. The challenges are many—the rewards harder to come by. But the rewards are there for the consulting or company veterinarian. This is the challenge for you, the veterinarian—knowing the problems your ultimate customer faces and the type of product or services he needs to solve those problems.

## Mechanics

How do we approach a feedlot manager with our services?

In today's modern feedlots you won't find the feedlot manager behind the wheel of a feed truck. If you think you will, you are not ready for a feedlot consulting practice. He is probably behind a desk, sizing up his needs as shrewdly as any corporate purchasing agent. What is a feedlot veterinary consultant? To define this, we must first categorize feedlot veterinary consultants into two types: company or staff veterinarians and independent consultants.

In either form the veterinarian is selling his services which is his specialized training and experience in feedlot problems. Company or staff veterinarians have the distinct advantage of being very closely associated with the day to day problems of a feedlot, whereas an independent veterinarian

must rely primarily on communication from the feedlot personnel and feedlot records. Conversely, an independent consultant comes from the "outside," and he may be able to observe problems and suggest solutions that for one reason or another are not readily recognized by the employees. Also, an independent consultant will have the opportunity to be exposed to many varied feedlot situations and problems which will give him a broader base of experience.

How do we approach the problem? How do we get started? First and foremost is the ability to get along with people and recognize another person's point of view. This is the case with any successful veterinarian. Second, know the customer's business and know it well—then it takes a thorough marketing orientation and understanding.

Where does the veterinarian fit into this scheme? At the management level. To fit in the management level he must have an increased awareness of the profit and loss statement. It is not enough just to be conservative about keeping costs down. Management needs to know where and how to invest for maximum return. The veterinarian's value in management will increase as he extends his interests and knowledge. To be really effective in management, the veterinarian must learn to work and communicate with people of diverse interests and capabilities.

In our college training we were taught "facts." It didn't take long to find out that sound judgement and experience far outweighed the "fact." In management decisions have to be made and chances taken where there is no proven basis for facts. As a matter of fact, the only fact I know is that feedlot work is not taught, it is learned through experience. In the past, few veterinary colleges even mentioned herd health; now, I know of several that are trying to give the student some orientation. Orientation is really all they can do, plus perhaps let the student know that feedlot herd health is not a production line of shots, pills, etc.

Okay, now we have the right "frame of mind" for a feedlot veterinarian, and we have a thorough

knowledge of the industry. Then where do we go? Let's assume we have a client (a feedlot) that is interested in our services. As I mentioned earlier, we *must* be considered management and management has access to company records. What is the extent of the records? Are they complete? The average feedlot that we usually consider in Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma, etc., is large enough that he must keep very complete records. Okay, what do we want to know? (1) Average Daily Gain; (2) Average Feed Consumption; (3) Death Loss; (4) Morbidity; (5) Current Herd Health Policies; and (6) Employee Pay Scale.

Feedlots fit into two categories primarily: (1) commercial and (2) private.

If the lot is private and all company owned cattle then your problems are decreased immensely. A commercial lot may have as many different herd health policies as there are clients in the lot. I believe that 95% or above of the problems in herd health can be directly attributed to management. Sometimes it is very difficult to determine just exactly how it is related to management, but it usually is.

The records are an absolute necessity. They must be complete enough to let you and the feedlot management know where you are starting. You must be able to show progress and that progress should show in dollars and cents—the P & L. Even with records complete enough to satisfy the client, whether he be the owner of one group of cattle in the feedlot or the feedlot manager or the feedlot owner, a feedlot without the services of a veterinarian in the past may not have accurate records for death loss, morbidity, etc.

How do you set up a record system for the herd health program? The ways are as endless as there are veterinarians and feedlots. Also, you will find that what may be adequate for one feedlot does not work well at another.

What should the records contain?

A. Individual animal records: (a) animal identification—individual and group; (2) diagnosis; (3) treatment—daily; and (4) cost.

B. Group summary—to go with the P & L: (1) summarization of individual diseases; (2) cost of treating each group of diseases; (3) realization percentage and reasons; (4) mortality percentage and reasons; and (5) morbidity.

C. Feedlot summary—done monthly or bi-monthly: (1) total number of cases treated during that period; (2) number of animals re-treated; (3) number of cases of the prominent diseases for the period; and (4) realization—number and percentage for the period.

This appears to be a lot of bookkeeping if it is all set up at one time. Therefore, start out simple and add to the program gradually. You will get better cooperation from the feedlot staff if you do approach the problem gradually.

From the record system you will begin to get a picture of the feedlot's problems. I prefer to be conservative on initiating an extensive herd health program. If you already know exactly what disease prevention program the feedlot in that area should be on, then initiate it, but be able to justify it to yourself and the feedlot.

Now we have established what we want to do in the herd health program.

Next, I believe the personnel involved in the herd health program should undergo an educational orientation program. Communication is a very easy area to forget. You have to teach everyone at the feedlot how you prefer to have things done. Everyone does things differently; show them your way and give them a reason. Understanding breeds cooperation and it's amazing what cooperation can do for a feedlot herd health program.

The educational program should not end with the first meeting. Make the meetings regular and meaningful. The feedlot staff will appreciate being informed and they in turn will have a basis for doing a better job.

The treating staff can be set up in two ways: (1) each man responsible for treating his own stock, and (2) technicians that treat all cattle.

I prefer the second method, but I believe either method can be used effectively.

Treating areas can be arranged in the fashions also: (1) area treating facilities, and (2) centralized treating facility.

Here again, we have a preferential discussion and both have their merits. I use a centralized hospital set-up and believe it does a very good job for us.

Therapy regimes can be set up for the common diseases the health department crew will encounter. The veterinarians will need to be well informed on day-to-day problems in this area of therapy and make changes as needed.

The last area of the total herd health monitoring program is the necropsy routine. This can be a very useful guide for the veterinarian on the total health picture and it should never be discounted.

#### Summary

A successful veterinary consultant is actually a partnership between the veterinarian and the feedlot owner or manager. Both of you must work

together to control the factors of environment which influence animal health.

The practice of a veterinary consultant for a feedlot will involve the following areas: (1) promoting health; (2) nutrition; (3) sanitation and pest control; and (4) economics.

The list could probably go on and on, but the main thing I would stress is that a veterinary consultant for a feedlot, dairy or ranch must become very specialized and he will have to work very diligently at educating himself to meet these very difficult standards.

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## The Way I Look at a Veterinary Consultant

R. H. Diven, *Ph.D.*  
Amarillo, Texas

Before I discuss with you the way I look at a veterinary consultant, let me review the previous associations we have had with veterinary consultants. I was employed by the Department of Animal Pathology at the University of Arizona for four years. While in that position, I worked closely with veterinarians. Their consulting was primarily with practitioners who in turn were feedlot consultants.

Later, I spent two years conducting large animal research for a major pharmaceutical firm. In that position, I utilized the consultation of veterinarians to help direct and conduct studies. For the last seven years I have worked as a nutritional consultant for feedlots. As a consultant, I have worked with 25 to 30 feedlots in 11 different states. Presently, the two of us in our firm are consulting with 11 feedlots in Mexico and 13 organizations in the United States. Two of our 13 U.S. clients are not directly involved in the business of feeding cattle.

All the feedlots that we have worked with either in the past or at present have used the services of veterinarians. The type of service offered has ranged from an on-call basis for castrating big bulls and operating on water bellies to considerable involvement at the management level directing herd health programs. We have consulted with feedlots for several years and never met their veterinarian. At other times, we have worked closely with the veterinarian in establishing over-all management and operational programs. As in any situation like this, we have seen good men with excellent programs as well as the incompetent with no program at all.

Now, with this brief history, let me tell you the way I look at a veterinary consultant. First, I think he is essential to the operation of a successful feedlot. We insist that the feedlots with which we

work retain the services of a consulting veterinarian. Secondly, when I consider all the veterinarians that we have worked with, I consider him a second class citizen at the feedlot. There are exceptions, of course, but in the main the veterinarian is a member of the cowboy crew and is not a part of management.

His spectrum of the operations within a feedlot is very narrow. He is concerned with the health of a particular animal or a pen of cattle. Seldom does he become involved with other aspects of the feedlot's operations. This is in contrast to the way we work with feedlots. Our degree of success, indeed our very livelihood, depends upon the continued financial success of our client feedlots. We have no other source of income; the veterinarian does. At the very least, he has an income from a classical large animal practice. More often he has a general practice. He often realizes an income from dispensing drugs. Seldom is he in a position that food on his table tomorrow depends upon some feedyard's profit and loss statement today.

Over the years we have found that good sound nutrition is a very small part of what makes a successful feeding operation. In order for our programs to succeed, we have to be certain that performance in all other areas of the operation is good. These areas would include: record keeping and accounting; customer relationship; feed milling and mixing; feeding; feed pen management; cattle management, including animal health and buying; and selling of both commodities and cattle.

I firmly believe that in order for the veterinarian to become a significant part of a feedlot operation and make his health program work, he is going to have to take an active interest in these other areas as well. To show you what I mean, let me relate to you an actual experience. Instead of a