

# Facilitating knowledge transfer through producer meetings

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## Abstract

Producer meetings can be a valuable tool for providing information to clients and receiving feedback. Meetings can cover a wide range of topics and material. They can be used to deliver new information, highlight opportunities, and challenge producers to improve. They may involve a variety of participants and can take place in a variety of locations. Participating in non-traditional services such as producer meetings helps to maintain the veterinarian's position as an engaged information provider.

**Key words:** veterinary, practice management, training

## Résumé

Les réunions avec les producteurs peuvent être des outils précieux pour fournir de l'information aux clients et recevoir des réactions. Les réunions peuvent couvrir un large éventail de sujets et de matériel. Elles peuvent être utilisées pour transmettre de nouvelles informations, faire ressortir des opportunités, et pousser les producteurs à s'améliorer. Elles peuvent impliquer plusieurs types de participants et avoir lieu à plusieurs endroits. Participer à des services non-traditionnels tels que des réunions avec les producteurs aide le vétérinaire à maintenir sa position comme un fournisseur de renseignements impliqué.

## Meeting Content

While individual discussions with producers may sometimes be appropriate, producer meetings provide an excellent opportunity to disseminate information to a broader audience quickly. Systematic reviews of synchronization programs, recently trending farm issues such as weather impacts on crops, seasonal changes to teat-end condition, caring for youngstock during cold weather stress, and fly abatement strategies are all great examples of meeting topics that interest producers. Records analysis of farm performance and disease statistics is a common topic of interest among producers. While traditional benchmarking should be done with great caution, highlighting areas of opportunity and establishing goals that are achievable can help challenge producers to achieve their full potential. Changes to data recording systems, working with the fresh cows and hospital pen animals, and novel approaches to disease treatment are

additional examples of topics that can be covered in producer meetings. Producer meetings can also be a great way to teach new skills such as on-farm culturing, hoof trimming, and obstetrical techniques.

Discussing the same management change week after week can become frustrating for both the veterinarian and client. Producer meetings provide a unique forum for effecting procedural change on the dairy and can raise awareness about opportunities for improvement. This can be done by highlighting current research or utilizing another dairy in the area to present practices and protocols that have been successful for them. Topics such as using oral calcium boluses, pathogen-based mastitis therapy, and selective dry-cow therapy can all stimulate discussion and a deep reflection about an individual dairy farm's specific procedure.

The opportunity to make an impact on farm management is highlighted in the following example of a recent producer meeting comparing antibiotic use among several clients. Eight clients in western NY are enrolled in a USDA study designed to characterize antimicrobial use on the dairy farm. The study involves 32 dairy farms across the nation with the long-term goal of establishing a functional and efficient antibiotic use monitoring system in beef and dairy production which will support the continued advancement of antibiotic stewardship in the United States. This study collects data on antibiotic use from enrolled farms. With the help of the researchers conducting this study, a meeting for 4 of the dairies was planned to discuss trends in antibiotic use. Individual farms were masked to maintain confidentiality. One of the farms utilized nearly twice as many antibiotics as the other 3 farms. This comparison identified an opportunity for that dairy and prompted additional farm conversation on physical exam diagnosis, a clarification of the case definition for several diseases, and increased compliance with farm treatment protocols. Another one of the farms, with a history of high adult cow mortality, utilized significantly less antibiotics than any other herd in the nationwide study population. This recognition provided the opportunity to discuss earlier disease detection and treatment. The meeting was informal and lasted only an hour, but provided the opportunity for numerous additional conversations and management discussions, and serves as just one example of the many benefits of group meetings.

A generic meeting agenda should include an introduction of the speaker and a review of the meeting topic. For smaller group meetings, a personal introduction from all

attendants including their name, the farm they are from, and the role they play on that dairy is useful to promote a group atmosphere and facilitate discussion. The key material being covered would follow, beginning with an introduction of the topic and its practical importance and potential impact on the farm. The detailed presentation should be less than an hour and should be followed by a lengthy question and answer period. This discussion period is perhaps the most important part of the meeting for exchanging information and effecting change. The meeting could end with some brief discussion about future topics of interest to the group.

### **Target Audience**

People with a variety of different job titles benefit from meetings. Owners and managers may be interested in discussing employee management or reviewing performance and disease data from farms in the area. Herdsmen benefit greatly from a group discussion of how to identify, diagnose, and treat sick animals, as well as how to record disease and train new employees. Employees with more specialized jobs such as calf feeding, breeding, hoof trimming, etc., also benefit from the opportunity to learn new techniques and discuss their personal experience with others.

### **Preparation**

Meetings are most productive when some effort is committed to preparation. Selecting an appropriate speaker or facilitator is very important. Outside speakers are great at encouraging thought and challenging a group. The credibility of an outside "expert" often increases participation and the likelihood of the group embracing meeting content. Meetings that involve the local veterinarian(s) also provide considerable value, as the local veterinarian is more aware of farm and local region factors (labor, facilities, etc.). A local veterinarian also provides the lighthearted opportunity for clients to commiserate about working with that veterinarian (humor is intended here and can be helpful during meetings to improve participation and collegiality within the group).

Meeting locations can be varied. They can be conducted on one of the participant's farms, starting with a tour of the facility for those visiting. They may occur at a veterinary practice, if there is room enough to accommodate the group,

or at a local restaurant or events center if funding permits. Additionally, cooperative extension offices and other agribusinesses often have low or no-cost meeting rooms that can be used. Meeting in a location away from the farm provides participants with a fresh perspective and helps them focus on the meeting rather than the to-do list waiting for them.

As an aside, a very productive environment for one-on-one meetings is the silage truck, tractor cab or forage harvester. In this environment, the farm owner or manager can remain engaged in farm activities while also having the capacity to become involved in deep discussions. Such discussions might not occur in an office or after a herd health visit when the producer is focused on the remaining tasks for that day, and can often lead to significant progress on the farm.

Funding for meetings, though not necessary, can drastically improve their quality. Funding can provide an improved venue, meal, and audio-visual materials.

Outside agribusiness companies are usually excited at the opportunity to be involved in funding without the need to be overbearing with their own sales message. Additionally, they can bring valuable resources, information, and experience to the meeting.

While very useful, meetings can be time consuming in both preparation and attendance. An ideal meeting frequency does not exist. Meetings should occur often enough to encourage participation and distribute timely information while still maintaining their novelty.

### **Summary**

Veterinarians play a vital role in educating their clients. Veterinarians advance their connection with clients when they facilitate knowledge transfer, challenge their clients, and establish themselves as a key resource for new information. Producer meetings can be very helpful in achieving this goal. Meetings can occur in a variety of forms with a variety of participants. Group meetings provide a great opportunity for stimulating discussions to improve animal welfare, help farm management, and advance judicious pharmaceutical use.