

Offering nutrition and ration balancing as a service

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Abstract

Offering nutrition and ration balancing services can be an excellent way to increase revenue at a veterinary practice, as well be a solution for the changing role of the consulting veterinarian. Today's dairy producers demand a consultant-based veterinary service which contrasts greatly with the veterinary service of the past. Offering nutrition services is also a great way for young veterinarians to become good at troubleshooting feed-related disease processes on dairy farms.

Key words: dairy, nutrition, ration

Résumé

Offrir des services pour l'alimentation et la formulation de la ration peut être une très bonne façon d'accroître les revenus dans une pratique vétérinaire de même qu'une solution au rôle changeant du vétérinaire consultant. Les producteurs laitiers d'aujourd'hui demandent un service vétérinaire fondé sur la consultation ce qui diffère des services vétérinaires du passé. Offrir des services pour l'alimentation est aussi une excellente façon pour les jeunes vétérinaires de devenir plus compétents dans la résolution de problèmes reliés aux maladies d'origine alimentaire dans les fermes laitières.

Introduction

I am a mixed animal veterinarian in Ashland Ohio, servicing dairies of varying sizes. I began offering nutrition services and ration balancing about 4 years ago. I initially wanted to learn about nutrition and rations to better serve my producers with troubleshooting on farm problems as well as have a better understanding of the nutritional requirements of dairy cattle. I had little experience with forage evaluation, harvesting, storing, and feeding. As I began learning about forages and nutrition, I became very interested in balancing rations and the economic impact it has on a dairy's success. Offering nutrition services and ration balancing has proven to be a successful service for my veterinary practice.

Veterinary Shift

Today's dairy producers require a veterinarian to have a more consultant-based approach. The "fire engine" approach to veterinary medicine is largely in the past. This can make it more difficult for new veterinarians to enter veterinary

practice and begin consulting dairy producers without having a good mentor. Dairy veterinarians need to be proactive and adjust their practice to accommodate the new demand of dairy producers. Will we be palpating cows in 10 years? What will the veterinarian's role be in the next 10 years? 20 years? We need to sell our services and take advantage of new opportunities to add new services to keep the dairy veterinarian sustainable and thriving.

Why not Offer Nutrition as a Service?

Can veterinarians be nutritionists? I have been told veterinarians should have nothing to do with nutrition...that we should just work on the back end of the cow and leave the front end for the nutritionists. I feel nutrition is vital for rumen health and therefore the overall health of a cow. Nutrition influences reproduction, milk production, components, and disease incidence. That fits perfectly with the role of a veterinarian. I feel nutrition and ration balancing is 1 of the next service areas veterinarians need to invest in.

I feel many veterinarians fear rations. I ask every veterinary student that rides with me how they feel about nutrition and rations. They confirm that they are afraid and feel unprepared to have anything to do with it. This is a shame. Veterinary students are largely poorly introduced to nutrition and forage evaluation. They are introduced to ration software and how to use programs, but I feel this is the wrong approach. Instead, they should be introduced to forages and what we feed them for first. How do we create a proper environment in a rumen for optimal animal health as well as production? They should be introduced to nutritional requirements and goals. After they have a good understanding of these things, then software introduction will be much easier. The computer programs are not the hard part for the young veterinarians of today. They struggle with the nutritional requirements of a dairy cow. If we teach them the requirements they will be successful using any computer program.

Nutrition Consulting

I have been asked how you get started offering nutrition services. It starts with nutrition consulting. How do most veterinary practices make money? Pregnancy diagnosis, milk quality consulting, disease prevention plans, reproduction consulting, sick animal treatment, facility design, etc. These are all services. Nutrition is no different. Veterinarians are already sitting in team meetings consulting in many areas. Nutrition is a huge part of these meetings, and is no different than consulting on reproduction. To get started I always

recommend learning to evaluate feed tests and determine what will make good feed. Learn proper planting and harvesting techniques and how to properly preserve and store forages. You can then begin consulting on forage quality and how certain feeds may be affecting the herd's performance. From there, ration balancing is right around the corner. One way I love to help my producers make and save money is by managing what I call nutrition economics. This involves constantly monitoring feed prices and locking in the best rates you can; constantly searching for alternate feed options that will save money. Minimize purchased feeds, minimize shrink, managing feed inventory, and keeping feed mix rate low when needed and find areas to invest that will yield more income. Nutrition consulting is a huge area for veterinary involvement.

Veterinarians have an Advantage

Who does a dairy producer speak to more frequently? Their nutritionist or their veterinarian? The answer to this surprised me. Their nutritionist by far! Feed changes and ration changes are occurring all the time. I have had more ration emergencies over the past several years than cow emergencies. This still surprises me. Veterinarians need to maximize the number of times their producers contact them and need their services. Veterinarians have an advantage when it comes to nutrition services. I have been told "you are already here on a regular basis, you understand my herd, you understand my management style, you know how cheap I am, and I already trust you"!! Veterinarians are already used to looking at what the cows are telling us, and not just what a paper is telling us should be going on. Starting nutrition services will be an easy process for a veterinarian. Producers like the fact that veterinarians are not feed sales people, and we do not get paid based on what we feed in a ration. We can get feed anywhere we want to.

Things I have Learned

I have learned the nutrition world is cutthroat! I hate that. I do not come in and try to steal a herd for rations. Let the producers come to you. Word travels fast in the dairy world!! Pick and choose your herds wisely. There will be herds that are not a good match for you. You probably already can list a few!! Set yourself, or other veterinarians in your practice, up for success. You do not want to jeopardize your dairy client as a result of losing a nutrition client. I always tell producers 2 things right off the bat. First, I won't balance your ration if you cannot fire me as your nutritionist, and secondly I will be making suggestions, you will be making decisions. You need to separate your veterinarian role from the nutritionist role to some degree. Don't be surprised if you occasionally get fired. It is part of the nutritionist game. Veterinarians are not used to this. Do your best and move on!!

Tough Spot for Vets

Balancing rations can be a tough spot for veterinarians. You do not want to be the person getting paid to balance the ration and to cut the LDA. This was 1 of my fears getting into the nutrition service. It keeps you on your "A" game. Keep in mind that you are the producer's veterinarian first. Making them the most money is your primary goal. If that involves you not being their nutritionist, be the first to recommend they get a second opinion. Your producer will respect the decision and will be able to tell that you have their best interest in mind.

How to Charge for Your Nutrition Services

Like your dairy producers, you will have class A through F nutrition clients. I however recommend leaving the C-F producers for the other guy!! You need to offer the service that each producer is looking for. Some will be incredibly progressive and want to add whatever will make them milk or components. Some producers will just be interested in cutting their ration costs as much as possible and settle for a bit less milk. Because all producers are different, I have found it most valuable to tier my nutrition services. My service has a range from providing service just when a producer calls to drying feed twice weekly and monthly forage testing on top of testing all new feeds. A flat monthly fee places a producer in a tier. The producer knows exactly what they will be getting and you know exactly what they expect. This works best for both the veterinarian and the producer.

Conclusion

Adding nutrition services and ration balancing to any dairy veterinary practice can be a valuable and profitable service. It is a great way for younger (and seasoned) veterinarians to start consulting on dairy farms. Offering nutrition services is no different than offering any other service. I feel it is an excellent area for veterinary involvement as the demand from dairy producers takes on a more consulting role. It is easy for veterinarians to begin consulting when focusing on forage quality and disease troubleshooting at first and then progressing from there. Taking advantage of CE opportunities like those at AABP can provide a veterinarian with the information and knowledge needed to begin nutrition consulting.