

Dairy consulting 101

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Abstract

“Consulting” is a highly sought-after area of expertise for many young veterinarians that is often ill-described and lacking direction. There are many different avenues to take in becoming a consultant, none of which are more correct than any other. A mindset shift combined with solid mentorship and a willingness to listen may be all it takes to adding consultative services to your clinic’s repertoire. A successful consultant will be extremely passionate in their chosen area of expertise, will have a well-designed learning process, an understanding of the cost and return on investment, and will have developed several rough drafts along the way. This particular veterinarian will discuss in detail her process for developing a herd metrics consultative service for the clients in her practice area.

Key words: consulting, new service, value added

Introduction

What is “consulting”? Many young veterinarians enter their chosen career path with the mindset that they need to “consult” to stay relevant in their field, but without clear direction to do so. All dairy veterinarians can agree that routine palpation will eventually come to an end, which adds pressure to this need to “consult”. As a group of relatively type-A perfectionists who frequently struggle with imposter syndrome, the first step to building a consultative service is to remove the stigma of being a consultant and bring it down to a much more manageable level that allows mistakes to be made and learned from. Quite possibly, the most important component to developing consultative services is listening to your clients and understanding what they feel they need, and in many instances, what they do not yet know that they need.

Identify your area of expertise and client needs

In order to successfully build a new service from the ground up, you need to be excited about the service. What is something you are willing to take home with you, or come in early for, something that won’t feel like a burden to work on outside of work? Understand what you know and don’t know about this topic. You don’t need to be an expert yet, but a successful veterinarian will be willing to learn and identify new ways to learn the necessary skills. A willingness to learn new skills does not necessarily translate to formal continuing education activities, but may require some creativity and ingenuity on your part.

Next, take a look at your clients. Do your clients already know that they need your new service? As is the case for many, they most likely don’t know that they need your new service, but this does not mean they aren’t interested in it. Really hear what your clients are saying and what their perceived needs are. Really listening and hearing cannot be stressed enough. Some areas will be more accessible than others, but in most instances, there is a way to create and market your service to your clients in a way that not only serves them, but fills a need they did not

realize they had. In the current dairy industry, many companies provide consulting services for “free”, but this does not mean that it is out of your realm of possibility. Consider the value you can provide to your clients by being an unbiased third party who has a full understanding of their operation, not just pieces of it. You are uniquely situated in this way to give an honest, well-educated recommendation to many of your clients’ concerns and guide them toward improved profitability, animal welfare and so much more.

Create a partial budget

Understanding the financial burden of developing a new skill as well as the return on investment is essential for new veterinarians. It is very easy to value your time as free, but it is not free. A full understanding of the cost to your employers, or lost opportunity cost while developing new skills, is incredibly helpful in valuing your new service. This does not need to be complicated, but does need to be done to provide insight on the impact to your practice’s bottom line as well as the opportunity your service has to be scaled and adapted to multiple different scenarios and operation types.

Identify your “guinea pig” client

The ideal “guinea pig” client is someone who understands the value of improving, but understands that learning new skills takes time. While it may seem logical to take a brand-new service to your A+ producers, that is not always the best starting point. A+ producers tend to have high expectations and many “experts” at their fingertips, with high expectations for all of them. A new service is something that takes time to build and develop into a final project that is efficient, concise and in a finished or clear state. Instead, consider taking a new service under development to your B/B- producers who are interested in bettering themselves, but have realistic expectations of the learning process and are more likely to be understanding while you are learning. Producers of this caliber are excited about bettering their operations, will see value in your new service, but are more likely to be patient as you learn and work out the kinks to speak of what you want your new service to look like as a final product.

Assemble and market your service

Finally, consider what you want this service to look like as a finished product. Create a rough draft, so to speak, and start working on it. Rarely do we succeed the first time we attempt something, however, with patience, time and adjustments, your first few drafts will become closer to your desired final product. For example, my experience with developing a local dairy benchmarking tool and herd monitoring system started as a poorly designed spreadsheet and a command list. However, each month adjustments were made, and year-after-year it developed into a functional metric system useful for monitoring management practices, protocol compliance and identifying trends overtime, unique to each operation. In its current state,

it is used to benchmark local herds against each other, inviting stimulating conversation and interest for everyone to grow and improve in areas they choose to as well as understand which aspects of their dairy stand room for improvement. This process did not happen in a matter of weeks. It has developed slowly over the last four years, each year gaining more interest and traction among our clients as well as becoming more uniquely valuable to our clients utilizing this service and the information it provides.

Conclusion

Consulting is often put on a lofty pedestal as something to be achieved without clear definition or direction in regard to achieving it. A good mentor, well thought out assessment of client needs (perceived or otherwise), combined with a true interest in the consultative area, are the first steps toward successfully developing a consultative service in your practice area. Followed up with an expectation of learning as you go, an understanding of the financial impact of developing a service and partnering with the right clients in the learning phase, it does not take long to provide consultative services outside of truck-side chats after herd health. You are in a unique position to provide your clients with an unbiased third-party answer to their questions and guide them toward a more healthy, profitable operation.

