

Dairy data Duolingo: The veterinarian's critical role in translating farm data to real change

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Abstract

Most veterinarians don't enter the field because they love all things data; however, they are uniquely positioned to serve the critical needs of dairy farmers by translating their herd data into meaningful stories. While it can be overwhelming to see the amount of data generated on dairy farms, it is essential to take the time to learn everything you can about your client's business. Practice working through farm data the same way you would learn another language: speaking a little bit every day and making it relevant. Each client is unique in their data needs, but all clients want to feel comfortable with their business.

Key words: data, data literacy, consulting

Traditional dairy medicine has served our profession well for a long time and still holds plenty of value. It is what we have been trained to do and are most comfortable doing, but the question has always been what should we be doing on dairies as a veterinarian? The landscape is changing, and traditional services hold less value to more dairies. This is nothing new, but many colleagues feel intimidated providing a novel service or feel limited to serving clients in a traditional role. My firm belief is we must listen to our clients and their evolving needs. Data consultation is where they need us most. If data consultation brings a sense of overwhelming anxiety and inadequacy, think of it as preventive medicine. I actively encourage veterinary medical students and recent graduates to practice and learn these non-traditional skills alongside routine procedures. One does not need to master surgery before learning how to navigate herd software and help a client gain a deeper understanding of their business. Some may feel they need to work for a certain number of years before they can even touch a farm computer. Some may feel they don't have any time or the clinic places little to no value in non-traditional services. Even if there is lack of support in the workplace, it is imperative to give yourself the gift of learning a new skill that has applications to farms of any size. If it is a priority to you, it will get done.

Start small with your journey into dairy data literacy. Often, routine herd health visits can foster huge opportunities for veterinarians to gain trust and access to client data. We only have to show we care for most clients to open their doors to us data wise. There is no excuse for a herd veterinarian to not know their client's goals and their animal health data inside and out. Routine herd health visits are a gift to our profession, it is not a right. If veterinarians won't touch dairy health and production data, who will fill the gap on these farms? How can we generate lasting value to our clients? Often there are young veterinarians with the desire to do more for clients, but it can be overwhelming in dairy hotspots where there are plenty of free consultants tied to products. There is plenty of room at the feed bunk for all to eat on a large dairy. Stop telling yourself clients won't pay for these services when they could get them from a company for only buying product. As a dairy veterinarian, your routine presence on farm allows you to be more effective at facilitating positive change than someone that may swing by a few days of

the year. By routinely working with client data, their herd, and their people, you are given the best chance of success in spotting opportunities before they can blow into disasters and helping clients reach their goals.

Population medicine requires knowledge of herd data and while this may sound all well and good, practically speaking, there are too many herd software programs holding this data for us to become experts at and often they don't play well with each other. Thankfully, there are plenty of resources available through these companies to learn their programs on demand or having scheduled calls with technicians to walk through questions you may have. They want people to be able to use their product and be happy with it. AABP has several great talks, preconference seminars, and courses held at AABP headquarters that can assist in the learning process, especially for common programs like DairyComp 305. That being said, to hope that we can learn a program and be able to utilize it effectively for consulting purposes in a day, let alone an hour, will lead to failed expectations. Even with knowledge of a client's herd software and the ability to find the data you want, you likely need to analyze it further than what the program is made to do. This is when you reach for spreadsheet and data analysis programs such as Excel, R, SAS, Python, Tableau or Power BI. All of these programs require training to use and can't be mastered in a day, just as with the herd software programs.

Many reach a roadblock and stop trying to learn a program after seeing the complexities. I always try to first help students and recent graduates adjust their expectations when learning to work with client data through the numerous software modalities found on farm. Think of it as learning a new language. The programs may use different words but they ultimately convey the same meaning. Be intentional and aggressive in your learning. Learn to love the challenge of failure and resist the type-A urge to quit things you are not naturally good at. Every language must be spoken regularly to learn it. Toddlers readily learn language by babbling without fear of embarrassment or failure. Be consistent and start small. As fast as you can learn a program, you will forget it even faster by not utilizing it regularly.

Thinking about data should be an organic and simple process. Even if you are comfortable playing with data, your clients may not be. Data for the sake of having data is useless unless it is rendered to answer a client's questions. Every client should be asked what their goals are, what metrics do they use to evaluate their business, what data do they record and why, and what questions they might have about their business. We must think big picture with clients and their information and meet them where they are in their data journey. Data literacy, the skill to organize, analyze and communicate data, is essential for the dairy practitioner working on any farm. We are using herd data to turn every report into a story about their business.

