

Practice Meetings for Farmers

- How to Get the Best Out of Them

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Key Facts

- **Practice meetings for farmers can be valuable both commercially and professionally.**
- **Successful meetings require careful planning and attention to detail.**
- **All parties concerned (practice members, farmers and pharmaceutical company) should benefit from and enjoy such meetings.**

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Practice meetings at which farming clients are invited to hear presentations on subjects of interest to them have long been common events in many large animal and mixed practices.

The success of such meetings, however, is not guaranteed merely by the presence of a speaker, some pretty slides, an audience, a free bar and some tasty food!

Successful meetings need good preparation and sound management. In this paper the pre-meeting preparations, the actual running of meetings and often neglected post-meeting follow-up actions are examined in some detail.

It should be noted that many of the views expressed are based on the personal experiences of the author over 5 years of giving presentations to farmer meetings for several pharmaceutical companies. As such these views should not necessarily be regarded as being those of SmithKline Beecham Animal Health.

Getting the best out of your practice meetings requires attention to 3 areas:

- Pre-meeting preparation
- Meeting management
- Post-meeting follow-up actions

Pre-Meeting Preparation

The Reason Behind the Meeting

Establish and appreciate the reason for holding the meeting. Some practices appear to have a policy of run-

ning a set number every year. They have done so for many years and feel obliged to continue (sometimes regardless of how useful they really are). Other practices appear to use such meetings to publicly spend money on their clients in order perhaps to "reward" their loyalty as clients.

Launching and promoting new or existing pharmaceutical products is another common reason for holding meetings. The desire to hold them may arise either from the practices or the pharmaceutical company's need to increase sales. In the former case, practice involvement is generally good and enthusiastic. In the latter however, lack of practice "buy-in" can doom such meetings from the start. Nothing cancels out the positive selling message of a meeting better than negative comments or questions from practice members either before or after the main presentation (see later sections).

Who to Invite

Decide who is going to be invited to the meeting. One of the main deciding factors here is the previous point i.e. "Why are you holding the meeting". If you want the meeting for PR reasons then invite everyone who deserves the "freebie." If you want to promote and sell a new drug for example, then only invite those clients who will benefit from the talk and who will be likely to try the product afterwards. All too often the audience at meetings contains only 20 to 30% of truly interested and potential customers.

A common response from practices on being asked to "target" the audience is that they don't want to offend uninvited clients. One way around this is to avoid inviting more than 20 clients and to promote the meeting not as being another "practice meeting" but more of a disease workshop/discussion group. Try holding such meetings during the day i.e. at lunch time, to avoid them being seen by those uninvited clients as entertainment at the practice's expense. Make it work not play. The subject e.g. calf pneumonia, is important after all and its control should be considered and treated as being work for both the practice and the clients invited.

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Meeting Format

The format for a meeting should be closely linked to its size and purpose. Small meetings can easily be held around a large table in a meeting room at the practice or at a local hotel. Many hotels have large meeting rooms ideally suited and designed to host this sort of meeting. It is important to keep such meetings as informal as possible though. Avoid unnecessary formality. However, the larger a meeting, the more formal it usually needs to be.

Input from practice members can greatly improve the value and relevance of a meeting, particularly in the eyes of the clients. It also offers the opportunity to get across practice-specific messages/warnings, etc. and adds support and credibility to visiting presenters.

Invitations

How to invite your farmers? Generally, unless numbers are going to be very small it is sensible to send out printed invitations on card. Unless you can get them professionally prepared at low cost it makes more sense, if possible, to ask the relevant pharmaceutical company to prepare them for you. Remember to allow plenty of time before the meeting to send them out. Farmers often have a choice of several evening meetings during the week and unless you give them plenty of warning you may find them attending an NFU meeting rather than yours. Keep an eye out for major sporting occasions too. The local team reaching the Cup Final is frequently more of a draw than a talk on "Calf Scours and Its Control." Where possible, talk to your clients about the forthcoming meeting during your calls. This will act as a powerful reminder and will show how enthusiastic **all** the practice vets are about the meeting. This highlights another important area.

Communication

All members of the practice (not just the vets) must know about the meeting. It doesn't say much for the importance of a meeting if a client asks the lay-staff or an assistant about it and they don't even know when it is, let alone what it's about!

Inform your practice about the meeting and, very importantly, **why** the practice is holding it. If there is a conflict of opinion about the value of a new product (for example) discuss it **before**, not at the meeting! If there are skeptics in the practice, arrange for them to discuss the subject with the speaker or the representative before they attend the meeting. If they are totally "agin" the product, I suggest they either don't attend or they keep quiet. One negative vet at a meeting can ruin it and says little for the professional "team" image most practices like to present to their clients.

The Venue

Finding a suitable venue can be difficult in some rural areas but it is very important to consider the num-

bers likely to attend and to choose an appropriately sized room. Too big a room and it is unwelcoming, too small and it will soon become hot and stuffy. Most dairy farmers need little encouragement to fall asleep after 8 o'clock at night so an overly hot room can be a disaster! On the subject of sleeping, although it is common practice to provide a complimentary drink before the meeting, in my opinion this is best kept to the end to avoid either full bladders or alcohol induced narcosis reducing audience attentiveness.

Once again one needs to have a clear view of what the meeting is for. If it's an "evening out" then pre-meeting drinks can be important. If the meeting is more serious then complimentary drinks are probably best left until afterwards.

Catering

Catering for evening meetings frequently results (in my experience) in large amounts of wasted food. Most farmers will have eaten beforehand so unless you are in the habit of providing a big "feed" then I believe the catering should center around savory nibbles/snacks rather than rounds and rounds of sandwiches, baked potatoes and bowls of stew.

A word in support of fellow speakers. If the speaker does not have company support with them e.g. a representative, then it is courteous to offer to get them some food and a drink after the official meeting is over as they have usually been ambushed by a farmer or two wanting to ask them about some involved problem that they have. As it may be a long time before they can get free, some refreshments will usually be most welcome - especially as they often have to witness everyone but them "tucking-in" while they deal with the enquiry.

Parking and Directions

Everybody drives to meetings, so pick a venue with ample safe parking, preferably within easy reach of the clients that have been invited. Good directions to the venue are also useful for the speaker as their local knowledge of roads and villages will not be as good as yours or your clients.

Meeting Management

Getting It Started

So, now we have everyone in the meeting room. The seats are all full except the front row or two (nobody ever wants to sit in them!) and it's time to begin the meeting.

It is always best for a well known member of the practice to welcome everyone and to introduce the speaker. It's **your** practice meeting so make sure the audience appreciates this. Welcome the audience on behalf of the practice and thank the sponsors (if there are any). It is then a good idea to introduce or indicate those members of the practice who are present. Remem-

ber, not all of the clients know all the vets in your practice (especially new assistants) and it will help to demonstrate how committed the whole practice is to the meeting. Introducing lay staff is also a good idea and makes them feel part of the team.

When introducing the speaker keep it brief. Long bibliographies or anecdotes from student days are not a good idea. The audience generally believes the speaker to be an "expert" on the subject (until proven otherwise!) and it is unhelpful to destroy that image before they even start by recounting stories of failed exams or drunken student parties!

When you're opening the meeting avoid prejudging the presentation and don't express strong personal opinions (unless they're very supportive) of the speaker and/or the product in question.

Question Time

As the practice representative and chairperson at the meeting you will have opened the meeting and, hopefully, paid attention during it. The speaker has finished and it is now up to you to chair question time.

Always try to have a question of your own ready to ask in case, as often happens, the audience is too shy to ask first. Keep it simple and remember who the audience is. Detailed "veterinary" questions about levels of IgA in respiratory mucosa after intranasal vaccination are **not** suitable for most farmer meetings. That sort of question is best dealt with before the meeting or privately afterwards.

When the question about cost of product/services comes up, be prepared. Know what your current prices are. Don't expect the visiting speaker to know the answer unless of course they have been briefed beforehand.

From time to time questions that bear no relevance to the topic of the meeting or outbursts of indignant outrage from dissatisfied clients occur. These need to be controlled by the chairperson. They should be thanked for their comments/questions but reminded that the purpose of question-time is to clarify areas not fully covered in the presentation. They should then be requested to come up at the end to discuss the matter privately.

Coming from the local vet who they all know and trust, such deflection of difficult questions is acceptable. When deflected by the "smart Alec" from the drug company it can often be seen as evasive and untrustworthy.

Don't overdo the length of question time. Remember how full peoples bladders may be (especially the older members of the audience!) and how distracting the smell of freshly laid out food may be.

Closing

Thank the audience for their questions and their attention. Thank the speaker, perhaps with a short summary of the key points or take-home messages, and initiate the applause. Then, direct the audience to the catering and remind them who is available from the practice to answer their queries.

Post Meeting Follow-up Actions

It is all over now but the eating and drinking? No. An important and often neglected area is post-meeting follow-up.

It's no good having meetings unless you gauge how successful they were. Ask the audience both at the meeting and later, on your calls. Don't just ask them if it was good or bad. Ask them **why** it was good or bad. That way the next ones will be better because you'll know what to improve on.

If it was a meeting intended to boost sales of a product or a service then compare "before" and "after" figures. Just how much more sales or interest did it generate. Was it worth all the effort?

Last, but not least, give feed-back to the outside speaker and the representative who helped organize it. Everyone needs to know how they performed and you are in the best position to find out and to tell them.

So, practice meetings for farmers - potentially very rewarding, both financially and professionally - but only with good planning and forethought. One final thought on the matter. Enjoy them! If you don't enjoy them let someone else in the practice organize or chair them or don't do them at all!