

Successful concepts for building beef practice

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Abstract

While there is not a universally accepted definition describing complete success for beef practices, the aim of this paper is to outline 10 concepts that have been important to the success of Feedlot Health Management Services Ltd. These 10 tools provide a framework for beef practice owners to specifically define success for their practice and customize a plan for accomplishing that objective.

Key words: cattle, beef, practice management

Résumé

Bien qu'il n'existe pas de définition universellement acceptée pour décrire le succès absolu dans les pratiques de bovins de boucherie, le but de cet article est de souligner dix concepts qui se sont avérés importants dans le succès de *Feedlot Health Management Services Ltd.* Ces dix outils fournissent un cadre aux propriétaires de ces pratiques qui sert spécifiquement à définir le succès dans leur pratique et de personnaliser un plan pour accomplir cet objectif.

Introduction

People may define success in many different ways, depending on individual preferences and circumstances. For some, success means piloting a spacecraft to the moon, whereas for others it means finally moving out of their parent's basement. Discussions with veterinarians will provide an equally wide array of milestone measures of success. At the American Association of Bovine Practitioners Conference in Milwaukee in 2013, Dr. Arn Anderson talked about the "view forward" for his beef practice and challenged those in attendance to ask themselves why they were cow-calf veterinarians. In answering the question he said, "After all the standard answers of loving livestock and livestock producers, enjoying the outdoors and relishing the challenge and the pungent odor of extracting a necrotic calf, eventually you will focus on 2 central themes: there is a need for your services and you want to make money."¹ We will use this as an excellent starting point for defining success for individual beef veterinarians fulfilling a need for service in such a way that generates profit.

So, is success simply a measure of the amount of profit generated? For some it might be, but not all determinations of success can be assigned a monetary value. If success could only be determined by total net worth, we might have chosen other careers. Studies to quantify the characteristics of successful veterinarians have identified an array of characteristics that contribute towards success.^{7,12} Therefore, it is up to the owners of the beef practice to establish their definition of success.

Studies on career success describe success as a "desired outcome of a career", and thus a destination that one progresses towards in degrees.¹⁰ For this article, let's assume all beef practices exist on this success continuum and are looking to improve their degree of success. Success criteria for small business owners has been divided into 2 general categories: 1) personal and interpersonal criteria and 2) business criteria.¹¹ For beef practices these criteria may be influenced by such things as personal interests, geographic location, timing, resource availability, capital availability, level of risk aversion, client needs, and regulatory environment. However, the following 10 concepts can provide the opportunity for creating ongoing success for any beef practice.

1. **Beef Practice is a Business** – In general, as a profession, we have a tendency to lean towards relying on our veterinary training and skills without consideration for organizing those services into a complete business and service model.⁷ Thus as veterinarians owning beef practices, there needs to be some emphasis on developing, organizing, and operating a business.⁷ We can acquire these business skills for ourselves or hire/partner with individuals that have those skills.
2. **Clear Vision and Mission** – Mission and vision statements are generally considered essential for all types of organizations and have been shown to have a positive association with the organization's financial performance.² Vision statements provide the overarching direction for the organization in a way that should motivate the team members to help shape the organization into the future. From that a mission statement is developed that succinctly describes the organization's key purpose; the reason that the organization exists.⁸ The owner(s) must be able to clearly describe the direc-

tion of beef practice and how success will be measured. What abilities, tools, and resources does the practice currently have, what others are needed and how can these be refined? They must also be monitoring and preparing for upcoming challenges, difficulties, and opportunities. This type of leadership is an essential component of aligning the beef practice team. Bart et al investigated the impact of mission statements on a company's performance and concluded, "Only when employees feel the heat of the mission or have a sense of the mission, will they be in a position to execute and implement it with a profound passion and resolve."²

3. **Alignment** – Organizations that are effective in aligning their structure, systems, and procedures with their mission have the greatest effect on positively influencing employee behaviour by rewarding employee activities as appropriate.² This alignment approach can then be extended to create the correct alignment with clients, suppliers, business associates, business partners, and business collaborators. The central idea is to establish the outcomes most desired by each party, determine the commonalities among those outcomes, and then finally connect the rewards to those outcomes so as to motivate all parties toward outcomes that are positive and common. Complete alignment is very difficult to achieve, but it has been our experience that sufficient alignment can be achieved if all parties are willing to commit the required time and creative effort. In all cases, it has been worth it.
4. **Team Approach** – The ultimate form of the team approach is for the beef practice to have clients rather than individuals within the practice having clients. This approach moves away from one where veterinarians have their client lists and derive their revenue stream from the services they provide to those on the list. They come together to share overhead, resources, and to participate in an after-hours call schedule. However, the value to the client is dependent on the individual veterinarian, and there is a lack of economic incentive for other veterinarians to be part of the service delivery and value creation. When using the team approach, the collective expertise of the beef practice team works in concert in a planned and formal way within the practice's service and business model to create synergistic client value that cannot be attained by individuals. The business structure, revenue streams, and service plan are designed such that all members of the beef practice team (professionals, paraprofessionals, and support staff) are incentivized to contribute to this value creation by matching individual skills, interests, and personalities to service and business functions. In order to be successful, the beef practice must develop exceptional internal and external communication abilities to

prevent clients receiving a service that is disjointed or disorganized.

5. **Formalized Decision Making Process** - Sound decision making is essential for the success of any business and is best accomplished by gathering the relevant information in a timely and effective manner, prioritizing the decisions, understanding biases, then assigning and allocating appropriate time and resources according to their relative importance to the business.^{5,9} In addition, as a veterinary practice servicing the beef industry, there is the need to assist clients with their decisions. The practice's level of involvement in those client decisions varies widely depending on the services provided. In all cases, remember that veterinarians are trained scientists that have the ability to translate data into the knowledge that clients require so that they can implement plans in a way that brings them value.¹ This is most effectively accomplished by understanding the industry and business in which clients operate, so as to be able to focus the data collection, economic modeling, and decision making on areas that bring the largest value to the client.
6. **Technical Expertise and Competency** - Having the ability to differentiate your company in a positive way is an important component of success for all companies. Many of the tools on this list can be applied to enhance the success of any business, and may not be limited to successful beef practices. However, as competent veterinarians, we have the opportunity to provide a unique service compared to all other non-veterinary service providers in the beef industry. This allows for beef practices to leverage other areas of technical expertise into their service offering. This can be accomplished by further training of veterinarians or by including those with other technical expertise as part of the beef practice team. It can include expertise in data collection, statistical analysis, data modeling, economic modeling, epidemiology, nutrition, beef production, pathology, applied research, process optimization, quality assurance, animal welfare, meat science, and many others.
7. **Sustainability and Adaptability** - Implicit in the concept of success is that the practice is associated with some longevity and has a business model that is sustainable over time. Balanced consideration of the economic, environmental, and ethical aspects of sustainability provides the best opportunity for success over the long term.¹³ If a beef practice has done a good job of creating alignment with its clients, then the practice and its clients will share many of the same challenges and opportunities related to sustainability. Closely tied to the sustainability of the beef practice, adaptability is meant to describe the practice's overall

ability to be flexible as well as its willingness to continually question its own business model and business strategies. Over time this is likely to have a spectrum of outcomes, from incremental adjustments in approach and strategy all the way to disruptive innovation⁴ or creative destruction.¹⁴

8. **Passion for the Beef Business** – In his book *Intrinsic Motivation at Work: Building Energy & Commitment*, Kenneth Wayne Thomas describes how all of us are motivated in our work by both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. He states that intrinsic motivation “requires more initiative and commitment, which depend on deeper passions and satisfactions than extrinsic rewards can offer... Intrinsic rewards come to workers directly from the work they do – satisfactions like pride of workmanship or the sense that they are helping a customer.”¹⁵ Those that have this “deeper passion” for the beef industry can use this as intrinsic motivation to do all of the extra things, to work hard even when no one is watching and to not give up when others would. This attribute compels veterinarians to be relevant to their clients by being involved in the veterinary and beef industries. This passion for the beef business, channeled through an appropriate business model and skill sets, transforms difficulties into opportunities, engenders client loyalty, and is contagious to the rest of the beef practice team.

9. **Relentless Focus on Customer Service** – In his book, *Leading at a Higher Level*, Ken Blanchard describes the 6 elements of “high performing organizations.” One of these elements is “relentless focus on customer service” such that everyone in the organization ensures that everything starts and ends with the customer.³ A beef practice is a service provider, and without customers the beef practice will not exist. This simple statement should influence every action performed by each member of the beef practice team so that their actions demonstrate their determination for providing exemplary customer service. I suspect some have immediately begun to think about some clients that are difficult to work for, and wonder if they deserve this exemplary service or even if they would notice if they had. There is no doubt that such clients exist, but remember that in order for the practice to have a relentless focus on customer service, it must be adopted as the culture of the practice regardless who is the recipient. It has been the experience of Feedlot Health Management Services Ltd. that customers have different expectations of service, but the goal is to understand those expectations and to deliver services to that level plus a little bit more. This allows for consideration for the economic costs associated with the service so that it can be provided in a profitable and sustainable manner.

10. **Recognize the Role of Timing and Serendipity** – As a client has pointed out, “don’t mistake good timing for good management”. It is important to recognize that the opposite is also true, bad timing doesn’t mean bad management. Recognizing the role of timing and luck in the outcomes of our business keeps us grounded for future decisions. On the one hand, it helps to prevent our egos from becoming over-inflated, while on the other, it keeps us from being overly deflated when the best laid plans don’t provide the intended result. Often the word ‘serendipity’ is used to explain both of these scenarios. The term was originally coined by Horace Walpole in 1754 when referencing the Persian fairy tale, *The Three Princes of Serendip*, when he said the princes were, “always making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity.”⁶ Often when we think of serendipity, we think only of the “accidents” or luck and forget it also includes an aspect of mental discernment and sound judgment. So when things do work in the favor of the beef practice, always remember that good luck and timing may have played a significant role, but don’t sell yourself short as it still requires a prepared mind that recognizes and capitalizes on the moment.

Conclusion

A successful beef practice can be defined in a number of ways, but at the very least it needs to be providing a needed service while generating a profit. Although not comprehensive, the concepts for a successful beef practice discussed here have been identified as having applicability to all beef practices. The concepts related to each tool have been described, but the specific application of each tool must be customized by the practice owners. One place to start that customization process is by asking the question, what is the practice doing today that creates an opportunity for tomorrow?

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