

ADVANCEMENTS IN SUCCESSFUL CONSULTING REQUIRES TIME, COMMITMENT

It takes a lot of education to be a nutritionist. An established nutrition consultant has exerted significant effort to master ration balancing, protein synthesis, carbohydrate fractions and the like. But even if you aced organic chemistry, there's an entire other skill set you'll need to master to differentiate yourself in the consulting nutrition field.



"Unfortunately, just having the letters 'PhD' after our names does not automatically make us valuable to dairymen or successful in our careers," says Jeff Weyers, PhD, consulting nutritionist with Compass Nutrition, Stephenville, Texas. "Communication and relationship-building skills are just as—if not more—important than our technical abilities."

"In my opinion, there are two types of relationships," says Rajesh Setty, personal management consultant, author and speaker from Santa Clara, Calif. "They are (1) long-term; and (2) very long-term.

The rest are casual transactions." Setty says relationships become long-term only when there is mutual value. A one-sided relationship will not endure the test of time.

Establishing trust, delivering relevance

Weyers says he works to add value to every client relationship so that the dairymen he serves each have 100% confidence in him. That level of trust and confidence must be built gradually over time, and is the result of efforts to be consistently responsive, bring new ideas to the table, and be sensitive to every client's business needs and personal situations. "Every dairy is unique in terms of its management style and structure; nutritional needs and available

feedstuffs; and personalities that run the operation," he says. "It's important to demonstrate to clients that you understand those subtle differences and don't try to take a 'one size fits all' approach."

Likewise, Setty says asking the right questions and truly listening to the answers are keys to adding value to the relationship and bringing relevant information to the client. "Think of the last time you 'tuned out' of a conversation," he suggests. "One of the reasons you did so may have been that the other person continued to say things that were not relevant to you. Now, the key question is: How many times do you continue to talk with someone about something that is not relevant to them? If we are not relevant, people will tune out and our messages will not get through." He adds that relevance starts by truly caring for people with whom you interact. "Once you care, you will start taking notice of what is relevant to them, rather than focusing on what is relevant to you."

Invest in yourself

Being able to deliver value stems from developing your own knowledge and skills, so you can be a useful source of input and information to your clients. Setty identifies three key areas of personal development that he encourages to enhance one's technical and personal worth:

1 Know your values – Values state what is most important in each of our lives, and everyone has them, whether they are clearly defined and personally recognized or not. "Interestingly, very few people spend their time trying to identify their values," he says. "Whenever we make a significant decision, it will be based on our values, so it's important to know what they are."

2 Be a reader – It has been said that all leaders are readers. "Most people don't read, but most

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Consultants **C O R N E R**

SETTING YOURSELF APART IN A COMPETITIVE FIELD

In the Texas Panhandle where much of my business is based, there are about 60 consulting dairy nutritionists. To say competition is stiff is a dramatic understatement. Here are some key priorities that have been helpful to me in growing our practice and achieving client loyalty:

1 Phone management – The telephone is my lifeline to my clients, and answering their calls—even on weekends and holidays—is the most important thing I can do to support our relationship. Even if I am not able to take a call right away, I'll send a short text to let them know I'll be right back with them. When a dairyman calls a nutritionist, it almost always means there's a situation that needs to be solved.

2 Consistent presence – I work a rotating schedule between the Panhandle, central Texas and Kansas that puts me on every client's dairy at least twice a month. I could easily see more dairies if I cut this back to once a month, but I think the regular, face-to-face time; records

and feed evaluation; and visual observation of the cows in my existing herds is more valuable than trying to add new ones.

3 Management team involvement – Particularly on larger dairies, the owner is just one of my key constituents. I also need to have a strong relationship with the herdsman and the others who are doing the day-to-day management of the cows, as well as other herd advisors like veterinarians. The impact of the advice I dispense is dependent on all of these people, so it's important to show them respect and work jointly with them. I have a personal goal of learning Spanish, which would help me strengthen many of these relationships on the dairies even more.

4 Travel efficiency – My client base that spans Texas, New Mexico and Kansas puts me on the road about 6,000 miles per month or 72,000 per year. With a young family, time spent away from home tops the list of causes for premature burn-out. One thing I have done to improve travel efficiency is to obtain my pilot's license. A five-hour drive becomes a two-hour flight, and in the process I get to take my mind totally off work and enjoy my favorite hobby, while servicing my customers more efficiently.

5 Personal improvement – As busy as life gets day-to-day, I still need to add to my knowledge base; set and monitor long-term personal goals; and maintain balance in my life so I can sustain the energy and perspective to serve my clients well. I read dairy trade magazines cover-to-cover every month to stay abreast of new information and be aware of what my clients are reading. I also enjoy the interaction with my peers by being involved in professional organizations. And I make time to rest my mind and body by engaging in pleasurable activities like flying, fishing, football and family time.

Of course, in addition it is important to do great nutrition work and help dairies maximize long-term productivity while minimizing costs. But I find it is much easier for me to do that when I have all of these other bases covered.

Quality **C O R N E R**

Grouping Strategy Affects Application of Prepartum Anionic Diets

Along with Dr. Overton's comments on managing transition cows, your choice of grouping strategy for dry cows can influence your approach to feeding anionic diets. If you choose to separate close-up heifers from mature dry cows, perhaps you can save a few dollars by not feeding anionic supplements to the heifers. They generally don't have much problem with milk fever, and may not benefit as much from supplemental anions as mature cows do. However, research by DeGroot et al. (2010) showed that first lactation cows that had been fed anionic diets prepartum consumed more dry matter and had lower blood concentrations of NEFA and BHBA during the first 3 weeks of lactation than did first lactation cows that had been fed prepartum diets without anionic supplements.

Also, if you choose a one group dry cow program and would like to utilize anionic diets to manage milk fever and subclinical hypocalcemia, the high calcium approach (greater than 100 grams calcium intake per day) is probably preferable to the low calcium approach (less than 50 grams calcium intake per day). Achieving a low calcium diet is one way to enhance calcium utilization at calving, and the mobilization of bone calcium can be enhanced by prepartum anionic diets. But, doing so for the entire dry period may remove too much calcium from storage sites in the bone.

Reference: DeGroot, M. A., E. Block and P. D. French. 2010. Effect of prepartum anionic supplementation on periparturient feed intake, health, and milk production. J. Dairy Sci. 93:5268-5279.

MEASURING DAIRY FEED EFFICIENCY

Feed expenses typically represent at least half of the total revenue on a dairy farm. Thus, keeping a handle on feed costs relative to cow performance on a routine basis is critical to a dairy's success.

"The gold standard for measuring feeding profit in dairying is income over feed cost (IOFC)," explains Robert Fry, dairy nutrition consultant with Atlantic Dairy Management Services, Kennedyville, Md. "However, this calculation often is cumbersome on a day-to-day or week-to-week basis because milk pricing is unknown until sometime in the future, and changes in feed prices often are out of the control of management."

To more regularly monitor feed expense ratios "on the fly," Fry borrows a tool from the meat-animal livestock production sector by evaluating feeding efficiency (FE). While the desired output of the dairy animal (milk) is different from that of other livestock (body weight mass/meat), the concept is the same: measuring the amount of output (milk) relative to the amount of input (feed).

"FE in its most simplified form is calculated by dividing milk production by dry-matter intake (DMI)," explains Fry. "But because breed, stage of lactation, season and genetics can be so variable, a more correct measure of FE is calculated using energy corrected milk production to adjust milk to standardized butterfat and protein." The result is a more precise metric called energy corrected dry matter efficiency (EC-DME).

Fry shares the formula for calculating energy corrected milk (ECM):

$$\text{ECM} = [(12.82 \times \text{fat lbs.}) + (7.13 \times \text{protein lbs.}) + (0.323 \times \text{milk lbs.})].$$

EC-DME is then calculated by simply dividing the DMI into the ECM. Fry notes that when using EC-DME to evaluate performance, "higher is better." "Early lactation will be higher than late lactation; diet formulation and feed additives will influence the ratio; and higher digestible forages will drive the ratio higher," he states. "The unique value of EC-DME is that it has a direct and positive influence on IOFC, within parameters under management control."

F R O M T H E

MANAGING TRANSITION COWS FOR SUCCESS

Research on the transition-cow complex has identified elevated circulating concentrations of nonesterified fatty acids (NEFA) as a predictive marker for fresh-cow disease occurrence and impaired reproductive performance. Cornell University professor of animal science Tom Overton, PhD, says elevated NEFA levels are associated with increased risk for metabolic disorders in both heifers and cows; decreased reproductive performance in heifers and cows; and decreased ME305 projected milk yield in cows.

Overton and his colleagues have examined and performed research on a variety of management practices for optimal transition-cow care:

Stocking density – Much of the research on stocking density to date has been based on field observations versus randomized trials. In one randomized study that did examine the issue (Proudfoot et al. 2009), overstocking and thus competitive feeding of multiparous cows resulted in more feeding visits but lower dry-matter intake (DMI) in the week before calving; less feeding time in the first

week postcalving; and higher feeding rates in the second week postcalving.

Pen moves – Overton says many farms have applied the recommendations by Cook and Nordlund (2004) to eliminate pen moves two to five days prior to calving and shorten fresh-pen stays, with positive results. Recent research by von Keyserlingk et al. (2008) indicates that cows' sensitivity to pen moves may not be as great in mid-lactation as it is in the transition period.

Commingleing of cows and heifers – Overton suggests that separating primiparous and multiparous cows during both the prepartum and postpartum periods presents a major opportunity to avoid fresh-cow complications. In a study comparing elevated NEFA levels in both pre- and postpartum groups (Ospina et al. 2009) in which cows and heifers were not separated, a staggering 70% of herds had more than 25% of their first-calf heifers with elevated NEFA levels during the prepartum period, indicating that DMI was compromised in those animals.

Heat stress abatement – Based on Israeli research (Wolfenstein et al. 1988) that

showed a positive impact on postpartum milk- and fat-production due to evaporative cooling during the entire dry period, Overton and his colleagues believe that heat stress in cows that calve in the heat of summer contributes to lower milk yields in the fall. They also suggest the situation is further exacerbated by overstocking in transition groups in the summer months due to high levels of fall calving caused by poor reproductive performance during the previous summer.

Nutritional grouping strategies -- The Cornell researchers point to a number of studies that support the value of moderating energy intake during the entire dry period as a means of reducing postpartum metabolic diseases and keeping postpartum NEFA levels low. Whether such a diet is fed in a one-group dry-cow scenario, or a "far-off" and "close-up" split, depends an array of considerations including herd size, facilities and labor availability. If a "one group" strategy is employed, Overton suggests that macromineral levels be set similar to those that would be included in a close-up ration, to avoid hypocalcemia and related disorders.

Maternity Pen



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Nutrition

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successful people do a lot of reading,” observes Setty. He suggests reading one book a month, or 12 books a year, as a realistic goal. As far as what to read, Setty believes it should be material that helps take the individual “to the next level.” “Ask your role models to suggest books that have helped them in their journey. You’ll be amazed at what you will learn.”

3 Think long-term – “We are becoming a world of short-term thinkers,” observes Setty. “We tend to overestimate what we can do in a day, and underestimate what we can do in a year.” He suggests that every individual have an annual plan. It should be reviewed regularly to check progress and avoid getting caught up in day-to-day “busyness.” “Very rarely do we check everything off of our daily ‘to-do’ lists, but you can pack a lot into a year with some discipline and commitment,” he says.

The challenging dairy economy of the past several years has heightened the importance of keeping a

sharp skill set and maintaining strong relationships between nutrition consultants and their client dairies. At the same time, it has put a strain on those relationships. “When margins get slimmer and dairymen are looking to shave every nickel and penny they can, you hope the long-term trust and value that you have established will preserve your client relationships,” says Weyers. “Unfortunately, that won’t always be the case, and you have to learn to not take those changes personally.” He adds that being truly invested in one’s clients and their lives can sometimes take a personal toll, as he has watched some of them endure extreme hardships and even tragedies in recent years. “This business is a whole lot more fun when everyone is doing well and making money, but there also is gratification in enduring the long haul together.”

*Excerpted from “25 Ways to Distinguish Yourself”
by Rajesh Setty*