

The Role of Veterinarians and Nutritionists as Consultants For Dairies

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Many of the same principles that apply to making a business successful, apply to operating a successful dairy. One fundamental factor for any business is establishing and maintaining a strong team. While the team behind a dairy may look different than that of a traditional business, they all have the common goal of making their companies profitable. The team behind a dairy consists of individuals focused on improving and maintaining herd health, because a dairy is only successful if its animals are healthy and producing. The individuals who comprise this team must be able to provide the skills and expertise needed to develop practices to maintain healthy animals. The farm manager, veterinarian and nutritionist are typically the individuals who make up the team responsible for the maintenance of herd health. In some cases, additional specialists and technicians may be included. This paper will explore the dynamics of the team behind a dairy.



Today's Role for Veterinarians

The role of veterinarians in the dairy industry is ever changing just like the industry itself. Change in the size and sophistication of dairies, in general, has caused a change in a veterinarian's typical role at an operation. In many cases, veterinarians are no longer needed to examine and treat every animal or even perform every pregnancy exam. Veterinarians, now, play an intrinsic role in establishing protocols, especially as it relates to treatments with antibiotics, and training farm employees how to implement them.

Veterinarians as Consultants

The job of a dairy veterinarian has shifted from primarily clinical work to helping establish protocols, meet guidelines, and train employees. Veterinarians are key resources when establishing protocols for calving, newborn care, animal-handling, and disease detection. Veterinarians must be able to advise and train farm staff on how to implement a protocol, recognize issues, and determine the best steps to resolve health-related issues. Veterinarians are also important consultants when it comes to reproductive health. They are able to help fine-tune specific synchronization techniques and heat detecting procedures that are cost effective or are a best fit for an individual operation. Animal welfare programs, like FARM, further the importance of dairy producers establishing a strong relationship with a veterinarian. These programs establish criteria for pain management, employee training and other policies that make it important to have an on-going relationship with a veterinarian. Veterinarians are required to stay up-to-date with guidelines and national regulations, such as the restrictions of antibiotic use. All extra-label use of antibiotics requires that a veterinarian develop the treatment for a particular animal(s). Stricter regulations and programs are making veterinarians an increasingly important resource to make sure all requirements are met, that if are not properly met can be very costly for a producer.

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Nutritionist responsibilities

Nutrition is central to the health and performance of dairy cows. Nutrition lays the foundation for a cow's success through all stages of her life and lactation. Nutritionists' primary role in the dairy industry is the balancing of dietary components to produce high quality feed promoting optimal milking performance. Every dairy has its own goals and every cow and every facility are unique; so, nutritionists are tasked with establishing diets that work best for each individual operation. Nutritionists also offer knowledge on what management practices optimize feed efficiency, health, cow comfort, and other aspects that impact profitability. They are able to advise on how things from feed storage, feed mixing, and feeding routines can impact the efficiency in cows. A relatively new responsibility of the nutritionist is minimizing environmental impacts. Some areas around the country are heavily restricted on the output on minerals such as Nitrogen and Phosphorus. Nutritionists are able to balance rations that still provide optimal nutrients, but minimize environmental impacts in compliance with regulations.

The Farmer's Role is Central

Farmers have a large workload and often have a hand in all aspects of the farm. At the same time, each is only one person and cannot be everywhere or do everything by themselves. A farmer must be able to distribute the workload and also effectively communicate to all parties involved in the dairy. Their work is central to the success of the dairy. The farmer serves as an information liaison and communicates to both the employees who are interacting directly with the animals and the consultants who are helping to establish protocols and procedures on the farm. He or she must be able to effectively relay information on both ends and have an open line of communication with everyone involved. Procedures or protocols cannot be expected to work unless they are properly communicated to the employees who are using them daily. And, the effectiveness of new implementations cannot be known or evaluated unless it is properly communicated back to those who were responsible for helping develop them. For these reasons, it is important for the farmer to have good relationships with his team of consultants and his employees. Finding people, who he or she can trust and speak honestly with, is important as well to establishing open lines of communication.

Why Teamwork is so Important

Each individual of the team behind a dairy brings their own set of expertise and skills to the table. On the same token, they potentially bring differing opinions or options. The only way these individuals are able to benefit the herd is if they can come together to work as one unit with the common interest of improving the dairy. An open line of communication between all individuals in the team and a mutual sense of trust and respect is essential. Regularly scheduled meetings in which everyone can sit down and assess what is working and what needs improvement is ideal but unrealistic. However, every member being willing and able to touch base with each other frequently is important and not exclusively reserved for when a problem arises. Visits from the veterinarian and nutritionist are also beneficial to provide extra sets of skilled eyes to look over the herd and detect issues that may have been overlooked. If issues do arise, the ability of everyone to come together to troubleshoot, without placing blame on any single individual, is essential. At end of the day the bottom line is making sure the herd is healthy and the dairy is successful. The only way this can be accomplished is through consistent cooperation and communication.

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