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**“Meeting the Changing Needs of the Livestock Industry-
A Swine Practitioner’s View”**

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Introduction

I have been asked to explain the changes that have taken place not only in my own veterinary career, but also in that of our practice, the Swine Vet Center in St. Peter, Minnesota, which currently employs 7 swine veterinary consultants, an office manager/controller who is also a veterinarian and 7 full time lay support staff.

We believe that the swine industry has gone through incredible change in the last 5-7 years and it seems prepared to accelerate this change in the next few years. From the outside looking in, it seems that the dairy industry and the veterinarians that serve that industry are in for similarly dramatic changes in the years ahead.

The Swine Vet Center was co-founded in 1990 by Dr. Paul Yeske and myself as a specialty swine practice and is located in St. Peter, Minnesota. We presently serve approximately 200,000 sows and 4 million pigs, primarily in Minnesota and northern Iowa, the majority being located within a 100-mile radius of St. Peter. Dr. Yeske is a 1985 graduate of Iowa State University and I am a 1978 graduate of the University of Minnesota. Of the other veterinarians in our practice, 2 others are ISU graduates, 3 others are University of Minnesota graduates and 1 is a Kansas State University graduate. The Swine Vet Center also manages 3 sow farms and 1 boar stud and consults for many herds around the country and internationally, having practiced in over 30 states and 22 foreign countries.

Both Dr. Yeske and myself were formerly partners in a large, mixed animal practice in a nearby town and specialized in swine prior to starting our own practice. I was one of Dr. Al Leman’s first swine students when he came to the University of Minnesota in the 1970’s and owe much of my practice philosophies to him.

There has been much concern over the last 5-7 years about the rapidly changing swine industry and how it will negatively impact the swine veterinarian. Conceivably, there may be very few swine veterinarians needed to service the swine industry as farms get larger. In Dr. Ralph Vinson’s 1986 Howard Dunne Memorial Lecture, he said that the 1990’s would be the last decade for private swine practice. But he went on to say that with given adaptations, the ‘90’s may be the *best* decade of private practice. I believe that the future is still *very* bright for both the swine veterinarian and the dairy veterinarian *if they continue to adapt*.

Practice Growth, Practice Development, Long Term Business Planning...

All of the above are made easy if you can make your clients successful (i.e., profitable). I don’t believe there’s ever been a pork producer who consistently made excess money that

didn't expand. We have clients that have not lost money for any of the last 18 years (possibly for a month or a quarter, but not for an entire year). Expansion of existing clientele improves practice economics because time can be devoted to pork production rather than to the development of new clients. It all sounds simple. However, the key is to "make the client successful".

Decide What You're Going To Do and Do It Now!

The swine industry has always been in a constant state of change, the rate of which has accelerated during the last 5-10 years. The practice and your professional career must keep pace with the industry changes; you don't necessarily have to be the *leader* of change, but you must at least be an early adapter.

Several things come to mind when reflecting on my 20 years of practice. Knowing what to do isn't enough if you haven't developed the self discipline to actually **do it**. Through the years, there has been an evolution of current "trends" and these are what get talked about and implemented with clients. It's what you're currently "selling". It seems incredible at times that it has taken us this long to adapt, but most people can change just so many things at once. Examples of some of these changes are: Ultra sound pregnancy checking, regularly scheduled herd visits, batch farrowing schedules, records, crated gestation, building design (standardized, natural ventilation, cost effective), single stage nursery, PRV eradication, NPD's, genetics, All-in/all-out production, nutrition (sow confinement ration, phase feeding, split sex feeding, blood meal), the evolution of Mystery Pig Disease to SIRS to PRRS, PRRS vaccination, PRRS eradication, Pork Quality Assurance, SEW, multi-site production, contracting, business structure, personnel training, employee management, employee manuals, marketing, networking, A.I., nursery-finisher, and the future in creating your own opportunities in areas such as carcass quality, feeding high priced corn, Salmonella eradication, export programs, sexed semen and genetic engineering.

Realize that to change is difficult, but NOT to change when it's necessary can be catastrophic to your business or career.

Leadership

Producers can be and often *need* to be led or convinced of the need for change. Most are conservative in nature and must be "sold" on new ideas. To be a successful "salesman", one must:

- Have broad experience. Continue to increase your "basket of skills" and eliminate your weaknesses. Read periodicals, attend and present at meetings (30-45 days/year), subscribe to the Internet, do international consulting and enroll in post graduate education courses (I am a graduate of the University of Illinois' EVP Program, Dr. Yeske is working on the University of Minnesota Swine Masters Program and we are both currently enrolled in Michigan State's Swine Health Management Certificate Seminar Series)
- Have great knowledge of the swine industry. (Be an "idea person").

- Have conviction that new ideas or technologies are important.
- Have gained confidence from the producer that your ideas will and do work.
- “Deliver the goods”. Do what it takes to get results.
- Benchmark” performance as you make changes. (10 weeks, Year to date, Annual goals)
- Treat the client’s farm as if it were your own.

The above list did, has and will have the ability to keep me or a team of veterinarians very busy. It’s interesting to note that little of the above “service work” has much to do with traditional swine veterinary medicine (diagnostics, post mortem exams, blood testing, epidemiology, etc.).

However, if you develop a large, successful clientele, there will be much traditional “swine practice” yet to do. I believe the Swine Vet Center is one of the largest users of the Minnesota Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory in St. Paul. The old saying still holds true that *“if you have livestock, you will occasionally have deadstock”*. This will require post mortem examinations, diagnostic workups, blood testing and epidemiological workups. In attempting to prevent more “deadstock”, you must monitor the herds via clinical exams, blood testing, slaughter checks, etc.

You do have control over your destiny. *Never, never, never underestimate your ability to influence, either directly or indirectly, the direction your clients or employers will take, their subsequent growth and that of your practice or career.*

Identifying Customer Needs - “Seeing The Big Picture”

“The obscure we eventually see. The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.”
- Edward R. Murrow ¹

Most businesses focus on what is in front of them, even getting caught up in the day to day running of the business. Part of our jobs, as outside observers of a business, is to see the “big picture”, identifying and pointing out weak areas to the producer and then providing written solutions or recommendations.

For example, you are called to a farm to work on a continuing APP problem in the finishing barn. Your initial suggestions would focus on short term therapy, but you might also suggest that the finishing barn would make a very adequate crated gestation facility. The producer could expand the herd and network or contract finish (improving pig flow) and possibly depopulate the facility during the expansion. These suggestions accomplish the mission of your visit which is to control APP, but in the process, you’ve improved the producer’s overall herd health and pig flow which will help to control *any* organism he may encounter in the future. At the same time, you’ve expanded your client base.

Realizing weakness in the production system or management team is critical, as these bottlenecks impede long term progress. Any organization is only as good as its weakest

link. The problem is that most organizations need help in identifying the weak links and also in eliminating them.

Everybody can think of farms that need help in one or more of the following areas: buildings, pig flow, management, personnel management, employee training, records, genetics, financial records/accounting, nutrition and health management.

Identify weaknesses, convince the owners of their existence and plan a solution.

“Deliver the Goods”

Service, service, service! This is the cornerstone of success. Always try to deliver more than the customer expects.

- Know more than they think you should. Be a “student” of the pork industry. Read, attend meetings, network and learn as you work. Living the job is a great educational experience.
- Continually bring new ideas to the table.
- Establish yourself as a professional.
- Contribute by knowing and understanding related businesses such as human resources, accounting, business structure. Make the farms “work”. Too often today, the system is designed correctly, but “down on the farm” performance is lacking. Identify what must be done and do what it takes to accomplish it.
- Provide prompt written reports.
- Make yourself available through multiple forms of communication including cell phone, voice mail, fax and e-mail.
- Make contacts with related consultants. ***Know when to seek help.***
- Do what it takes to follow through with your ideas and recommendations. Often people don’t know how to accomplish certain tasks, though you think they should. Be prepared to show them exactly how to do things by providing consultation in areas like:
 - Building design (Swine Vet Center has over 20,000 slides of pig barns that help show clients what not to build as well as leading edge technologies).
 - Host educational producer field trips (examples for us are State Pork Producers, World Pork Expo, trips to different states - North Carolina, Illinois, Iowa and visits to Europe and Chile).
 - Organize peer groups.
 - Understand pig flow such as batch systems (Dr. Mike Mohr designed a computer program for us). Give slide presentations on 2-site, 3-site, SEW and Multi-site production.
 - Help farms with employee management by writing or assisting them in the development of farm production manuals which provide typewritten instructions for vaccination schedules, washing procedures, load out procedures, etc.
 - Help to assess business development needs in the areas of software, supervisors, accounting, office and staff. Invite speakers in from pharmaceutical companies to help with guidance in personnel management.
 - Assist in record keeping with a PigCHAMP® bureau service, written records analysis and data base application special reports.

- Develop meeting agendas for farm owners and staff.

People are often embarrassed to admit that they don't know how to do something or don't understand a concept. ***Lead them through the process and continue to lead them until they are convinced or until it becomes "their idea"***.

You can see how you can bring things to the client that add to your value while helping them to become successful and grow. ***"Value is one of those abstractions that everyone understands best when it is absent". - Robert B. Tucker***²

Understand why clients choose to do business with you year after year and understand that today's clients are ***volunteers***.

It Takes More Than Luck

Armand Hammer, past president of Occidental Petroleum, once said that his success was based on luck. He worked 7 days/week, 14 hours/day and he just kept getting luckier and luckier!

Becoming successful for myself and others in our practice has not been easy. It takes a lot of time to keep up with new technologies while holding down your "day job". Clients' calls may often mean an interruption of family schedules. However, surrounding yourself with good, dedicated people who share many of the same thoughts and beliefs as you do, is a very rewarding and enjoyable experience.

Remember that it's not the actual goal or destination that is fun and enjoyable, rather it's the journey to get there.

Make Time

Developing clients and/or business takes time. You must be prepared, both mentally and from a commitment standpoint, to "take it on". Too many practicing veterinarians are too busy "being busy" to take the extra time necessary to work with clients to move them forward.

A dramatic change for Dr. Yeske and myself came in December of 1990 when we left mixed animal practice and established the Swine Vet Center.

- We were freed up from the day to day running of an emergency type clinic and could take the time to work on our clients' needs which resulted in the explosive growth of our new practice.
- Another surprising development was the discovery that producers often perceived that we were too busy to work with them in our former practice and hence, didn't call or ask for more. The first year in our new business, we received calls from these people saying "You should have more time now to help me". I won't deny that having "enough time" is still a huge problem within our practice because of the volume of work, but it's important that:

- The customer perceives that you have time for them.
- You “deliver” (follow through) on what you said you would do.
- You don’t promise more than you can deliver; it’s far worse than not promising enough.
- You follow the “MMFI” rule (“Make Me Feel Important”). A business guru once said to treat every customer as if “MMFI” was stamped on their forehead. Treating people in this manner goes a long way in “cementing” a business relationship.

Make time for the right clients (i.e., identify clients with the potential to become successful in their own production unit as well as those that have the potential to become agribusiness people.) Your extra effort should go to these individuals. Those who are continually “sold” and never buy, should quit getting “sold”. Don’t become frustrated with clients who won’t listen to you; life is too short!

Match Veterinarians and Clients

It’s very difficult if not impossible to be everything to everyone. Within the clinic, there are different skill levels in the areas of observation, systems analysis, financial decision making, cash flow modeling, diagnostics, A.I. and others.

Clients may want to “work” with only 1 veterinarian because of personality compatibility, but it is often in their best interest to get a “team approach” in order to take advantage of individual specialties. Each farm needs a “lead veterinarian” that directs this team as needed. Match the strengths of the team members with the weaknesses of the client.

Pace The Client

You must continually “read” the client to set the pace of information transfer and client growth. This can change from year to year and even from visit to visit, depending on a host of external and internal factors.

This “reading” of the client on a visit by visit basis is crucial to your success. On some visits, the client may be open for criticism, wanting to know everything that’s wrong with the organization and ready for the proverbial “kick in the pants”. However, a “positive only” approach is needed on the days when that client is very nervous about the future (for whatever reason) and needs a shoulder to cry on.

Failure to properly “read” the client can turn visits into significantly negative experiences that will require future visits to regain lost ground.

“They Still Keep Score in Dollars” - Harvey Mackay³

I have almost never had dissatisfied customers that were profitable (high production, low costs), especially if they achieved profit above their expectations. Profitable clients are

normally open to new ideas, new technologies and **expansion**. The easiest way to expand your business is to make your clients highly profitable.

Record systems, or more accurately their use and analysis, are still a weak area on many farms.

- Production records must be kept up to date weekly in order to be used proactively for farm improvement and to be able to “keep score”. Games that go too long get boring and the players lose interest. If weekly production numbers are acceptable, so will be the quarterly and year to date numbers. Make farms “live and die” on weekly and 10 week cumulative records.
- Financial records, including the profit and loss statement, should be run monthly. Nursery and finishing close-outs should be done weekly. Early identification of losses or slippage in profitability will focus attention immediately on correcting problems.

The focus of yourself and your practice must be **clear**. Make your producers profitable and more successful. The selling of yourself has to be real; the client will know if you truly “live” this philosophy. The satisfaction gained from being part of a successful “team” is the true reward of practice.

“The mark of a good salesperson is that his customer doesn’t regard him as a salesperson at all, but a trusted and indispensable adviser, an auxiliary employee who, fortunately, is on someone else’s payroll.” - Harvey Mackay ⁴

Motivation

- Always have a goal or a dream.
- Faith moves mountains! Have a “can do” attitude.
- Cheerleaders...there’s a reason why they have them.
- Surround yourself with people ***who like people***.
- Be excited about your job.
- Help other people to be excited about *their* jobs.
- Be confident and enthusiastic.
- Plan on being successful.
- Be positive.
- Be compassionate.
- Have a sense of humor.
- Focus on prioritization.
- Recognize all, especially work well done.
- Show respect to all.
- Motivate ***by example***.

Don’t be an elitist or have a bad attitude. It’s bad for your business and your health.

The consulting (herd health) portion of our practice accounts for approximately 60% of our service work. We charge by the hour (\$60-80) or by the day (\$550-750) or by the ½ day (\$300-400). Management work is done on a per pig weaned or per dose of semen produced basis.

Swine Vet Center veterinarians are paid a minimum base salary plus incentive pay for service work and client business. This has allowed for great self-motivation and initiative. Veterinarians are allowed a significant amount of freedom to “pace” themselves thereby eliminating squabbles over “equal work, equal pay” disputes.

Our practice can function essentially as 7 independent veterinary consultants that are totally responsible for their own livelihoods. Communication is accomplished via cellular phones with voice mail during the day, faxes in all of the homes for evenings or early mornings and monthly all-day meetings at the office.

Practice Future

- Make the client profitable by evaluating weaknesses and correcting them.
- Do what the client wants. Provide for the needs of the client as determined by them or yourself with consulting, veterinary services, organizing user groups, managing boar studs, serving as an “information center”.
- Be flexible.

The livestock industry is as strong today as it has ever been. A successful veterinary practitioner who has kept current will be a sought after individual somewhere in the industry. Worry about being good at what you’re doing. The rest will take care of itself.

Summary

Leadership, production and profit orientated service, motivation... this is how we have helped our clients reach their potential. These things have also been the key contributors to the growth of our practice.

Hopefully you’ll understand that this paper has highlighted our practice beliefs, philosophies and goals. Every facet of our practice can always be (and *must be*) improved in order to stay abreast of the rapidly changing swine industry and provide “value added” service to our clientele.

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