

DAIRY FARMERS ARE CUSTOMERS TOO

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I have been asked to address the topic "Marketing Herd Improvement Services" to this conference. I do not suppose to have the answers, just a few ideas to share, but I believe dairymen can be the most interesting and progressive people in the rural community with which to provide a service.

The herd improvement industry has really only become a professional organisation since the early 80's with the integration of herd improvement centres, development of H.I.O.V., introduction of Australian Breeding Values for dairy sires and the importation of North American genetics. This stage was reached following momentous decisions made by H.I. pioneers to amalgamate organisations of the day and looking back provided us with a very sound base for the expansion of the service to what it is today. The success of the venture in Victoria has been almost solely due to the level of farmer participation in these decisions, farmers were guiding their own destiny.

EXPERIENCED STAFF

The pleasing development from the amalgamations was the appearance of field staff who had been providing services to farmers at a different level but who had developed the necessary skills to take herd improvement into the next decade. They had first hand knowledge as to what the farmer customer wanted and together with the direction given by farmer board members of the Co-operatives were able to transfer farmer needs into financially viable services.

Herd Improvement Services have now developed a highly professional group of employees with a vast safety net of experience of farmer needs.

COMMUNICATION IS THE QUEST

The ability to communicate is a trait not readily achieved by people not familiar with the farming community. If the communication is undecided in the message to be delivered and the goal to be achieved, it seems unlikely the desired communication would occur.

Therefore a complete knowledge of herd improvement services available is a pre requisite to farmer contact. Knowledge of the sales product is also essential to attain confidence to communicate, confidence aids communication.

A new knowledge seeking generation of farming customers are now entering dairying who require services that have not been available in the past such as farm management computer services. They are demanding a better style of life from the seven day a week, long hours per day dairy system in the past. Cows must produce more of the right product, be free milkers and have good shed manners.

ON FARM VISITS

Probably the most productive form of extension is actually visiting dairymen and discussing herd improvement options. The need to involve all partners is important, herd improvement costings quite often involve both partners.

The timing of visits is most important. I find a call about a month after A.I. has been completed to introduce mating data reports is much appreciated and pre season visits before calving and mating very productive.

Discussions involve : availability of bulls, how to read bull proofs, how to understand lactation production reports and other computer reports that are now available.

SELECTING GENETICS

The most exciting introduction to the Artificial Breeding would have been the introduction of A.B.V.'s and North American genetics.

In the late 60's, the usual question I would ask of a customer was whether they wanted a dose of Jersey or Friesian semen. Now farmers have already made their decisions when the technician arrives - decisions based on A.B.V.'s, genetics and price.

During the last twenty years, many tools have been developed to assist herd management decisions.

Information available is as follows :-

1. Australian Breeding Values are available to allow him to select a sire of suitable genetic potential.
2. Milking speed and temperament information is available on most proven sires.
3. Calving ease information is useful for many matings.
4. Pedigree details provide a safeguard for inbreeding concerns.

A small computer program is used extensively to aid in the search for suitable sires and allows the customer to set their own specifications for suitable choices to fit both standards and budgets.

A wide range of sons of the North American super sires and dams are now available for general use here in Australia. They provide a lower priced high genetic value option but for safety should be used as a team not as individuals.

With the introduction of overseas genetics commercial dairymen have made more genetic progress in the last five years as they have in the previous twenty-five years. This improvement has increased farmers involvement in genetics and consequently increased their desire to purchase of top genetic material.

Customers must constantly be assured that we can get his cow in calf artificially. Even the best genetic material is of little use if cows can't be readily got in calf.

OPEN DAYS

Open Days provide a wonderful atmosphere for transmission of ideas and for the demonstration of equipment and techniques.

The vast majority of Victorian dairymen use the "farmer collection" milk sampling system, The system is cost effective but not enjoyed by many customers. On "Open Days" the accuracy levels available with modern infra red machines, the efficiency of automatic data capture equipment and the speed of producing computer data production reports can be demonstrated.

A range of semen production centres can be available to provide information on sires currently available.

An increasing section of the dairying community is becoming interested in computer technology and what dairy programs are available. Sound advice on hardware and software could be promoted.

SERVICE INFORMATION

The introduction of a service booklet has been most beneficial, customer needs to know exactly what various service options are available and how much they cost. The service information booklet give the centre a chance to promote and give details on programs and services available, eg. heat synchronisation procedures, sire sort programs.

NEWSLETTERS

If produced at reasonable intervals are well read and certainly promote various aspects of herd improvement.

PRESENTATION

The tidy appearance of staff and the cleanliness and smartness of vehicles and buildings are paramount. Tidiness relates to efficiency in a customers mind.

CONCLUSION

1. Good communication based on a sound knowledge of herd improvement is essential.
2. A strategically arranged farm visit provides the best extension results.
3. Open days, newsletters, news media articles all provide useful results.
4. All communication material presented to farmers whether written, vocal or visual communications should have simple explanations and contain easily understood words.
5. A farmer uses A.I. to provide better cows as well as higher producing cows - have a good look at them. You can admire them if you have done your job right.
6. Encourage farmers to understand the reports they receive on cow production. They are more likely to remain regular customers if they have a complete understanding of herd improvement reporting.
7. Efficiency of H.I. staff members must be of paramount importance. A years income for a farmer depends on correct A.I. technician technique. Culling and mating decisions depend on accurate herd recording information.
8. " To be a good communicator, you don't need to have glasses to look learned, grey hair to look wise, and haemorrhoids to look concerned ".
9. The use of milk recording and artificial breeding assist management decisions and help towards a better way of life for the dairyman.