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Calf Note 211 – Walking the Farm, Part 1

Introduction

Over the years, I've had the opportunity to visit many dairy farms and calf raising operations. Some of these visits were social in nature, but most were my opportunity to view the operation, identify potential areas for improvement, offer a few new ideas, and generally to help make the operation better. In the next few Calf Notes, I hope to outline some of my experiences and some "teachable" moments that may be helpful to a wider audience.

Before we start digging into the details, it's important to understand the how and why each visit is conceived and executed. No serious farm visit should be done without the appropriate planning. And, everyone should understand the purpose of the visit. Here, I outline some of the things I like to think about prior to a farm visit. Note, that I almost always visit a farm with another person – a veterinarian, nutritionist, or other dairy professional – who has a relationship with the farm manager or owner. I rarely, if ever, visit a farm on my own.

OK, let's plan our farm visit!

Planning the Visit

Why are you going to the farm? This is the critical question! Remember, you are a resource, *you must bring value,* whether it's new information, training employees or to try to solve a problem. That value needs to be understood and clearly defined by everyone involved. Have a goal and objective before you arrive. Normally, I will talk with the consultant who should be help set the objective.

It's important, too, for everyone to remember that the investment comes at a cost. If I'm working with a veterinarian or a feed company consultant, those businesses have several expectations – (1) that I will bring value to the farmer; and (2) they should be compensated for the service of helping improve the operation. That compensation may be through increasing or continued business, or purchase of a specific technology to improve the operation or solve a problem. It should be clear to everyone that "nothing in this world is free".

Speaking of investments, each farm visit should be planned regarding investments of time, effort and money. Will this visit last 1 hour? 12 hours? Will we simply walk through the facilities and look at the operation, or will we take measurements and samples? If so, what kind of equipment will we need? Will we ship samples? Will they need special handling (e.g., freezing)?

It's useful to have a goal regarding these investments that is explicitly stated. Of course, a 1 hour walk-through may turn into a 4 hour evaluation if we find something important or interesting. Flexibility is certainly necessary, but it's a good idea to have a plan thought out prior to arriving at the farm.

Be prepared! I've visited farms in the Southern U.S. (Florida) in July and Central Russia in December. Each visit required different preparations! Biosecurity is no longer a buzzword. It's required. Boots, gloves, coveralls (clean!), and a hat are all a necessary part of preparing for a visit. I prefer to work with consultants who bring with them a stainless steel bucket, disinfecting solution and a brush. When we arrive, we disinfect. And, we disinfect prior to leaving. It's a good habit that should be implemented by every farm visitor. Note that if I'm traveling a long distance, I may not have my own coveralls, but will rely on the consultant to provide disposable coveralls.

Also, if you'll take samples or observations, be sure to have all the equipment available and in good working order. If I know beforehand what are the likely issues (e.g., problems with rotavirus or salmonella infections), I can prepare by collecting a few handy references as educational materials for the manger.

Photos or videos that demonstrate an area for improvement are excellent tools. Be sure to get permission first, but once you have permission to record areas for improvement, be sure to do so. I also will ask my consultant to write down (on paper or into their phone) key points that we can cover during the debrief. Don't rely on your memory… you'll have too many things to remember.

The Visit

The best visits usually follow this basic sequence of events:

1. *Introductions.* We all meet together, usually at the farm office and introduce ourselves and then discuss a bit about the farm – history, goals and structure. Then, we'll have an explicit statement of the goals – looking for agreement as to what we'll try to accomplish during the visit.

2. *Walk the farm.* Here we do the actual work.

3. *Debrief.* We'll meet AFTER the visit and discuss key observations and recommendations. I try point out what is done well in addition to those areas of concern. If there are a LOT of problems, I like to rank them and ask the farm to work on the most important 1, 2 or 3. No more than 3. Save the other, lower priority issues for the next visit!

   A written follow-up report is not usually expected, but it's a good practice, particularly if the visit is lengthy or there are multiple issues. I like to have a business card or e-mail address of both the consultant and the farm manager so I can forward a report on the visit.

   Unfortunately, the debrief portion is often cut short, due to time limitations or other demands on people's time. It's the most important part of the visit, so it's critical to save enough time to review the visit and make recommendations.

Pardon the Repetition

I like to ask questions… lots of questions. And, I will often ask a question in several different ways and to different people. It's not my old age or senility (not yet, anyway!). I have a purpose. For example, I may ask the farm manager about their colostrum measurement program. Then, I'll ask the same question to the herd manager and then again to the workers in the barn. "Do you measure colostrum quality? Oh, yes? Can you show me how?" It's too frequent to hear from both the farm manager and herd manager "of course, we bought a Brix refractometer last year", only to find out that the workers really didn't understand how to use the thing and it's been in a box in the desk of the calf barn for the past three months.

Remember that, as calf raisers, we are at a distinct disadvantage. We have so few actual numbers to look at. Whereas advisors who work with lactating cows have milk production data, breeding data, ration information and a whole computer full of data to "slice and dice", we calf people have to rely on "well, I think our preweaning mortality is about 2%, but I'm really not sure", or "no, we don't record when calves have scours". This makes the job much more challenging, and confirming information is one approach to trying to determine if the information you're receiving is valid.

Finally, beware the online manager. This is the person who knows all the "best practices" and can repeat them to you at the drop of a hat. "Yes, we feed 1 gallon of high quality colostrum within the first hour after the calf is born!". Excellent! I will reply. Then, be sure to confirm with the herd manager and workers if that message makes its way through the chain of command. If a farm has written protocols (they should!), it certainly makes the training job much easier and is easier to confirm. I LOVE those operations that have critical protocols simplified to a few key steps and have written those steps on the wall (in the appropriate language) for everyone to see… and follow!

Summary

Well, that about summarizes the preparation for a farm visit. Next time, we'll begin looking into some of my more memorable visits – both good and bad!

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