

The clueless funny farm

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Abstract

Managing novice cattle/livestock clients is becoming more common for multiple reasons, such as the increase in homesteading or an individual wanting cattle because a distant family member had cows. This talk covers how to provide proper client education and help those clueless livestock producers make the appropriate decisions for their livestock.

Key words: novice livestock owners, cattle clients, client education

Introduction

As a new large-animal veterinarian, receiving a call from a novice livestock owner can be daunting, but should be manageable with the tips I'm about to share. I'm going to cover some of the most common situations a new graduate may experience, what questions to ask while making the appointment, and how to conduct yourself during your time on the farm.

The (CLUELESS) Call

In my 28 months of owning my own practice, here are the 6 most common scenarios I have dealt with:

1. "I have a down cow, when can you come out and look at her?"
2. "I need my kid's pet longhorn bull cut. He is kind of halter broke."
3. "My cow calved 6 days ago, I need a clean-out shot today."
4. "My cow is having problems calving but I can't get her in the lot."
5. "My friend gave me a bottle baby with scours. I have never had cows before. Farmer Joe told me I need to give it antibiotics"
6. "Can you come out to work my herd, but I don't want to pay what John Doe did...he said you were expensive!"

Each of these scenarios pose very different challenges, which is why you need to ask a lot of questions to your new potential client. The core of those questions is to fully understand what the client is wanting you to achieve, what supplies and equipment you need to take with you, and if the circumstances are safe for you and your staff. If you forget to ask a question, it is okay to call them back. Communication is key to a successful veterinary-client relationship.

Some people can be difficult on the phone, so don't let them control the conversation. My husband frequently says to me, "Remember, you are the smartest person in the conversation." This phrase resonates well with me because I have let clients talk down to me. Please don't make that mistake! If a new potential client is difficult to get along with on the phone, they will likely be difficult in person. I do not accept those types of people as clients, nor should you.

During the call, don't forget to ask for their contact information including the client's name, spelling, physical and mailing address, location of the cows, and phone number. Be sure to ask specific numbers regarding each class of cattle such as cows, calves, and bulls. For example, some people will say they have 100 head, but only 45 of those will be cows; this information is important when it comes to what supplies you need to take with you on a call. You need to know how long they have had cattle, what made them want to get cows, and what breed of cows they have. You will be able to tell a lot about the individual and their cattle just from those few questions.

The 5 W's should be covered in every call from a novice client, and are easy to remember:

1. **Who** referred you to me? / How did you hear about me?
2. **What** are your working facilities like?
3. **When** would you like me to come out?
4. **Where** are your cows located? Cows may not be at the client's address
5. **Why** do you want me to come out?

In wrapping up the call, it is a good idea to summarize the conversation. You should verify their contact information, why they are having you out, and provide a starting estimate. I make them aware my safety and my staff's safety are the priority; if we get out there and the situation is not safe, they will be billed for the farm call and my time even if I don't touch the animal. **Don't forget, NO ANIMAL IS EVER WORTH GETTING HURT OVER!**

Before ending the call, give a quick 30-second snapshot of what is expected from them as clients. This is your opportunity to set appropriate client expectations. I tell them I start charging once I arrive on the farm, thus if they would like a cheaper bill they should have plenty of help available and the animals should be caught up. With effective communication, there shouldn't be any surprises for anyone involved. I let them know I require payment at the time services are rendered and what payment methods I accept. Lastly, be sure to ask the producer if he/she has any additional questions or concerns, thank them for their call, and tell them you are looking forward to working with them and their herd.

Before Arriving

Two of the best pieces of advice I can give you when it comes to novice clients is to block off twice the amount of time you think you will need for the appointment and always take more supplies (vaccines, dewormer, tags, etc.) than you were told you would need.

Many times I have arrived on a farm to discover a totally different problem than what I was presented on the phone. I remember one particular late night emergency call for “a sick calf that won’t get up.” I failed to ask for a specific age of the “calf” during the call. I had taken supplies to make and run IV fluids on what I assumed was an acidotic calf. Much to my surprise after a 2 hour drive, the “calf” was a 700 lb (318 kg) Holstein steer who had nervous coccidiosis and was 8% dehydrated. Thankfully, my truck was well stocked with everything I needed to treat the coccidiosis and dehydration.

While On Farm

Once I have arrived, I introduce myself and my staff to everyone, including the kids. Interacting with a client’s kids can be an invaluable connection. The next thing I do is give them a new client form which is already on a clipboard with a pen. I then ask where we will be working and where they would like me to setup my supplies and equipment.

While my staff is getting everything set up, I physically walk through the working pens and chute area with the client to help ensure the environment is not only safe for me but also for the animals. If I see something that needs to be fixed from a safety standpoint, I bring it to the client’s attention. There are some situations where no amount of last minute ‘patchwork’ will make for a safe setting. I discuss what changes need to be made and politely tell the owner I’m happy to come back when those changes have been made. Do not get pressured into working in an unsafe environment. Since I addressed safety during the initial call to set up the appointment, I charge for my time, my staff’s time, and the farm visit.

After walking the working facilities, I help to get everything setup. During that time I will ask the client what they hope to accomplish during the visit. I also ask anyone around the chute if there is something I can teach them today. Connecting with clients on the first visit often results in a long-time client. People want to know you are interested in them, their livestock, their operation, and their family. While you may have already asked these questions during the phone call, people often elaborate when asked the same question again. When I’m introduced to kids, I make notes in my software to help remind me; these little gestures go a long way with clients.

I tend to talk and work, and by talk, I mean offer client education. It is important NOT to point out everything they are doing wrong. You wouldn’t like it if someone did that

to you, so don’t do it to your client! My big 3 points I try to discuss are 1) the importance of proper antibiotic use, 2) proper vaccine handling, and 3) Beef Quality Assurance (BQA). I focus on these 3 the first visit because these topics don’t seem to offend most people. As I’m on farm more often, I will start to point out additional changes to benefit their operation.

Regarding antibiotic use, I engage them in the conversation by asking if they routinely take a rectal temperature before giving antibiotics. The response I get 90% of the time is “no.” I use this opportunity to tell them I have a thermometer on my truck with their name on it. I discuss why I don’t write open prescriptions and why it is important for me to do a physical exam before giving antibiotics. Another great topic to cover is proper vaccine handling, including where the vaccines are purchased, how they are stored, and how they are administered. Oftentimes I have my VaxMate cooler and pistol grip syringes on farm so they can see I follow my own advice. The last topic I try to cover is BQA and why their guidelines are important. I focus on proper injection sites and correct needle size. If someone wants to learn, I have them physically feel the borders of the injection triangle. I encourage clients to get their BQA certification, as they may be eligible for a premium at certain sale barns.

While we are cleaning up, I encourage them to get involved at the county, state, and national level cattlemen’s groups. Some producers will have negative things to say about one organization or another. My response is “change won’t occur without your involvement.” Also during this time, I discuss what they should have in their “emergency” kits and offer to get a kit together for them. A large majority of my producers take me up on the offer. Please see the link below for access to my kits lists for both producers and veterinarians.

After cleaning up, I give them their invoice and go over it to hopefully reduce confusion about charges. I typically include written discharges or notes that are printed on the invoice which I point out and discuss with them. At this time, I also provide any appropriate client handouts I have put together. Before I leave the farm, I ask them if they have any questions or concerns. If they don’t, then I thank them for their business.

Words of Wisdom and Summary

One of the best pieces of advice I was given by a few wise veterinarians is “you can only care as much as the client.” You shouldn’t pour your heart into a case if the client acts like he/she doesn’t really care what the outcome of the situation is.

A piece of advice I will give you is to be sure to charge for your time and knowledge, no matter the outcome.

Remember, communication is a major key to success. Learn to communicate and work with different types of people, all while being flexible.

Lastly, a quote I recently came up with is “my clients’ continued success is my continued success”. More often than not, if you invest in your new novice client, they will invest back in you.

My Resources

This link will have downloadable documents ranging from “Kits Lists” to “Herd Health Protocols”. Feel free to use the documents but please give credit where credit is due.

•https://1drv.ms/u/s!AkLfKETDzyg4h_EQ9AKhw8jfqQ-faw?e=eHYTpP