

Responding to change by offering a new service

D. Brennan, DVM

Country Roads Veterinary Services Inc. Ashland, OH 44805

Abstract

Today's veterinarian is being asked to become more of a consultant by their producers. Producers still rely very heavily on their veterinarian's recommendations and knowledge to help make their farming operation successful. Offering new services is key to filling this new veterinary role. Determining what services your producers are asking your veterinary practice to offer, and making the change to start offering them, will be very beneficial for both the producer and the veterinary practice. Budgeting and advertising the new service is important for the success of the new service. Increasing billable hours is the goal of all veterinary practices. Offering new requested consulting services will certainly do that.

The veterinarian's role is changing

The food animal veterinarian's role is changing. It is no longer the fire engine medicine that it largely was in the past. Will veterinarians be palpating cows in 20 years? In 10 years?

Today's producers want to be as self-sufficient as possible and want their veterinarian to be there to help and guide them. Today's veterinarian is being asked to have more of a consultant's role. Producers want to treat their own sick animals but want their veterinarian to be there making treatment protocols. Producers want to vaccinate their animals and to administer any preventive medications on their own, but want their veterinarian there making the protocols and recommending the best products for their needs. Producers want to expand their herd or renovate their facilities and want their veterinarian there to make cow comfort and facility design recommendations. It is valuable to self-evaluate what services your producers are paying someone else to do that you could be doing. Today's veterinarians need to adjust their services offered to remain sustainable as food animal veterinarians and to meet the demand of today's producers.

How to determine what service to offer?

Reviewing veterinary billable hours is key. What area of service is a majority of your billable hours coming from? Is bovine palpation 50% of your business? How many hours are you billing being a consultant? How many hours are billed writing and making protocols? Have you looked at cow housing and consulted on cow comfort? Have you billed for trouble shooting a ration? Or trouble shooting a milk quality issue or concern? Evaluating where your billable hours are coming from is important to see how many of those areas will be minimized or eliminated in the future. If you are billing as a consultant, what new area of service could you start offering to expand your practice's services and generate more income? What area of service are your producers demanding that you are not offering? Polling your producers can really help answer this question. This could be an actual letter asking your producers what services are you not providing that they would like you to. Or you could simply discuss with your producers while on farms. I have asked many producers "What is Country Roads NOT doing that you would like us too?" This helped me identify a few areas. Find out what your producers are asking you to do and fill that void and get paid for it!

Budgeting for your new service

New services can be very small like offering a new diagnostic test or blood work or as large as milking system evaluation and ration balancing. All can generate more income for a veterinary practice and make the practice more valuable to producers. The overall goal for any new consulting service is to maximize billable hours. I approach all new consulting services as developing new ways to increase on farm billable hours regardless of what the consulting service is.

Budgeting for consulting service is based on how many hours do I have to bill to pay for the new equipment or for the new education received? This is usually easily regained in a short period of time. A good example of this is ration balancing and nutrition consulting. The classes needed to learn to consult and the cost of a decent ration balancing program are paid for in a relatively short period of time when billing an hourly rate. If you are not planning to balance rations, using a balancing program just for consulting is also very beneficial. Providing ration balancing and nutrition consulting services was an obvious route for Country Roads when I learned how much more frequently a dairy producer talks to their nutritionist than their veterinarian. We want to be the answer to all of our producers' consulting needs. I love it when I get a call from a company concerning one of my dairy producers and the company says we were on so and so's farm and we asked them a question and they just said "call Dave". Or "Let's see what Dave thinks!" That is as big of a compliment as a veterinarian can get.

When marketing a new service and being asked how much does it cost, I usually say "the same as it would if I was here for herd check". This sells the service and does not put an exact dollar amount on it. Some new services will have to be a set dollar amount. Diagnostic tests are good examples of these. I started offering somatic cell testing to compliment my milk culture lab. For this, I calculated how much I was paying for both the machine and the needed materials and calculated what I needed to charge per test to pay for the materials and the equipment. I plan to have new equipment paid for in less than 3-5 years depending on the cost of the equipment. I like to have consulting services start paying in 3-4 months.

Smaller services and diagnostic tests may not even need to be budgeted for. An example of this is running calf scour diagnostic tests. These are charged a flat fee just like a heartworm test would be. I was amazed to see how many producers wanted manure tested to identify the exact pathogen responsible for the scours. I then started writing vaccine and treatment protocols for individual pathogens for individual farms. I can't believe the amount of consulting that was gained just by offering a cheap simple sours test.

Another example is FARM® Program requirements. Every dairy in the United States is going to be required to meet FARM Program requirements. This is a wonderful area for consulting and helping a producer and it costs a veterinarian nothing. I have found it very valuable to learn exactly what is being required by FARM, and sitting down with producers and making sure they are compliant. This has consisted of doing a farm

walk through evaluating cows as well as writing protocols for whatever is needed or lacking on individual farms. Many of these billable hours were spent in the office or at home in front of the computer.

Budgeting for a new service can be tricky due to the inability to evaluate the amount of additional billable hours that will be gained. These new billable hours are out there. We as veterinarians just need to find them!

Advertising and marketing your new service

Marketing a new service may seem challenging at first. It only takes one producer to allow you to consult on their farm to get you started. Word then travels fast in the producer world! This is very helpful when offering a new service. Usually after your first time offering the new service it is not uncommon to get several more requests soon after. I will send out a newsletter with monthly invoices that will announce our new service. It will explain the service and what value it has to my producers and how it can help them. This has proven to be very valuable in advertising the service and getting producers thinking about it. A follow up discussion on farm is then much more valuable and often leads to successfully starting the service. I find that talking during routine farm calls is also very helpful. Start asking questions related to your new service. If offering nutrition services, ask about how the cows are eating. How are the cows milking? Are they eating to the batch report? What are your components? Sooner or later, a producer will display concerns and ask you to take a look at it.

If you are offering milking system evaluation services, ask what is your cell count? Are you seeing any clinical mastitis? How do the cows act during milking? When was the last time you had your reserve air measured? Next thing you know, you will be asked to take a look at the system.

I have also found that sending out a detailed report after a consulting session is valuable. Results are discussed during the farm call but sending out or delivering a typed up -written report is very valuable and producers can visibly see what they paid for. This also creates a record to compare to when reevaluating or when follow up evaluations are needed.

Measuring the success of a new service

It is hard to put an exact dollar amount on the success of a new service because services involve the direct financial gain from the service but also lead to additional on farm billable hours. A good example of this is my somatic cell machine. Not only do I gain profit from running the actual test, I also gain many billable hours consulting on milk quality and troubleshooting a high somatic cell problem. I have run cell counts for herds that are not on official test and this has led to milking system evaluations and milk quality consultation.

This has also been true with ration balancing. After taking classes to learn to balance rations, I have found that I consult on feed quality, ration analysis, and forage management on many farms that I don't even balance the ration for. I have been on farms where I am consulting on milk quality concerns and the discussion turns to nutrition. I have then taken feed samples at the end of a milking system evaluation. The goal for all new services is to gain on farm billable hours.

Many new services lead to openings to offer other new services. It is not uncommon to be doing a milking system evaluation and getting asked to look at a sick cow. Or collecting feed samples and getting asked "what do you think of my calf care program? Or my vaccine program? On farm consulting regardless of what area it is in, leads to increased billable hours in other areas.

Offering new services

Offering a new service is an excellent way to increase the profitability of a veterinary practice. New services are also the answer to replacing services that may be unsustainable for the veterinarian in the years to come. With each new service offered you also become an even more valuable asset to your producers. You want your practice to be the solution to all of your producers' concerns. Veterinary practices need to think outside the box when looking at services they offer. Today's producers are requesting services that are not that of the traditional food animal veterinarian. It is up to the veterinarian to make sure they are meeting these new requests.

