



by Steve Martin

Teaching is part of the job

I DRIVE as many as 30,000 miles a year, so I listen to a lot of radio. There is a particular show whose subject matter is personal finances and whose host encourages listeners to hire a financial planner to help them manage their fiscal future.

Not unlike dairy nutritionists, there are many financial planners to choose from. The radio host encourages his listeners to pick one that has a teacher's heart. After hearing him say this for about the 100th time recently it occurred to me, should a dairy nutritionist also have a teacher's heart?

Every person who hires a financial consultant has some knowledge of managing money, budgets, saving and investing. Likewise, dairy producers who put their trust in a nutrition professional also have a basic understanding of nutrition principles.

I had a conversation recently with a client that was eye-opening for him. Dairy producers have become very skilled at buying various ingredients to feed their animals. A large dairy might buy more feed ingredients than a medium sized feed company! But the conversation I had with my client helped him better understand how those ingredients are really used by his animals to make milk and meat.

For that discussion I needed a blank sheet of paper. On it I drew what looked like a cartoon bug with six legs, two eyes and a mouth. The goal was to take several years of ruminant nutrition training and boil it down to a picture and a 30-minute tutoring session.

On the sheet I wrote a few examples of feed ingredients and listed them in two groups. The first includ-

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ed terms like corn, soy hulls, silage and CSH (cottonseed hulls). After drawing a circle around that group I drew an arrow to a big "C" (carbon). The second group included ingredients like SBM (soybean meal), canola, CSM (cottonseed meal) and urea. The arrow from this group pointed to a big "N" (nitrogen). I then drew two more arrows to illustrate the C and the N going into the mouth of the cartoon bug.

If you have doubts about a nutritional issue on your farm, ask for the basis of the feeding plan. Be willing to be taught about basic nutrition principles, as well as new advancements in technology.

The illustration was describing the grouping of ingredients into those that mainly supply carbons, and those that mainly supply nitrogen to the rumen microbes or "bugs" that are in the cows. I could tell this was a new level of understanding for my client, so I proceeded to draw more arrows coming out of the bug to illustrate how the process works to supply energy and protein needed by the animals.

Thirty minutes later my client, who had bought untold thousands of loads of carbon and nitrogen-containing feed ingredients, had a new level of understanding about how they help make animals grow and produce milk. He thanked me and I felt good, like a teacher must feel after a lesson where the students really learned something new.

It is probably a client-by-client difference, but it should be my job to

teach nutritional principles as much as each of them desires. At times I use them to explain why I feel a nutritional change is needed. Or perhaps a teaching opportunity could be well timed to explain an event that occurred with the cows.

The magic happens when these sessions turn into a high level combination of not just biology, but also of economics. It is the uniting of these two that leads to dairy profitability.

I am sure my explanations are sometimes too detailed; the producer might just prefer the two-minute summary instead of the full lesson. Business owners in production agriculture have a lot on their plate, so sometimes just hitting the high points can be enough.

As my consulting business has grown, I have learned to place a tremendous amount of trust in my accounting firm. I struggle, though, to truly grasp many of the things they discuss with me. Some are things that I really don't want to understand; sound advice and leadership is all I really want.

I have wondered before how my ability to follow, without fully understanding, mimics some of the leadership I hope to provide to dairy producers or heifer raisers. It is all about trust and credibility.

Trust is vital

I want my CPA to be a teacher for some topics and a trusted leader for others. Since the trust is there, I will follow. I hope I have earned a similar level of trust from my own clients. They are good business people who have varying levels of understanding about the details of diet formulation. My job as their advisor is to add to that existing knowledge, augment it as we work together, and at times challenge ideas.

Not unlike my CPA having volumes of state and federal tax law at his dis-

posal, I have a multitude of resources to lean on as I formulate diets. If I suggest to a client that we increase energy or protein levels in, it is based on sound science that is accepted by the academic and industry communities. Thankfully, these standards exist in nutritional science.

If you have doubts about a nutritional issue on your farm, ask for the basis of the feeding plan. Be willing to be taught about basic nutrition principles, as well as new advance-



ments in technology. Feeding cows is certainly an evolving science.

To be sure, the nutritionist has spent more time thinking about a particular nutritional subject than you have, so he or she will be ready to defend their formulation. Ask in the way that I might ask my CPA about why we have to file yet another IRS form, and I bet you will be given a satisfactory answer.

We have talked about teams in this column before. Be sure that each person in your farm's dairy management team has earned the right to be an expert in their area. Then, with some degree of freedom, let them lead that area.

We all can't be experts in everything. I trust my CPA; you should trust your qualified nutrition professional. It is his or her job to be sure that your farm is truly feeding for the bottom line. **WEST**