



by Steve Martin

## Teamwork is the way

**A**S I MAKE my rounds through several Western states visiting clients, I spend a few nights in various hotels. One of my favorite parts of this is the early morning work I get done in the hotels' breakfast areas. My goal is to be the first one there – to get some quiet time to grab some coffee, catch up on rations, return emails, and get other computer work done.

Since most of these hotels are in places like Garden City, Kansas, Herford, Texas, and Clovis, New Mexico, I almost always see other dairy industry folks who are also grabbing a quick bite before heading out to various farms. At times, the breakfast rooms nearly turn into a dairy meet & greet, thus my goal to get in there early before the crowd shows up.

In one recent early morning breakfast room, in a quiet corner with my coffee and laptop, I noted a couple of different dairy industry folks enter the room, and then another. It occurred to me that day what a valuable resource all of the dairy industry's traveling warriors are to me. And what a great opportunity to look to each of these industry colleagues and see how we might work together to solve the problems of clients.

Soon after, I was in a conversation with one of them about reproduction opportunities at one of our client's dairies. This guy works for one of the leading genetics companies and has forgotten more about getting cows pregnant than I will ever know. I later shared with the client how his breeding company rep and I were working together to help the dairy.

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The great thing about dairy sales people is they almost always know a lot about what they are selling. The good ones who make a successful career of it are often a great resource for me. No matter whether it is a direct-fed microbial, an immunity enhancing binder, or a fat or protein product, spending a little time with these individuals works to the benefit of my clients.

Most of my clients expect me to handle many of these conversations to figure out the potential fit for a particular product at their dairy. This results in lots of cups of coffee, or time over a meal learning more about the product. It is my job to listen, learn, and sort through the parts that may or may not be a solution or opportunity for the dairy.

### Veterinarians are allies

Another group of professionals in our industry that I work hard to connect with is dairy veterinarians. There is often fodder for comical conversation about how veterinarians and nutritionists work together – or maybe don't! I assure you, this doesn't have to be the case. I often lean on my client's herd health vet to help in areas where they are the expert, not me.

A strong and healthy relationship between the vet and nutritionist will work to the benefit of the dairy. Maybe the discussion is about reproduction or transition cow health. The best way to get to the bottom of a problem is to work together as a team to find solutions. The dairy owner and the cows will be the benefactors. Regularly scheduled meetings, or at least frequent communications between these two important dairy advisors, should be the standard.

As you know, the dairy nutrition world is a pretty competitive place. Since we all have the goal to grow and sustain our businesses, we often find ourselves at odds with other people in the industry. Sometimes it is a bit awkward at best, but keeping everything professional will pay dividends in the long run. But what if there is a way to cooperate with a competitor to help one of our clients?

A few years ago we all wondered if stray voltage might be the source of some problems with herd performance for one of our clients. I studied, Googled, and asked many people who worked in that area to help me understand the potential for this problem in this situation.

Upon discussing this with another client, he told me one of my competitors was very well informed on the topic and had solved some real issues related to stray voltage in the past. So I decided to reach out and ask him if I could buy a consulting day from him and send him to the dairy. He said yes. The result was a very positive impact on my relationship with our client, and the competitor brought great ideas for us to consider.

There are many smart people in our industry and no one person can know everything. Perhaps the smartest and most successful person in our business is the one who knows best how to network and gain information from the best minds. Everything doesn't have to be a competition. We should respect others in the industry and work for a strong spirit of cooperation where it fits.

A number of years back, a potential client was interviewing our group and two or three others. We ended up getting the nod and we still work with that client today. After we

were told we would get the business, I asked the producer if he would share the determining factor in his decision. His answer surprised me.

He said all of the nutritionists interviewed had good ideas and nice proposed rations. What got us the nod was we were the only ones that had good things to say about the other nutritionists. Wow. I think that reminds me of something my mom taught me as a child.

This is not an overly technical column and probably doesn't help you manage the dairy better today. But don't we often need a reminder that none of us has all the answers and we will end up with better solutions if we show some humility and ask good questions of smart people?

When I run up against a problem where I need help, I often send an email question out to a few folks who I think may have helpful insight. It usually seems that when I do this I get really good information, and the folks feel good that I respected them enough to value their opinion. Don't be too proud to ask for help.

We are all an expert in one or maybe a few things, but none of us are experts in everything. The smart nutritionist or smart dairy producer builds a strong network of respected individuals who are almost always more than happy to offer an opinion. It usually doesn't require a plane ticket or a multi-day trip, but more like an email or a phone call. If you are in my "brain-trust" network, you know who you are and I hope you know how much I appreciate your help over the years. If I can ever return the favor, it would be my pleasure to do so.