



by Steve Martin

Picking up trash

IT IS always a challenge to explain to my non-dairy friends and acquaintances what I do for a living.

I usually end up comparing my job to that of a dietician, but with an economic twist. But as the explanation continues the conversation goes to ways that a dairy nutritionist is involved in animal health, farming, trucking, banking, employee development, facilities... the list goes on.

Perhaps the term “nutritionist” isn’t really the most fitting. The breadth of the job is so much wider than just being a dietician for dairy cows. Most of it is not very glamorous. In fact, some tasks are pretty unimpressive – like sorting through manure, counting feed bags, or even picking up trash!

One of the important parts of most consulting visits is a general look around the dairy. We call this “walking cows”, although as dairies have gotten larger it’s usually a mixture of walking and driving.

The main goal, of course, is to carefully observe cows and make sure the diets we build are performing as planned. How much more, though, can be gained while observing feed and cows? A lot!

Farm cleanliness matters

It is important that all food production facilities be clean, neat and well-kept. This effort has little to do with the energy or calcium level of the diets I formulate, but it can fall under the broader responsibility of a dairy nutritionist to be part of the team to generally make the dairy better.

Since many dairy visits are monthly, or perhaps twice a month, the nutritionist is familiar enough with the facility to know what is going on in general, but not too close to be blind

The author is the founder of Dairy Nutrition and Management Consulting LLC, which works with dairy producers and heifer growers in multiple Western states.

to things that can be improved.

One specific way I remind myself of the importance of this part of the job is by not walking past a piece of trash without stopping to pick it up. Since the wind is very prevalent in most of the areas where we work, our pockets can get pretty full of stuff on a routine dairy walk.

Maybe it is a piece of silage plastic, hay strings, or the most offensive of all, soft drink bottles. We don’t want the area behind the parlor or around the employee parking to look like Bourbon Street the morning after Mardi Gras party. But on larger dairies with numerous employees this is a real potential. We have all seen a steel corner post or pipe in out-of-the-way places that have been stuffed with all types of small trash. This is not the way we want employees to treat their place of employment.

My favorite opportunity on this topic is to have a dairy employee see me pick up pieces of trash. This communicates to them that I am on the team, that I care how the dairy looks, and that attention to every detail is important. If the person formulating diets to one-tenth of a percent of a particular nutrient takes the time to be sure a bag used to deliver that nutrient isn’t blowing around the dairy, then maybe we have accomplished something special.

The concept of “another set of eyes” on things that the owner, manager or employees might miss is an opportunity that also needs to not be missed by the visiting nutritionist. One way I do this is to include things in my notes that relate more to the general operation of the dairy than to anything in particular about nutrition.

I may comment on cleanliness of the parlor, the bagged ingredient area, or even the bathroom for employees. A while ago I continually mentioned the need for a nicer bathroom in the parlor until the dairy became convinced



it was a problem. I don’t remember learning anything about that in my college nutrition classes, it was just good common sense – business sense, and it was worth me being persistent that it needed to be fixed.

Another similar topic is the cleanliness of equipment. We all know that clean tractors last longer. Dairies, particularly feeding areas, are always dusty and are often muddy. Having adequate facilities for periodic power-washing of equipment is good business.

Clean equipment matters

I often see clean tractors pulling dirty mixer wagons. We are using that piece of equipment multiple times every day to mix and deliver a highly technical diet. Keeping it clean not only increases the life of the mixer, but also the accuracy of the scales and the dependability of the electronics. A clean mixer also communicates to the feeders and the rest of the team that there is an expectation for excellence and high standards in everything they do.

Clean equipment also has a biosecurity and animal health uplift. Are there areas where feeding equipment

drives through manure? If so, then that needs to be fixed. And don’t forget about tractors that push up feed. Those machines spend all day moving up and down feed lanes in near constant contact with the diet. Are they clean?

I honestly don’t understand much about the complications of milking equipment. I do notice, however, the cleanliness of parlors. The majority of time I spend in them revolves around washing my boots and drying them with udder towels. Not only does this extend the life of my boots, but it also helps with biosecurity for the next farm I visit. And yes, it gives me a few minutes to evaluate overall cleanliness of the parlor.

Cleanliness of cows, equipment and facilities is a big deal to our consumers and some dairies do it much, much better than others. The parlor is a place where “things” constantly splatter. One way or another, try to be sure that you would be proud of your parlor’s cleanliness if a surprise visitor asked for a tour.

Lastly, we always need to remember the importance of clean bunks and water troughs. Is our awesomely formulated TMR being put down on top of moldy feed remnants that are a day or two old? Does the curb top under the stanchion have muck on it that can fall into the feed? We all know about the importance of clean water troughs. Enough said.

As I take time to write notes as a follow up to my dairy visits, I continue to evaluate these non-nutritional items right along with evaluating length of the TMR, body condition of cows, and the consistency of manure. Some of those things end up on subsequent notes and may remain unaddressed. We have all heard the saying that cleanliness is next to Godliness. That’s a pretty high bar, but I do know that cleanliness is probably related to profitability. **WEST**