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# Factors Determining Success In Practice

*William D. Daugherty, D.V.M.*

There are certain tangible, and many intangible factors which determine whether or not we become known as a successful practitioner. Of the tangible factors, professional knowledge and our particular practice territory are paramount. Professional knowledge, while it is not easy to acquire, is certainly made available to us while we are attending veterinary college. Experience is naturally an important adjunct to formal education, but this comes only with time. Formal education is merely a means by which we can take advantage of the experiences others have had. As far as professional knowledge is concerned, we usually have sufficient for successful practice.

Many of us have been under the unfortunate impression that professional knowledge means successful practice. Right or wrong, this is not true. In addition we must find a good territory; here we might well ask, what makes a territory good?

First of all, there must naturally be adequate numbers of livestock. It's a little more convenient if they get sick once in a while, but at any rate, they must be there in the first place.

Next, the type of people in the territory must be considered. Are they thrifty and honest? What percentage own their farms? This is a good indication of the character of the people and the economic stability of the community. What type of

farming do they practice? Is it diversified as far as livestock is concerned? As a general rule diversification of livestock programs make for a better practice, not only from the standpoint of interest, but from the outlook of economic stability. Types of roads, schools, churches and banks are all indications of whether or not it is a good community. Telephone service is very important, especially from the standpoint of the area covered by the local system. Farmers hate to call long distance, even if they can reverse the charges. Many times the end of the telephone line means a territory boundary, even if it's only a few miles from town.

Let us assume that we have plenty of professional knowledge, and a good territory. That sounds like we should be successful, but all this is not enough. We could still easily starve to death, at least in normal times. What else is necessary? Many factors, most of them intangible, yet some very concrete. The potentialities of the location are more or less stable; that is, there is not so much we can do to make more people own farms, more people raise pigs, or the telephone company to extend its local service.

Again granting we have our professional knowledge, our success is further determined by our abilities as salesmen and business men. Salesmanship is a rather new, and many times frowned upon word when connected with professional practice. Certainly it must be qualified. So, first, let's define salesmanship. We like to think of it as a means by which we

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influence people to do something we want them to do. In the case of many salesmen, the thing they want us to do is to buy. In our case, we must be much better at salesmanship than that.

We must influence people to think we have professional knowledge. We must influence people to follow our disease-control recommendations. We must influence people to believe we are sincerely interested in the livestock industry, and their individual problems on their individual farms. We must influence people to think that we are there to add to their community, not to take away from it. All these things we must do as salesmen if we are to be successful in practice. Well, now, how do we go about doing them?

### **Professional Attitude**

First, we have professional knowledge. How do we sell our client on that idea? Of course, we must actually know. We must always walk onto a farm with a positive air, act as if we know, but never act superior. When we don't know, say so; sometimes that in itself is a mark of knowledge . . . to know we don't know. Never bluff, try to outline a prognosis which will lay all the possibilities before the farmer. If you are sure you can save the animal act that way. If you are reasonably certain the animal will die, always make it clear that you will try, but that your efforts and his money will be wasted.

If we are to be successful and render our clients the best service possible, we must influence them to follow our disease control recommendations. Merely to sell him on the idea that we know veterinary medicine will not accomplish this. The cold scientific routine of sanitation and disease control measures, laid out in numerical lists, mean little to the average farmer. He must have painted for him a simple picture, logical and adapted to his farm, his personality, and his livestock. If we can further show him where this plan will save veterinary bills and put extra money in his bank account, the plan will appeal to him.

We must influence people to think that

we are sincerely interested in the livestock industry and particularly in their individual livestock business. The only way we can really do this is to actually feel that way. If we regard veterinary practice as merely a business which pays dividends, we just won't be successful veterinarians. Personality has been defined as other people's thoughts about the kind of person we really are. If we aren't friendly and sympathetic, no matter how we try to be a personality-plus boy, some of them will surely discover the person we really are. If we do want to help, to be a friend, there are several things we will keep in mind.

When a client calls, if we cannot help him, let's say so, rather than just responding for the fee. When inexpensive drugs will do the job, let's dispense inexpensive ones. Recommend costly treatments only when the animal's value and necessity for that treatment will give a better chance for a favorable outcome. When called to examine animals, whether one cow or a herd is involved, spend some time on the farm. It takes time to arrive at an accurate diagnosis, plan treatments and control measures. We will not only do a better job, but our client will know we are doing our best to help him. Follow up cases. When we see a sick cow or horse, or a herd of swine, drop by the next day or so if possible. If not, call the owner in the evening, or have your office girl call; such actions show the farmer that you are interested and he certainly appreciates this.

### **Interest In Community**

We have considered at length influencing the opinions of our individual clients; community opinion is also important. Many rural territories regard their community as almost a complete little nation, they resent others trying to take anything away from its happiness and security. We must convince the community that we want to add to these things, and here again, we must be sincere. We must honestly add to the community, and we can do this in various ways. We can cooperate on 4-H, Future Farmers and high

school agricultural programs. We can take an active interest in some of the local service clubs. We can serve on various community committees. And last, but certainly not least, we can sincerely strive to be of service to our local church.

There is one other factor we must consider, unfortunately so, because it has always seemed rather tragic to me that the practice of veterinary medicine must be tied up with economics and business, but it is, and we might just as well face it and make the best of it. Office expenses, car expense, insurance, office help, telephone and drugs all must be paid for. Then, too, the Mrs. usually wants a dress each year, and junior can't seem to wear a pair of shoes over 2 years. In spite of whether or not we like it, we must be business men.

### Ethics

All business existence in the long run, depends upon honest service, and fair fees for that service. It is just as ruinous for business to over-charge as it is to under-charge. If we as practitioners over-charge, we will surely drive clients away. If we do not charge enough, we cannot make a fair profit and fulfill our own obligations. We all know what honest service is, we have talked about that enough already. What is a fair fee? That, gentlemen, is another question. It is one you will have to answer for yourselves, in your community. The answer will not only depend on the service rendered, but the costs of your establishment, and the economic value of the stock treated at that time.

In the business end of veterinary practice, we certainly do not attempt to sell service at a lower cost than a colleague. That, as I see it, is a cardinal sin, and makes one unworthy of the name veterinarian. We do want to keep our costs down so that we can charge fees comparable to those of our neighbors and still make a decent living. There are certain costs which cannot be altered, yet some can if we try.

Office expenses commonly get out of hand unless we watch them. It isn't neces-

sary, at least to start with, for us to have an elaborate office or hospital. It is necessary though for it to be clean and neat, and it should smell like something other than a "horse doctor's office." We may need office help. Someone to answer the phone in our absence always pays dividends. Don't let your degree be a reason why you shouldn't do a little cleaning yourself, most of you will have plenty of time, at least for the first few months. In short, never plan on anything below standards of necessity for good service, but leave the so-called fancy fronts until later when you can afford luxuries. Drug expenses, particularly those of new practitioners, consume too large a slice of your profit. There are probably several good reasons for this, but nevertheless, it is a situation which bears watching. In the first place, no one knows, when going into a new territory, just how much practice he will have, or what conditions will be most prevalent. Even after we have been there for years, these things vary from year to year. Buy minimum amounts. Carefully decide which preparations you do not absolutely need at first and do not include these with your initial drug orders.

Later, when you are established, and can reasonably predict your future needs, try to buy 6 month's to a year's supply of items. This depends of course on the item's stability. Whenever you can save 10 percent by quantity buying, it is certainly a good investment. What sort of stocks or bonds will pay that much today? The 2 percent discounts allowed by most houses for payment of invoices within a certain specified time may seem not worth bothering about, but many of you will spend \$100,000 for drugs during your life time of practice, 2 percent of this is \$2,000. Not much, but quite a sum when we consider how easy it is for us to get it.

One more factor of business must be discussed while we are considering success in practice. We can do everything and be everything that spells success, but if we fall down here, we'll be failures. We must collect the fees due us and we must meet our own bills promptly. Probably

the hardest job for all of us is this business of getting the client to pay his bills. We not only want the money due us, but we want his friendship in the future. So-called credit managers of large corporations have spent their entire lives at becoming efficient in this particular phase of business, yet many of them are able to do but a very poor job.

The first place for us to start is to attempt to keep as many clients paying cash as possible. There are many ways in which this is attempted. First, as a new man just out of school, most farmers will accept the story that you are not financially able to extend credit. Explain that rent, utilities and drug companies all expect cash, and that you, as a recent graduate, haven't the reserve to carry them. Explain that you certainly do not doubt their honesty—and this is all important—but your own financial situation makes it necessary to do mostly a cash business. You can assure them that after you have had a chance to get on your feet you certainly won't mind, but habits will have been formed by then, and habits are hard to break. They will be in the habit of paying you cash.

One practice which has proven effective for some men is that of giving the client a type of invoice when they leave the farm. This is merely a printed form on which is recorded the date, animal sick, type of treatment, and of course, the charges. Many men will automatically reach for their pocketbooks when they see you filling out the slip. If they don't, you can always help them along a little by saying, "Jim, do you want me to mark this paid now?"

Now, what about those clients who say charge it? First of all, never be afraid of insulting a client by sending him a monthly statement. A few might take offense, but you can easily explain the difference between a statement and a demand for payment. Statements serve one valuable purpose besides reminding the man that he owes you. If you have made a mistake on your books, or if he has forgotten that last call and thinks he's been overcharged, it's much easier to straighten it out before it gets over a month old. All

other types of businesses serving the farmer have discarded the idea that statements make a farmer mad. The physician sends him statements, so should you.

The worst problem of all, and the one where we veterinarians are weakest, is that of handling the fellow who apparently just won't pay. We've been to the man's place, we've given him all the possible service and benefit of our professional knowledge, we've paid out of our own pockets for the drugs we used, and he won't pay. Most of us have a tendency to get a little discouraged, and definitely angry with the whole deal. Fortunately, this situation is rare; it will be especially rare if we render good service, and if we convince the fellow we are his friend. If he is our friend, he isn't apt to try to dodge paying us. Remember, it's an old, and rather moth eaten saying, but it's still true, "To have a friend, be a friend."

*Speech before the student AVMA at Texas A & M.*

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## Would Reclassify Show Dogs

A new classification and rearrangement of the dog breeds into 10 groups has been suggested recently to replace the 6 variety classifications now used by the American Kennel Club. The new system is proposed in the interests of fairer competition in the show ring. In place of the present Sporting Dogs, Hounds, Working Dogs, Terriers, Toys and Non-Sporting classifications there would be groups as follows: 1. Hunting Dogs. 2. All the Spaniels. 3. Hounds That Hunt by Sight. 4. Hounds That Hunt by Scent. 5. Shepherd Dogs. 6. Rescue and Drove Dogs. 7. Watch Dogs. 8. Terriers Over 13 Inches. 9. Terriers Under 13 Inches. 10. House Dogs.

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An investigation of the role of wild animals in spreading foot-and-mouth disease has been urged by the American Veterinary Medical Association's special committee on diseases in wild animals.

In the 1924 outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease in California, 22,000 deer were slaughtered. Ten percent were found to show lesions of the disease.