

How Do You Define the Role of Your Nutritional Consultant?



By Donna M. Amaral-Phillips

In my career, I have had the opportunity to participate in numerous youth educational events. I greatly enjoy seeing these future agricultural leaders and industry advocates wanting to learn about the science behind how we manage and care for animals, not just dairy cattle. Understanding the application of these concepts has always been a passion of mine, the reason I went on to Graduate School and had the job I did. At these youth educational events, I often times have a nutrition-related station of which the content changes from year to year. One year, I decided to ask each of the groups what they thought a nutritionist's role should be on a dairy. Not to my surprise, their response centered on balancing rations alone. This was the response from more than one group of youth on this day. Yes, nutritionists are actively involved in providing balanced rations, but their role can and should extend way beyond just crunching numbers to get a recipe to feed various groups of heifers or cows. Today, the role of nutritionists on farms is very different from those 20 years, even as shortly as 5 years, ago. So, how would I define a nutritionist's role and skills needed on today's dairy farms?

Skill Needed: Ability to balance rations reflecting current science and knowledge

To start with, today's rations are balanced for an optimum performance while containing feed-related costs to achieve maximum profit, and not for least cost per se. Both potential production and reproductive performance along with feed cost drive farm profitability and need to be considered together when balancing rations. Rations also need to provide the best chances for maintaining an animal's health and well-being, as well as being environmentally friendly.

To bring all of these aspects together in one package or ration, the nutritionist needs a sound understanding of how cows convert nutrients found in feeds into milk and meat. Science in this area has accelerated greatly in recent years. Researchers are looking more at the mechanisms or the how's behind why certain products, i.e. additives, or nutrients work and the impacts they have within the rumen or the cow herself. To understand and apply findings from this generation of research, one needs a science foundation to build upon (often in the form of advanced physiology, nutrition, and biochemistry classes) and they need to participate in continuing education opportunities to understand and apply these advances. This understanding is needed to not only balance rations for today's industry and cows, but as importantly, to explain the merits of changes in suggested ration formulations, especially when they carry higher initial costs. Recent examples can include the use of ruminal-protected methionine in pre-fresh cows or the impact of certain fat supplements (specifically, certain fatty acids) on milk yield and

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components. Probably the best examples are the upcoming nutrition refinements associated with protein (specifically amino acids- the building blocks for protein) for lactating cows and in the requirements for calves and heifers.

Skill Needed: Nutritionists are management consultants, not just “Ration Balancers”

Sound nutrition programs are a result of the effective integration and application of not only nutritionally-related concepts, but also those associated with other “cow” management, agronomic, and economic aspects important to a dairy’s profitability and survival. Sometimes I am amazed by an assumption by some, including trained nutritionists, that nutritionists can only “do nutrition”. We possess the skills and training to understand the science behind concepts regardless of the discipline and have a unique skill set to apply and integrate various disciplines on farm. This understanding and ability to integrate various management aspects is important to achieve the expected results from properly designed feeding programs. Often times, nutritionists are the first person to detect an issue while it is developing and before it becomes a total disaster. This developing issue may not be directly related to the feeding program, but other aspects, such as reproduction or mastitis prevention. For example, nutritionists understand the important components associated with a reproductive program as breeding issues can easily derail any best designed and implemented feeding program. Cow comfort, be it stall maintenance, stocking density, or heat abatement, impact feed intake and rumination times. Nutritionists can be a sounding board as you consider changes in your operation’s cropping or management system or changes needed from an environmental standpoint. Additional aspects associated with environmental management are coming quickly and will need to be considered in feeding and overall management programs.

Skill Needed: Ability to maintain and expand a professional relationship

Many different combinations of feedstuffs and management practices can be incorporated into profitable feeding and management programs. A two-way dialog between a dairy manager and nutritionist sets the stage for this process and can be the difference between designing a profitable feeding program and overall operation and one that is not. Your nutritionist needs to understand your goals for your operation and on a routine basis discuss these goals with you, not just at the time of “getting your business”. On a routine basis, at least quarterly, they need to be able to explain to you why changes or certain components are part or should be part of your management program. Ration balancing is an on-going process, not one that is completed once yearly after fall crops are harvested. Tweaking a management program should occur in small steps, but is something which must be continuously explored. Dairy managers, in turn, need to understand why changes are needed, how to implement these changes, and continually ask questions of their nutritionist. A true dialog between all parties is important and do not forget to include others directly impacted by these discussions, such as family members or on-farm feed people.

Probably, one of the hardest realizations is the fact that this is a professional, business relationship first and foremost, not based on a friendship or feeling that either party “owes” the other something. You may develop a friendship and share common interests outside of the dairy operation. But, this is separate from the business component of your relationship. Sometimes your nutritionist, or any consultant for that matter, needs to be honest with you and tell you something that you do not want to hear. Yes, this conversation may “hurt” your feelings, get you upset, and get you to contemplate “firing” this consultant. However, later you might come to realize that they had your best interest at heart and really were doing you a favor. The key part here is they want to help you understand how to correct the detected issue and work through steps needed to correct the identified issue. Basically, they want to help you with a solution.

Skill Needed: What skill set do they offer- those of a nutritionist or a feed person?

The skill set of a “feed person” is very different from those of a nutritionist, in my opinion. A feed person serves an important role in the feeding program, but one very different from a nutritionist. A feed person, very often, is sent to collect forage samples as needed, makes “social calls” to make sure managers are happy with services provided, recruits new clients for the business, and collects payments, when needed, to name just a few of this person’s possible responsibilities. Often times, the feed person does not have background to understand how cows use various nutrients and does not have the responsibility of balancing rations.

In contrast, a nutritionist has some form of formal training in nutrition and physiology, continually participates in professional training opportunities for scientific updates, and is able to apply these concepts in the development of feeding and management programs on farm. Today’s ration balancing programs require one to have a sound understanding of what occurs in a cow’s rumen and in the cow herself. These computer programs calculate the amount and concentration of over 50 nutritionally-related nutrients and fractions, much different than older generation programs calculating just protein and energy concentrations. Nutritionists also should on a routine basis review management records to detect potential issues early, walk through the cows to “listen to the cows themselves”, and interact with the feed person, other employees and dairy manager as well to learn what is occurring on farm.

One question I often get is, do you know a nutritionist that is not selling something that I can hire? One first needs to realize that all nutritionists form personal opinions of what products, ingredients, and nutrient specs work best on farms, irrespective of whom pays their salary. This is just human nature. The difference comes in how they form these opinions and how they modified or update them over time. Are their opinions regarding a product or ingredient based on their company’s or personal profit margin or have they seen research that supports that said product/ingredient could deliver the intended benefit? I think you would agree that both sides of this coin exist in nutritionists serving the US Dairy Industry. The key here is to ask questions that allow one to determine if the selected products/ingredients are the best match for providing an optimum feeding program for your cows and if this person/nutritionist possesses the skills to help you, the dairy manager, better manage your cows’ profitability. This answer will not be the same for everyone. Just make sure what skills you are wanting, those associated with a feed person or a nutritionist, and use these people accordingly.

Bottom Line:

Nutritionists are a professional whom plays a very important role in helping you implement and manage sound feeding and management programs. They are trained to understand how cows make milk and how to make the best of this biological system for your operation’s potential profitability. They offer a skill set that goes beyond those associated just with balancing rations. As dairy managers, your job is to make the best use of their skill set in your dairy business.