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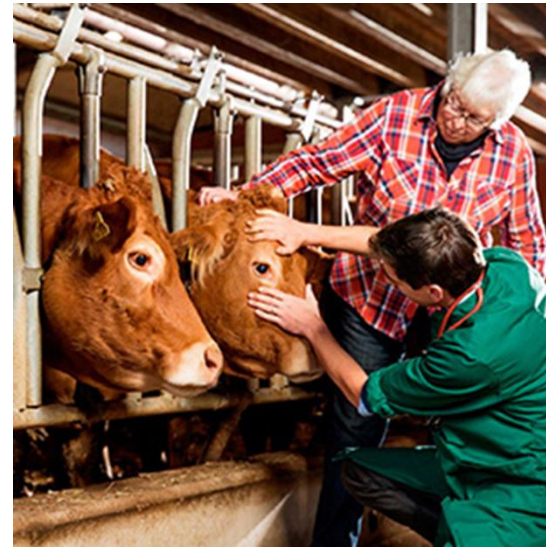
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Communication to farmers: what to expect



Marco De Nardi



A bit of theory....

Feature Series – Review Article

What veterinarians need to know about communication to optimise their role as advisors on udder health in dairy herds

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Abstract

The veterinary practitioner is one of the most important advisors for farmers in the field of udder health. He or she has the tools to improve udder health if farmers are motivated to do so. Many farmers think that udder health is important, but this does not always mean that management of mastitis is up to standard. Many veterinarians are of the opinion that they are unable to convince their clients of the possible profits to be gained from investing in management of mastitis. Something is required to bridge this gap. This article, based on data and experiences from The Netherlands, describes the communication issues that can be considered in order to improve the role of the veterinarian as advisor, to achieve better udder health. The outcome is beneficial for both farmers and veterinarians, the former for reasons of economics, welfare and ease of work; the latter because it creates extra, challenging work. It is concluded that the veterinary practitioner is in an ideal situation to advise and motivate farmers to improve udder health but, to do this, the means of communication need to take account of the different learning styles of farmers. The most important aspects of such communication are found to be a pro-active approach, personalisation of messages, providing a realistic frame of reference for the farmer, and use of the farmer's social environment. Importantly, all persons and organisations in a farmer's social environment should articulate the same message.

KEY WORDS: Communication, mindset, mastitis, motivation, veterinarian

Introduction

Mastitis is probably the single most-studied disease in dairy cattle. Worldwide, many activities are undertaken to improve udder health, such as research projects, knowledge-transfer programmes, herd health advisory programmes, and cow-based ambulatory work. Much attention is given to further development of veterinary knowledge, but only limited attention is given to how knowledge is transferred, although this is crucial (LeBlanc *et al.* 2006). Veterinary knowledge needs to be applied to be effective, and therefore to actually improve udder health, motivation and education of dairy farmers is of utmost importance.

The veterinarian is seen by many farmers as the most important advisor on udder health, but in practice the veterinarian's role is mainly reactive (Jansen *et al.* 2010ac). If a farmer perceives mastitis as a problem and is motivated to solve that problem, the local veterinarian is the first one to be contacted, and they will try to help the farmer solve the problem (Jansen *et al.* 2009). The veterinarian generally will not take the initiative, showing the farmer that there is room for improvement in suboptimal situations, let alone talk about changing management measures exclusively for preventive reasons.

The level at which mastitis is perceived as a problem differs significantly between farmers (Huijps *et al.* 2008; Jansen *et al.* 2009). Many farmers are not convinced of the importance of mastitis beyond the visible level, and therefore increased somatic cell counts (SCC) often do not lead to a change in behaviour. It would, however, be good if dairy farmers became aware of potential problems and possible improvements before serious problems occurred. A pro-active role on the part of the veterinarian in supporting dairy farmers could help with that. The latter aspect coincides with the changing role of veterinary practitioners over the years. Historically, the veterinarian worked solely on an ambulatory basis, but in today's veterinary practice, herd health management is becoming more and more important. A number of traditional veterinary skills have been delegated to less expensive workers, and, although it is denied by some, veterinarians have no choice but to evolve into advice-oriented consultants (LeBlanc *et al.* 2006) in order to stay in business.

To motivate and educate dairy farmers successfully, knowledge from different disciplines must be integrated, and recommendations and advice to improve udder health must be put within the framework of a herd health and production management programme (Burton 2004). For these programmes to be successful, each farm must be seen as a system of integrated activities (Leeuwis 2004a; Cannas da Silva *et al.* 2006). Within such programmes, veterinarians need to have the skills and the willingness to motivate farmers, and to sell the programme and advice within the programme, as a product (Penry *et al.* 2011). Veterinarians could improve their advisory skills by adopting a customer-oriented, pro-active approach, and by applying elementary communication techniques. This is essential not only to improve transfer of knowledge with a consequent optimisation of the effect of mastitis control programmes, but also from a commercial point of view to strengthen veterinary consultancy. Many veterinarians, however, find it difficult to take the step to become more advice-oriented, specifically in relation to preventive measures. Quite a

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BTSCC Bulk tank somatic cell count(s)
CMT California mastitis test
CSCC Composite somatic cell count(s)
SCC Somatic cell counts



Introduction

- Veterinarians need to have the **skills** and the **willingness** to motivate farmers, and to **sell the programme** and **advice** within the programme, as a product (Penry et al. 2011).
- Veterinarians could improve their advisory skills by adopting a **customer-oriented, pro-active approach**, and by applying **elementary communication techniques**.



Effective communication plan

What you ask people to do should be:

Clear – they have to **understand** it in the same way as you intend

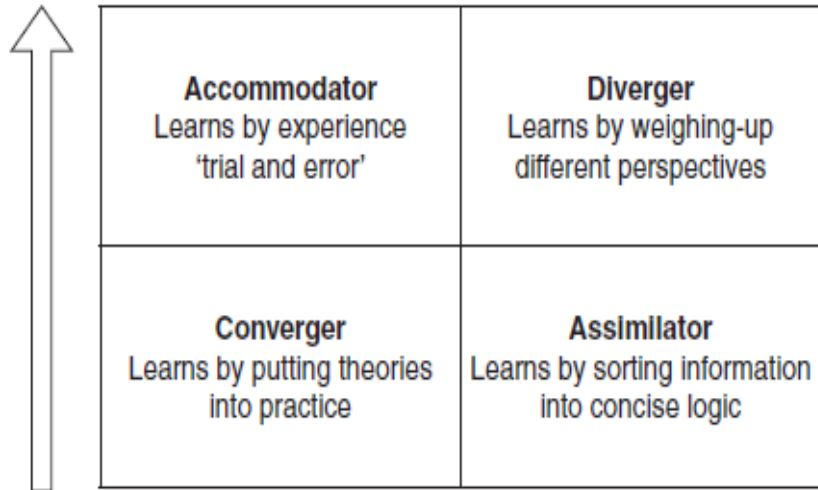
Feasible – it has to be **possible for them to do** as you recommend

Encouraging – it has to **make people want to do** as you recommend



Learning style

Learning mode: grasping
Score: conceptualise-experience



Learning mode: transforming
Score: action-observations

Figure 1. Four learning styles for different ways of obtaining information, according to Kolb (1984) (from Paine 1993).



An **ACCOMODATOR** is the type of person who tries to get a machine running before reading the manual. **Accommodators are very practically orientated; they learn by experience.**

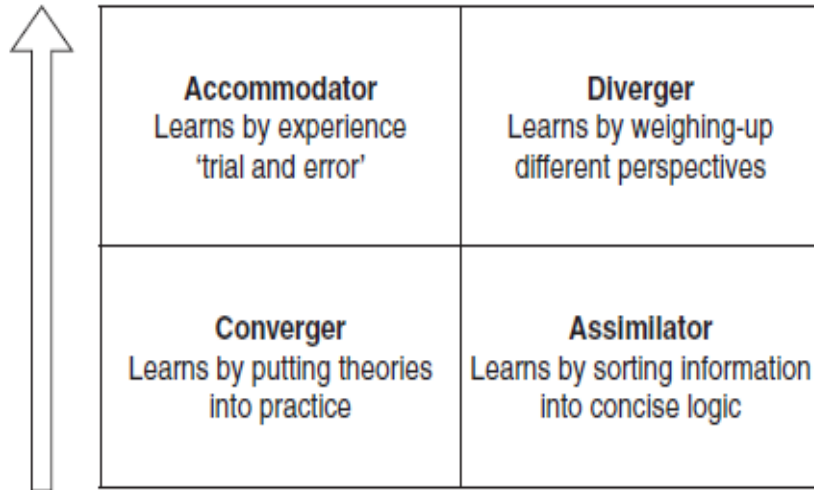
Offering the possibility to **experiment actively** and to have **hands-on** experience, (e.g. with specimens) is a way to reach them. **Present real scenarios.**

A **DIVERGER** learns by weighing-up different perspectives. **Divergers appreciate analysing problems in cooperation with others**, discussing the various approaches that people choose, and so on.

Field trips, study groups, visits to model farms or open days can be good learning approaches for them.

Learning style

Learning mode: grasping
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Figure 1. Four learning styles for different ways of obtaining information, according to Kolb (1984) (from Paine 1993).



A **CONVERGER** learns by putting theories into practice. **Convergers start reading the manual and follow it step by step.**

When learning, they prefer questions with only one correct answer.

In knowledge transfer, the **practical implication of the content should be clear, right from the start.**

An **ASSIMILATOR** learns by sorting information into concise logic.

Assimilators want to gather lots of information from different sources, they like self-study, and will gradually form an idea on the subject.

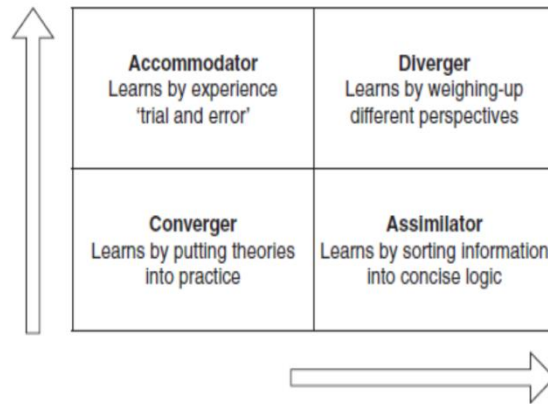
The **veterinarian** (or a study group) is only one source of information.

Information obtained from **websites, articles in farmers' magazines**, information at dairy shows, and so on, will all be absorbed and assessed. **Study groups.**

Which category do you think our target groups belong to?

Categories	Raised hands
ACCOMODATOR	
DIVERGER	
CONVERGER	
ASSIMILATOR	

Learning mode: grasping
Score: conceptualise-experience



Learning mode: transforming
Score: action-observations

Accommodators try to get a machine running before reading the manual

Divergers appreciate analysing problems in cooperation with others

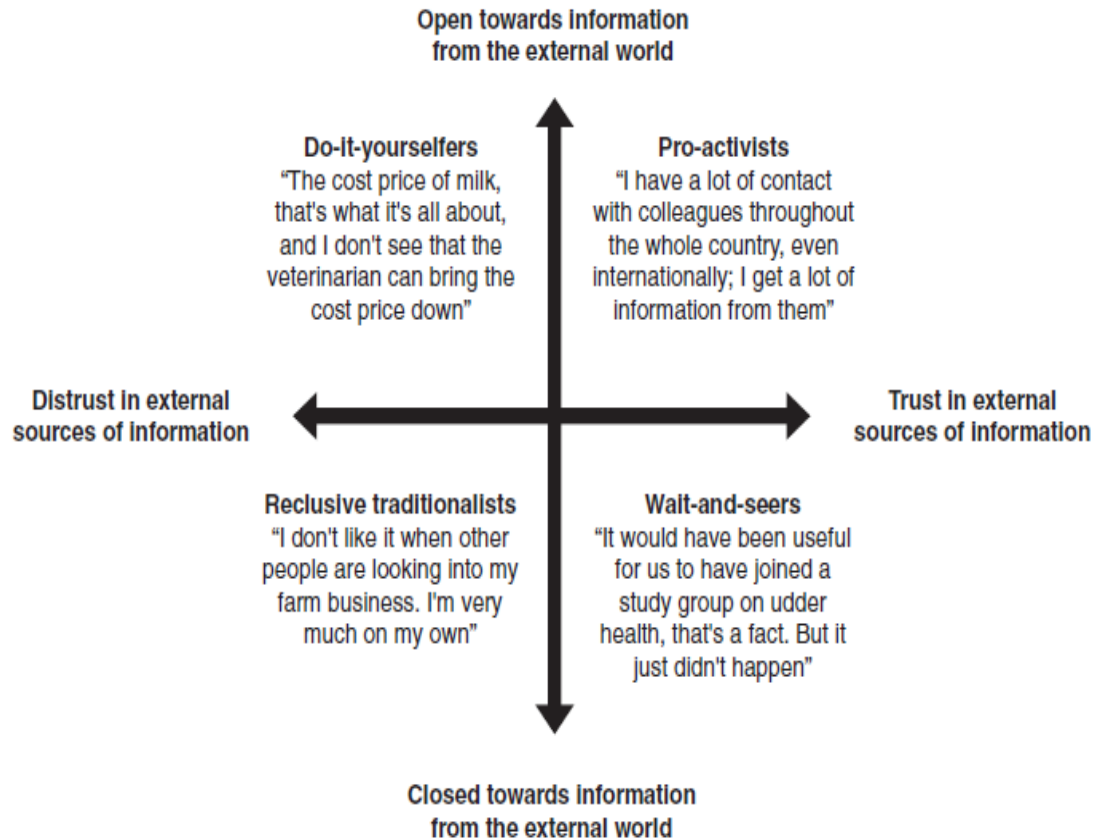
Convergers start reading the manual and follow it step by step.

Assimilators want to gather lots of information from different sources,



Figure 1. Four learning styles for different ways of obtaining information, according to Kolb (1984) (from Paine 1993).

The hard-to-reach farmers...



PRO-ACTIVISTS: to reach this group, one should realise and accept that there are different advisors on udder health, and try to obtain cooperation with them.

Making information available from various sources that are easily accessible is the best way to change behaviour in this group of farmers.

DO IT YOURSELFERS: they tend to rely more on their own experiences.

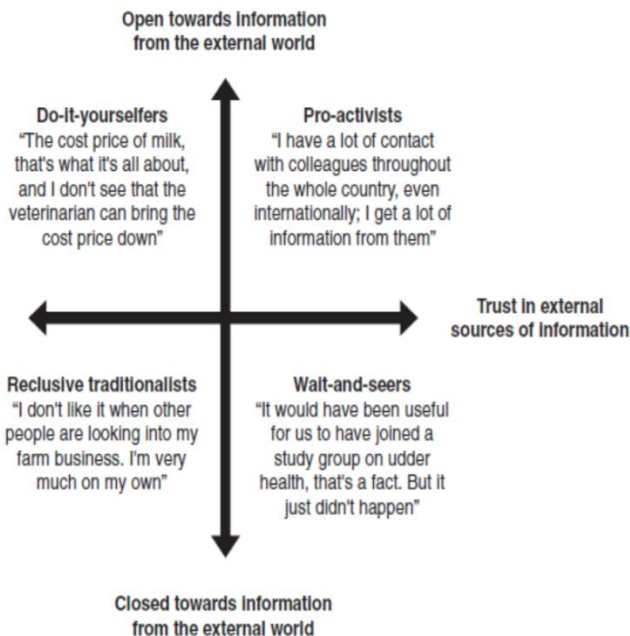
To reach this group, a businesslike approach is most suitable. Locally organised field demonstrations or open days may be a good initiative to attract their attention.

WAIT AND SEERS: they feel they ought to do more on udder health, but finds it hard to put advice into practice. They lack internal motivation.

Intensive personal communication, as well as social pressure through the presentation of successful examples from other farms, may help to activate this group.

RECLUSIVE TRADITIONALISTS: they try to keep the veterinarian off their farm as much as possible.

Therefore, a good way to reach these farmers is through farm magazines, and much less by interpersonal communication.

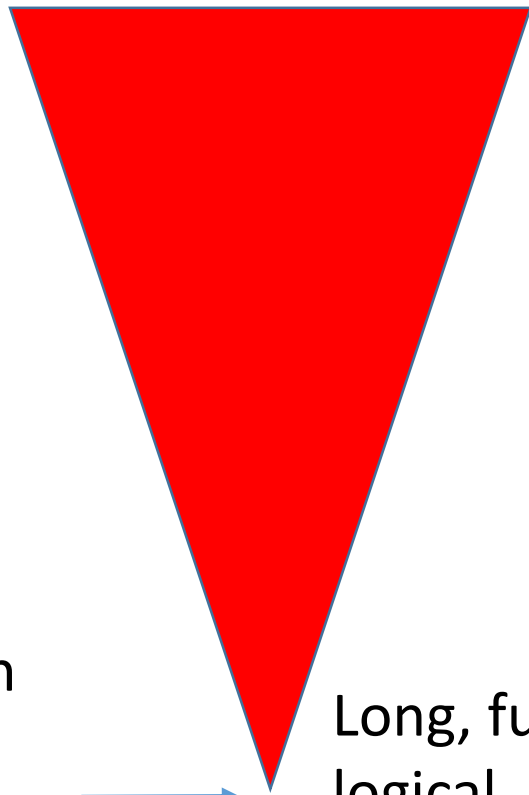


Some practical advises....



The essence of top communication

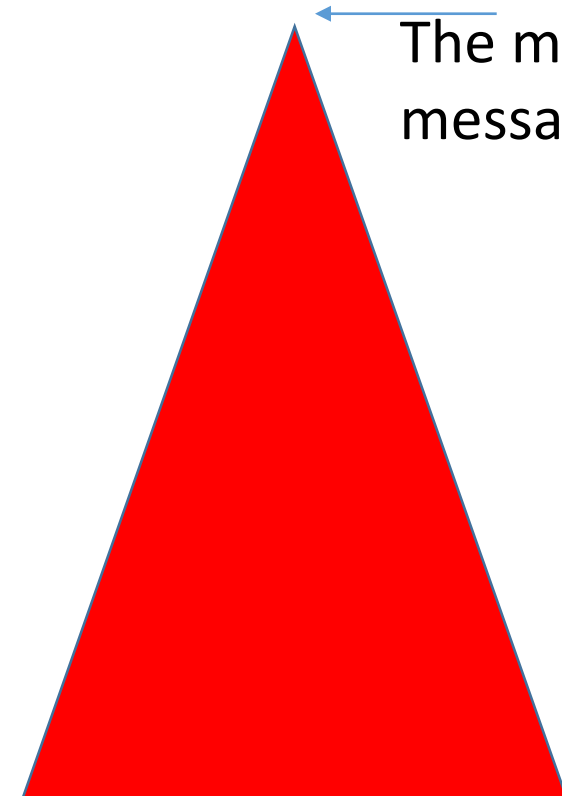
Experts speak like this



The main message

Long, full, and logical explanation

People listen like this



The main message

Reasons, evidence, explanations follow



The chance of success

- 7% is **WHAT** you say
- 33% is **HOW** you say it
- 60% is the **ENERGY** you used in saying it



The chance of success...

- You remember only **25% of what you HEAR by the next day.**
- By the next week it would be **about 5%** if you were lucky.



- Adding **visual messages** increases the retention rate.
- You have to do a really good job with **visual aids !! (pictures, graphs, videos etc...)**



Use of fanny images!!



How to get it wrong?

- **Too much information** – tell them the least your audience needs to know.
- **Too little** – no meat in the message.
- **Wrong place** – it was impossible to learn in the environment. The speaker was not aware of how bad the conditions were for the audience.
- **Wrong time** – nobody could learn at the chosen time of the talk for many reasons.



How to get it wrong?

- **Above their heads** – no chance of anyone understanding the message.
- **Boring** – dull enough to make everyone beg for it to end.
- Speaker not aware of the time spent so the **meeting over-runs**.
- Insulting **audience's intelligence**.
- **Telling the audience what they already know**– so wasting everyone's time and somebody's money.



So key points to be successful....



1) What's your aim?

Get this very clear right at the start.



2) Who is your audience?

- *You can't do much about this, other than be aware and try to modify your message.*
- **Age**
- **Sex**
- Leading **busy lives** – so *“time is precious”*.
- **Interest** in the subject (e.g. *consider hunters vs farmers*)
- **Educational** background
- **Social** status
- **Religious & cultural** status
- **Tiredness**
- **Hungry** –*low blood sugar*
- **Agitated** - *In need of a smoke/coffee*
- **Comfortable** – *how long have they sat on hard seats.*



3) Prioritise your message

Get this order of priority right.

- 1) **Must** know?
- 2) **Should** know?
- 3) **Nice** to know?
- 4) **Questions** and **discussion**

- *Never, ever, cut out number 4! That should be THE highlight of your talk.*
- *If you are running out of time, cut out number 3 and go straight to 4.*



4) Audience as interactive subject

- Always **involve them** in the discussion (and not teach them...)
- Ask them **feedback/opinion frequently**
- Make use of the **information they can provide you**
- Make use of **open questions** as much as you can
- Don't be aggressive (never !!!) but **resolute**



5) Choose adequate tools to involve them

- Facilitation
- Working group session
- Plenary discussion
- Participatory approach
- Energizers (*only if you are comfortable with them*)
- Questionnaires (*to collect infos, test learning process*)
- Use of handouts (*easy to take notes but don't expect house-studying*)





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Thanks